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

ALOYSIUS M. O'NEILL

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is the 19th of August 2008, and this is an interview with Aloysius M. O'Neill; the M standing for?

O'NEILL: Moultrie.

Q: This was Carolina, South Carolina.

O'NEILL: Charleston.

Q: This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies, and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. And you go by Al.

O'NEILL: Yes.

Q: Let's start. When and where were you born?

O'NEILL: I was born on October 21, 1945 in Charleston, South Carolina; hence, the middle name.

Q: There's Fort Moultrie. Moultrie was a Revolutionary War hero.... Was he the one who flew the Palmetto flag?

O'NEILL: That battle is the origin of the palmetto in the South Carolina state flag. In 1776 the British tried to invade Charleston which was the main port in the south of the colonies at that time. What was then called Fort Sullivan at the entrance to Charleston Harbor was the main obstacle to the British landing. It was, I think, the first victory by the colonists against the British in the war, June 28, 1776. The commander of Fort Sullivan was Colonel William Moultrie. The fort was built of palmetto logs which absorbed the British cannonballs and its guns drove off the British landing force and fleet. The fort was renamed Fort Moultrie and it played a big role in the Civil War. My grandfather O'Neill was born on June 28, so my great-grandfather Dennis O'Neill gave him the middle name Moultrie in honor of that day.

Q: Let's talk about the O'Neill side of the family and we'll talk about your mother's side. What do you know about when and where did they come from?

O'NEILL: Everybody in my family is Irish. The great-grandfather that I was talking about, Dennis O'Neill, was born in 1845 in Ireland. He came to Charleston at least by 1853.

Q: Was the potato famine part of that?

O'NEILL: I'm sure it was. He was born the year that the potato famine broke out. He came, I'm sure, with his father - my great-great-grandfather Michael O'Neill - and probably with a brother named Edward. I don't know anything about Dennis O'Neill's birth mother. She either died in Ireland or died on the ship because my great-great-grandfather remarried in Charleston in 1853. That's how I know their approximate arrival time. My family's been in Charleston ever since.

Q: Do you know what brought them to Charleston? So many of the Irish were heading to New York, Boston, New Orleans and Canada when the potato famine broke out but Charleston seems to be at the end of the line.

O'NEILL: It may be because my great-great-grandfather's older brother who was also named Dennis was already in Charleston. But you're right: The Irish tended to go to the main northern cities or to New Orleans although the Irish Catholic diocese of Charleston was founded in 1820, so there was a substantial Irish Catholic community there earlier and, in fact, an even earlier Irish Protestant community

Q: What were the O'Neills doing in Charleston?

O'NEILL: I don't know what my great-great-grandfather was doing. My great-grandfather Dennis O'Neill enlisted at the age of 16 in the Irish Volunteer Company of an infantry unit called the Charleston Battalion in 1862. He was discharged about two years later. After the war, he had an auction and commission business, mainly selling houses and property. He was also in politics from time to time, both as an alderman in Charleston and as mayor pro tem later in the 1880's. He was also an officer in the post-war South Carolina militia, first a captain and then a major. He was active in a number of Irish organizations in Charleston including the Irish Rifle Club and a book society and things like that. During the Spanish-American War he was apparently an "assistant captain" of the Port of Charleston. At his death in February 1900, he was not quite 55 years old.

Q: How was he earning his money?

O'NEILL: His principal business was that auction and commission company, and he had a part interest in a boot shop with his cousins and his uncle.

Q: We're up to your grandfather now?

O'NEILL: Yes. He was Aloysius Moultrie O'Neill, Senior. He was about nine when my great-grandfather died in 1900 leaving quite a number of children. My grandfather had various jobs in Charleston; he was among other things a timber inspector, timber and lumber being a big business in South Carolina in those days. He didn't serve in World War I because an older brother was in the Navy and he was the main support of his mother. Later he was the secretary and treasurer of the Hibernian Mutual Insurance Company in Charleston which as you can imagine was an Irish business. He died in 1962, aged 72.

My father worked in the county records office as soon as he finished Bishop England High School, named after the first Irish Catholic bishop of Charleston. When World War II broke out my father was an electrician at the Charleston Navy Yard, in a war reserved job, so he was not eligible for the draft. In 1943 he volunteered for the Army Air Forces and by early 1945, he was in Burma with a combat cargo squadron. His unit went to China right after the war. When I was born in October 1945, my father was still in China. He went to the University of South Carolina on the GI Bill; got a degree in electrical engineering and soon he started working for the DuPont Company. He retired from DuPont in 1982.

Q: What do you know about your mother's side?

O'NEILL: They came to Charleston at least a generation earlier than my father's family because my great-grandfather James Francis Walsh was born in Charleston in December 1850, 10 years before secession. I don't know anything about his father. James Walsh became a fairly wealthy businessman in Charleston. He ran a mortgage company and at one time had a wine and liquor importing business which did business in both Europe and the Caribbean. There was a military angle to him as well because he twice commanded the Irish Volunteer Company in the South Carolina militia after the Civil War, first in 1898-99 and then again from 1903 to 1908. He was in ill health for some years thereafter and died in Saratoga Springs, New York where had gone to recover his health.

Q: Yes, for the water.

O'NEILL: It didn't work; he died. He had two sons, one of whom died young, and several daughters, one of whom was my grandmother Gaffney. The other son, Roland Walsh who graduated from the Citadel in 1912, fought in World War I as a battalion commander in the Third Infantry Division. He stayed in the army thereafter and was one of several of my family members at Pearl Harbor when it was attacked. He then served stateside during World War II; retired right after the war as a brigadier general. He died in 1956 and was buried at Arlington. My grandmother Gaffney, his sister, lived until 1979. She was almost 90 when she died. Her first marriage was to the headmaster of a private school in Charleston. He died of typhoid fever in 1919, leaving her with two sons. She then married Edward Gaffney, a dentist, and gave birth to my mother in 1923.

Q: And your mother?

O'NEILL: My mother's still alive. She's in a nursing home in Newark, Delaware.

Q: How long did you live in Charleston?

O'NEILL: I was only there as a baby, because we moved to Columbia while my father was going to college. I was born in Charleston while he was in China. My parents had married on Veterans Day, November 11, 1944.

Q: How did they meet?

O'NEILL: They knew each other in Charleston. It was a mixed marriage, though. My father was from Cathedral parish; my mother was from St. Patrick's parish.

Q: Oh, my God!!

O'NEILL: Quite a stir, I'm sure, at that time in the Irish Catholic community. They knew each other as teenagers, at least. They began dating, and my father was in the Army Air Forces by the time they got married. From where he was training in South Dakota the farthest he could reach on leave was Vincennes, Indiana, so that's where they married.

Q: How much education did your father have?

O'NEILL: He had a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering.

Q: A bachelor's degree. How about your mother?

O'NEILL: My mother graduated from Bishop England High School in 1940, and went into nursing training at St. Francis Hospital. She got her RN degree there. She did some nursing during the war in DC and then came back to Charleston before I was born.

Q: As a kid where did you start growing up that you are familiar with?

O'NEILL: I vaguely remember Columbia, including our little house and some recollections of the university campus. We moved to Camden, South Carolina, by the time I started first grade in 1950. Then we moved to Pensacola, Florida where I finished first grade and went to second and third. We spent seven months in Charleston, West Virginia, then we moved to Danville, Illinois where I attended fourth and fifth. My father made a number of moves as a construction engineer helping to build various DuPont plants around the country. He transferred to the DuPont engineering headquarters in Newark, Delaware in 1956 and that's where I finished eighth grade. My high school was The Salesianum School, a Catholic boys' school in Wilmington, Delaware.

Q: You left Charleston at a very early age. How important was "The War" in your family?

O'NEILL: You mean the War Between the States?

Q: There's only one "The War."

O'NEILL: That war was all around us. Two doors up from where my O'Neill grandparents lived at 13 Franklin Street, when I was a boy there was a very elderly lady who was a child when Fort Sumter was bombarded. My grandfather was the son of a Confederate veteran. In the summers, we'd take a boat to Fort Sumter and go crabbing at Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island. The war surrounded you all the time.

Q: My grandfather, not my great-grandfather, but my grandfather was a major with you-know-who: General Sherman. They came from the west and took Charleston. Then they went up to Columbia where your father's college was and burned the place.

O'NEILL: I know the story!

Q: He was in a German regiment.

O'NEILL: From Saint Louis?

Q: No, actually from Wisconsin, the 36th Wisconsin Volunteers. My mother was a late child. He ended up as a brevet lieutenant colonel without a regiment. Was it in Florida that you became more aware of what was going on?

O'NEILL: Speaking of Florida and "The War," when I was in third grade in Pensacola I was in a parade with a Confederate veteran. The man's name was William Lundy and he was the last surviving Confederate veteran of the Florida forces. Every year, there was a Fiesta of the Five Flags parade to celebrate the dominion that various countries had over Florida including the Spanish, the French, the British briefly, the Confederate States and the U.S.. This was in 1953, and William Lundy was the parade grand marshal. He was well over 100.

Q: Where did your family fall politically?

O'NEILL: My grandfather Aloysius Moultrie O'Neill, Sr., was a South Carolina Democrat which meant a very, very conservative Democrat. My father always considered himself a Republican, but a very conservative one. And my mother was pretty conservative politically.

Q: A question I always ask is where'd your family fall in religion. I've come to the conclusion that with an Aloysius, the family was of a Catholic persuasion.

O'NEILL: That's true.

Q: How Catholic was your family? There're variations.

O'NEILL: I would say very Irish Catholic. The world of the Charleston Irish of those days was very conservative; so that was the atmosphere we were all brought up in. Some people say Charleston was "more Tory than Confederate;" it was that conservative. Wherever we happened to be, my parents sent us to Catholic schools. Almost all of us went all the way through Catholic elementary schools and then my two next younger brothers and I all graduated from the same high school, The Salesianum School.

Q: Were any of you nudged toward becoming a priest?

O'NEILL: No, I don't think it ever crossed any of our minds. A couple of times one or more of the priests who taught me in high school suggested it, but I just said, "Thank you, but no thank you." When I was in high school, my general thought was that I would major in history in college and teach history somewhere. Fortunately, I recovered from that idea and went into the Army.

Q: I went through the same thing! I know you were in and out of the South. You were growing up in a very critical time as far as race relations were concerned. How did this impact on you and your family and your various places?

O'NEILL: That's a good question. Because I kept going back to Charleston every summer I could see certainly at least through 1964 the established segregation, with the "white" and "colored" water fountains and the "white" and "colored" restrooms in the stores. Black people could go to movie theaters, but they bought their tickets at the front and walked up the outside steps to the mezzanine where they sat, separate from the white people in the orchestra. Of course, there was the whole "back of the bus" business too.

Charleston was odd in the sense that there was less segregation in housing than you might imagine. My O'Neill grandparents lived on Franklin Street in the old part of town. The house that they lived in still exists and was built in either 1847 or 1848. Just around the corner there was a little street called Short Street, and there were black families living there. The families around them were all white. My Grandmother Gaffney continued to live in the house that she and her first husband built on Mill Street before the First World War. The house immediately next to her was owned and occupied by a black family. The woman who owned that house did laundry for other people in the area. Relations were pleasant, but neither side would invite the other over, for example.

The point is that Charleston was a little unusual. It wasn't Birmingham or the depths of Mississippi in terms of race relations. I wish I could tell you that I was terribly indignant about the whole thing, but the most I can say is I realized that it wasn't right, but I also realized that was the way it was. By that time, too I had the experience of the somewhat more subtle but very real segregation of the North to compare with. With the coming of the '60s and the civil rights movement, there were a lot of demonstrations in Charleston, but there was almost no violence.

The Ku Klux Klan didn't figure in Charleston at all. Charlestonian whites saw them as knuckle-dragging rednecks. So it wasn't a question of violence, it was more subtle than that. The segregation was certainly there though. There were demonstrations to desegregate lunch counters and all that kind of thing, but they were handled to my knowledge with restraint on both sides. I don't think any Charlestonians, white or black, wanted the place to look like Birminghaor Detroit for that matter.

There was a strike by hospital workers in the mid- '60s in the big hospital complex in Charleston over poor pay and benefits and other working conditions. There was some violence in connection with that strike, but eventually it was resolved and that's the only case I can recall of violence in Charleston related to desegregation. Otherwise, it was just very different even from other parts of South Carolina. There was real violence in places like Spartanburg over desegregation that you just didn't see in Charleston.

Q: How about your church?

O'NEILL: The churches in Charleston? They would have been completely segregated, even the Catholic churches. There were a couple of, at least one black parish, St. Joseph's, and eventually St. Patrick's became a black parish. There were black Catholics in South Carolina going back well into the 19th Century, more than a few of whom had been slaves of Catholic clergymen or other Catholic owners who raised them in the faith, oddly enough. It was as segregated as church life still is in most places in the United States in most denominations.

Q: Your elementary school and this moving around. Were you doing reading on your own? This is a difficult life. It's a military kid's life of different schools. How did you cope with that? We're talking about the early elementary school years.

O'NEILL: I did a lot of reading. In my first year, most of which was spent in a public school in Camden, South Carolina, I spent about half the year either at home or in the hospital with bronchitis. We moved to Pensacola just before my last month of first grade. I passed but I'm sure it was my reading that pulled me through. I've always done a lot of reading. My father has always been a big reader, and even though he was an engineer he was very interested in history, which I think helped push me in that direction also.

Q: We're still speaking of the elementary school times up to the time you were 12 or so. Do you recall any books or types of books that particularly grabbed you?

O'NEILL: Mostly history books. I would say mostly American history.

Q: Your father was an engineer. How did you relate to math?

O'NEILL: I did not. I'm living proof that it is not hereditary! The only thing I ever did well in math was plain geometry, mainly because it was grammar rather than numbers. I felt a kinship with Winston Churchill in that. At least that's what I hide behind.

Q: Where did you do most of your high school work?

O'NEILL: I went all four years to the Salesianum School in Wilmington. We lived in Newark, so I'd commute by city bus. The order that taught there was the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, originally a French order.

Q: You say "New Ark." Is that "Newark"?

O'NEILL: No, it's pronounced "new ark" in the case of Delaware but it's spelled the same way as the New Jersey city. The story is it used to be two words, "New Ark" before the Revolutionary War. When they combined it, they still kept the old pronunciation.

Q: You were in high school from when to when?

O'NEILL: '59 to '63.

Q: What was it like? I want to say, how Catholic was it? Obviously it was Catholic, but there are variations. How did you find that, and then what was it like?

O'NEILL: It was a very good school. I assume it still is. I just haven't had that much connection with it since. It had quite a tough entrance exam and was expensive by the standards of the time. I can't remember exactly what the tuition was, but it was yet another effort that my parents made to make sure we got a Catholic education.

The academic standards were high. Latin was required for two years; you had to take a modern language for at least two years. All they had to offer was German, French, and Spanish, but the instruction was good. There was a strong science curriculum with excellent lab facilities. A lot of business and civic leaders of Wilmington and environs were Salesianum grads, so you had a good alumni donor situation. Overall the schooling was pretty rigorous.

The discipline was quite strict, but it was well understood by the students that it was going to be strict but basically it was fair. One of the priests was the prefect of discipline, as an additional duty. The one who was there for all of my four years also taught Latin and German. I went to our 30th anniversary graduation dinner in 1993 when I happened to be back here between overseas assignments, and the guest speaker that our class invited was that same prefect of discipline. He was by that time the president of Allentown College, an Oblate college in Pennsylvania.

Q: Was the DuPont operation a palpable presence in Delaware?

O'NEILL: It certainly was. There were many DuPont installations of various kinds in northern Delaware in addition to corporate headquarters in Wilmington. There were several labs and an experimental station where DuPont just had a bunch of scientists play with chemicals until they figured out whether it was nylon or Dacron or Mylar or whatever. They were not required to produce anything, but if they did, that was great. It was a very free-wheeling research and development set-up that exemplified the big U.S. companies of that era. In addition, DuPont's large engineering headquarters was in Newark and my father worked there from 1956 to '82. If you worked for DuPont, that was a good thing. It was the 1940's and 1950's ideal of a large, capable and benevolent American corporation and all that came along with it.

Q: When you were in high school, did foreign affairs intrude much into your thinking? Presumably, the Cuban Missile Crisis did.

O'NEILL: Yes. I can remember that, listening over the public address system to announcements about those events. In fact, by that time we had a number of Cuban refugee kids in the school. There were at least six or 10 in the various grades.

Q: How did the campaign and the election of President Kennedy hit you, as a Catholic and all this? Did this really engage you at all?

O'NEILL: No. I was a very pro-Nixon person.

Q: Oh my God!!!

O'NEILL: Yes, very much pro-Nixon. Kennedy's Catholicism had no effect on me at all. It may have been partly from my father who was very pro-Nixon, very anti-Kennedy, sort of distrustful of the Democrats in general. I was still in high school when Kennedy ran and won and I was quite disappointed that the Richard Nixon was defeated by the young and inexperienced guy. I very definitely was not influenced by ethnic kinship or Kennedy's religious affiliation, especially since the family belief was that his father more or less bought the election for him.

[laughter]

O'NEILL: I was in my freshman year of college at the University of Delaware when he was killed, an event I remember very vividly, like everybody else. But the week before that Kennedy had gone to the Delaware-Maryland border just south of Newark to dedicate a portion of Interstate 95. Several of my high school friends asked me if I was interested in going with them to see Kennedy, and I said I was not. The next week he was dead. I'd just come out of a medieval history quiz section and was walking up the campus. People were clustering around little transistor radios. At first I had no idea of what they were talking about until I went to a nearby newsstand where they had the radio on. That's when I heard that Kennedy had been shot. According to the report that I heard there, Johnson had also had a heart attack. By the time I got home he was already dead.

Q: You went to the University of Delaware. You were there from when to when?

O'NEILL: '63 to '67.

Q: What was your initial impression of the university?

O'NEILL: I kind of assumed all the way through high school that that was where I was going to go to college, and I didn't really think very broadly about other schools.

Q: There wasn't any direction towards Georgetown or...

O'NEILL: No, not really. I can't really say that it was anything other than inertia although money would have come into it because my father by that time was paying for high school for two other sons. I intended to study history. Delaware was a pretty good school. Some disciplines were stronger than others. It had a very good chemical engineering college which was a result of the DuPont connection. They had a fairly good history faculty, no great names or anything like that, but I was able to study broadly in American and European history. I had two semesters of Russian history, for example, and a graduate level course in U.S. maritime history. And in my very last semester I had a grad-level course in Asian history in which I did very badly because I was paying more attention to my military training in the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) and my impending commissioning in 1967. That was pretty ironic since I later spent about 21 years in five Asian countries.

I thought it was a good education. They had honors courses in various disciplines; I took honors English literature and psychology. It was not Ivy League or anything of the sort, but my first visit to a foreign country was as a result of a long-standing University of Delaware program. I had taken German all four years of high school and continued it in college. They had a summer program to send Spanish, French, and German language students at university expense for training in those languages. The German students were the only ones that made out well because the university sent the French students to Quebec to where they learned Quebecois, I guess, and the Spanish students went to Mexico. The German students went to the University of Heidelberg.

Usually those summer courses were for rising seniors, and four were sent every year to a "vacation course for foreigners" as it was called at the University of Heidelberg. But in 1964 they sent three rising seniors and me as a rising sophomore to the one month course. Regular faculty members taught the course, and we lived in town in rented rooms. Delaware paid our airfare and, again, because they didn't have a whole lot of money, we went on Icelandic Airlines which was probably the cheapest trans-Atlantic carrier in the history of mankind. We went over in a DC-6 propeller plane and flew back in a Bristol Britannia turboprop. It was JFK to Keflavik, Iceland and on to Luxembourg City. Then we got a train from Luxembourg to Heidelberg.

Q: Did you come away with any impressions from Germany?

O'NEILL: Well, that it was my first time out of the country so it was a great opportunity. Obviously, the antiquity of Europe and its institutions in comparison with the newness of America was most striking. The University of Heidelberg was founded in 1386 as one example. The other thing was that you could see that the preoccupations of Germans were quite different than a lot of preoccupations of Americans. Germany was even by that time still a growing economic power. They were beginning to bring in Turks as "Gastarbeiter" or guest workers at that time. I think in those days they still called them "Fremdarbeiter," or foreign workers.

You could also see U.S. and French soldiers not as occupation soldiers by then, but part of the NATO structure in the Rhineland. I was conscious that WWII had only ended 19 years earlier. In a lot of cases you could see that places had been built anew in an old style - places you knew had been either damaged or destroyed in the war. At least twice in the month I was there they tested air raid sirens. I remember my landlady Frau Bride fretting about this. She was in her 60's and was a widow. I don't know if she was widowed during the war or otherwise, but it made her visibly agitated to hear the sirens. Heidelberg didn't suffer the level of bombing that a Berlin or Hamburg did, but still....

Q: Did foreign affairs and your interest change at all in college? The Cold War was on, but also Vietnam. What sort of spirit was there about that?

O'NEILL: I would say the Vietnam War had a lot of influence on me in terms of what I immediately wound up doing. In those days as a so-called land-grant college, University of Delaware had compulsory ROTC for the first two years, so all able-bodied males went into that. We had 3,300 cadets in the cadet brigade at Delaware in those years, organized into several battalions. The commander was a cadet colonel. It would not have occurred to me not to go into the compulsory program. I did have to think about whether I did want to go into the second two years, my junior and senior year. By that time I had pretty much cured myself of the notion of going on to graduate school and teaching history, and I changed to the idea of becoming a career Army officer. I made this decision before the U.S. units began going to go to Vietnam in 1965 because I signed up for senior ROTC by the end of my sophomore year. The idea of actually doing something concrete was uppermost in my mind. I knew I would have had an obligation to do military service. Again, nobody in my family would have thought otherwise since so many relatives were World War II veterans.

I was trying to follow things in the course of the Indo-China war (because it was always Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) as best I could on the 30 minutes of TV news in the evening and what you could read in the newspapers, etc. One of our ROTC instructors was a West Pointer who had been an advisor with a South Vietnamese unit before coming to Delaware. He even invited Bernard Fall to speak at the university.

Q: Fall was a famous French reporter with long experience in Vietnam.

O'NEILL: Exactly.

Q: And was later killed, actually.

O'NEILL: Fall was killed a few months before I got commissioned, along the "Street without Joy," which is what the French had called National Route 1, the main north-south coastal road. He died in a mine explosion in February 1967 as I recall, accompanying a U.S. Marine unit. Fall spoke to us in late 1966, and as I recall it wasn't an ROTC-only event but open to all students and faculty. This was a period during which we had all the so-called "teach-ins" and beginnings of demonstrations against the war, and the controversy was beginning to build.

Fall spoke as he had written: the French had not understood what they were doing; they thought they had much more control or pretended to themselves that they had much more control than they did; the communist Viet Minh were infiltrating many of the villages. He also said there was a big difference between what the French tended to control during the daytime and in the nighttime. These were all the things that we would get entangled in as we got more involved in the Vietnam War. It was very interesting to hear somebody like that, a recognized authority. He told us from his recent observations that the U.S. was making many of the same mistakes that the French had made. The Street without Joy was his first big book on the French Indo-China War. He also wrote ï¿½Hell in a Very Small Place about the battle of Dien Bien Phu and others as well. He did reporting from Vietnam as the U.S. involvement grew and grew.

At graduation in June 1967, I got commissioned as a regular Army officer with a three year commitment rather than a reserve officer with just a two year commitment. I had 48 hours to report to the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia for the beginning of my training. My intention at the time was to make the Army a career.

Q: Before we do that, taking both high school and college, what about social life? Girls and other interests?

O'NEILL: I dated in high school. Actually, I dated in high school more than I think I did in college.

Q: How did it work? Did you have a sister in school or in high school?

O'NEILL: There were two Catholic girls' high schools in Wilmington: Ursuline Academy and Padua Academy. Ursuline was separate from a specific parish, but Padua Academy was the girls' high school of St. Anthony of Padua's church, one of the ethnic parishes in Wilmington. They had were Masses in Italian as well as in Latin. There were Polish parishes like St. Hedwig's and Christ Our King, and there were Irish parishes as well. Wilmington was a group of ethnic enclaves when it came to the Catholic Church.

Q: Did you get any feel for the Soviet Union?

O'NEILL: We did, and it was obviously all bad. Of course, going back to the Cuban Missile Crisis, we thought that really exemplified how bad the Soviet Union was - that they would come to threaten us so directly. I think I can vaguely remember having doubts about whether the Soviets and the Chinese were such great friends in that period. By that time the Sino- Soviet split was getting to be pretty clear to people who had better access to information than I did.

I had a two semester course in Russian history in college. The first semester went from the founding of Kievan Rus to the Decembrist Revolt in 1825. The second semester went from the Decembrists to Stalin, at least to World War II. The course was taught from two very different perspectives. In the first semester we had Professor Walther Kirchner who had all of his degrees from UCLA but still spoke English like Henry Kissinger. The second was a Stephen Lukashevich who was of Ukrainian background although he had grown up in France. I don't remember where his PhD was from. He was an expert on the Russian labor and radical movements of the Russian late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

The Soviet Union loomed large over everything. You'd read about Sputnik and all the other missile tests and developments and the size of their nuclear weapons, the size of their military force and all. I remember seeing the second or third Sputnik blinking across the night sky once at our Boy Scout camp. Eventually, much of that turned out to be either erroneous or completely missing the point that it was a very primitive country. As one Soviet citizen later said, the USSR was "Upper Volta with a missile program."

The national worry about the Soviets even went back further than this of course. I can remember in Pensacola when I was in second and third grade in St. Michael's School we would have those famous duck-and-cover exercises under our desks. St. Michael's would have been a disaster zone in an ordinary fire much less any kind of nuclear attack because it was a brick box that had the wooden floors suspended from the walls. But we dutifully did all those exercises. I don't remember that kind of drill in later elementary schools nor did we have anything like that in high school even during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when everybody was quite edgy. In the 1950's people were talking about fallout shelters and civil defense all the time, but they wouldn't have made any difference.

Q: In 1967 you went to officer training. How did you find that at Fort Benning?

O'NEILL: Fort Benning was the Army infantry school and I was commissioned in the Quartermaster Corps. But because I was a regular Army officer, the Army policy, which made a great deal of sense, was if you weren't commissioned in one of the combat arms you started off your first two years in either infantry, armor or artillery. I had wanted to become an armor officer and be in a tank unit, but my right eye was too weak. I applied all the way to the Surgeon General of the Army for a waiver, and he said no. I guess the Army figured if you had bad eyesight you'd do well in the infantry because you're supposed to close with the enemy but in a tank you had to shoot from a distance.

I went through five weeks of an abbreviated Regular Army infantry officer training course and eight or nine weeks of Ranger School. I was supposed to go to airborne school after that to become parachute qualified because I was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division. I got hurt at the end of Ranger School and was hospitalized for a while with a paralyzed shoulder. By the time that all worked out and I was physically fit again, I was put in a newly formed unit at Fort Benning for about six months. The Army tended to put you in stateside units for about six months before you went to Vietnam. In those days everybody knew that you were almost certainly going to Vietnam.

In the spring of 1968 it turned out that rather than being sent to a U.S. unit, my name had been drawn out of the Army's personnel hat to go as a military advisor with a Vietnamese unit. First, I was sent to Fort Bragg in North Carolina to what was then called the John F. Kennedy Center for Special Warfare for a six-week advisory training course and then went to Vietnam in June.

Q: How did you find the advisors' course?

O'NEILL: It was pretty good. Overall it was better than the infantry training in certain respects. At Fort Bragg, the concentration was not on tactics so much as it was on Vietnamese culture, history, organization of the Vietnamese forces and the structure of the advisory program. There was a lot about the organization and background of the Vietnamese communist insurgency, the Viet Cong and also the North Vietnamese forces who were the main combatants by then. We also had 100 hours of Vietnamese language taught by Vietnamese instructors, heavily weighted toward military subjects naturally. There was also training on the World War II and Korean War vintage weapons that the Vietnamese units were still using. It was actually pretty decent training.

Q: How did the Tet offensive impact what you were doing? This was January, February of '68.

O'NEILL: Well, as one unforgettable effect of the Tet offensive I was a pallbearer at the funeral of Richard Fox, one of the second lieutenants I had trained with, who was killed in action with the 101st Airborne Division. I knew his family in Atlanta better than I had known him. One of the other lieutenants in my unit and Dick were quite close friends, and the two of us would occasionally go up to Atlanta to spend a weekend with his parents. He was an only son and they had a daughter. Dick was killed in the end of January. Almost 10% of my infantry officer basic course class was killed in action before I got to Vietnam. Partly it was bad timing. They had deployed by late 1967, and most of them were with American units so they ran right into the Tet '68 offensive. The first of my classmates began getting killed in early January and Dick Fox was the third.

There was another second lieutenant at the funeral, from Marquette University as Dick was. So there were three of us who were pallbearers. I got to Vietnam in June, and I saw the third man's name listed in the Army Times as killed in action (KIA) in August. I unfortunately can't even remember his name now. There were a lot of Americans being killed in that time, hundreds every week that spring. In fact, 1968 was the worst year for U.S. forces in terms of killed, wounded, and missing during the entire war.

It was terribly sad to be with Dick's parents and sister at that time but we knew we needed to be there. Mrs. Fox and I exchanged Christmas cards for the next two decades, until she died.

Q: When did you go to Vietnam? Spring of 1968?

O'NEILL: No, I got there in June of '68. June 25, 1968 to be exact. I first went to the Vietnamese 22nd Infantry Division. Its headquarters was just north of Qui Nhon City on the central coast. Its three regiments were scattered throughout Military Region 2, which encompassed central South Vietnam. I went to the 3rd Battalion, 41st Infantry Regiment which was north of Phu Cat Air Base up Highway 1 from Qui Nhon. Another first lieutenant and I and an Army sergeant first class were the three advisors with that battalion. We were operating mostly in the rice paddies along the South China Sea coast and to some extent in the mountains to the west. The Korean 1st Infantry Regiment and the American 173rd Airborne Brigade shared the same area of operations with the 41st Regiment. I was only there for a month when the Army began drastically cutting the advisory team for the 22nd Division and they took all the battalion advisors out.

Q: First thing, you're near Qui Nhon, was it? What was going on there?

O'NEILL: That was Binh Dinh province, one of the largest provinces in the country which was quite prosperous because of rice farming. The eastern half of Binh Dinh was on the coast and was basically traditional Vietnamese; flat land, with rice paddies, with villages. The back half, the western half, was more mountainous. South Vietnamese civilians just didn't live there. The North Vietnamese Army did. There were small skirmishes during the time I was there, not particularly big battles. In May of 1968 there had been another North Vietnamese offensive which was also defeated like the Tet offensive was. There had been some heavy fighting in Qui Nhon City both during the Tet '68 and May '68 offensives. The division I was with - 22nd Infantry Division - had acquitted themselves quite well as did the Koreans and Americans.

Q: What about the division? What was your impression?

O'NEILL: The 22nd Division was pretty good. They had enjoyed a very good reputation from their defense of Qui Nhon in Tet '68 and the May offensive. They had their ups and downs over the years, and in the end in 1975 they were totally destroyed in the retreat from Pleiku. The 22nd was in the central highlands in 1975 when Nguyen Van Thieu, the president, gave his fateful order to abandon the highlands. The 22nd was withdrawing eastward on Highway 19 from Pleiku towards Qui Nhon and was completely destroyed by the North Vietnamese.

They sometimes did dumb things though. When I was at division headquarters, I sometimes went back to the 41st Regiment to do helicopter resupply missions. Once I did so in the aftermath of a situation where my old battalion (which by that time had no American advisors) had gotten tricked by a North Vietnamese surrender offer. The North Vietnamese unit had come out into the flatlands, and they ambushed our unit. Then they pretended to surrender and foolishly, instead of telling them to come forward, the South Vietnamese sent people forward to accept the surrender. The oldest trick in the book. It cost them the lives of quite a few men.

Q: What was the reputation of the Korean troops?

O'NEILL: Very tough. The main unit in Binh Dinh was the Capital Division. They had a reputation for being very tough fighters. They were quite feared by the North Vietnamese. In fact, there were captured documents in which NVA units were instructed under no circumstances to engage a Korean unit without having overwhelming superiority.

After I left the 41st Regiment, I was reassigned to 22nd Division headquarters and worked in the division tactical operations center for three months. I was mostly arranging U.S. air and artillery support for the Vietnamese units but occasionally flying resupply operations to some of the units when they got into combat. Then there was a major reduction in the advisory team at division level. In November 1968 I was reassigned to an advisory team in a remote area along the border between Vietnam and Cambodia, called Quang Duc Province. It was very sparsely populated, with no regular U.S. units. There were three Special Forces A-Teams, and the province and district advisory teams.

I spent two months at province headquarters as the air operations and intelligence advisor, a very interesting job. I coordinated all U.S. combat air support, reconnaissance and resupply for the province's units. Then I finally went to the position I was supposed to have had from my arrival in Quang Duc, to an outpost right on the Cambodian border called Duc Lap district. I was the assistant senior advisor for the first half of 1969. Duc Lap was a very primitive and isolated place. We only had radio communication, not even a military telephone link to the province team. For all but a few days of the year we'd get supplies, food and people in and out only by helicopter. There was a modest amount of combat in Duc Lap district while I was there, nothing very serious, although just across the border in Cambodia were some very large North Vietnamese units.

Q: What were you picking up when you were there? You had two tours.

O'NEILL: June 1968 to June '69, and I went back in December '70. That second time I volunteered to go back as an advisor for a variety of reasons, one of which was I found it interesting and I believed at that point - December 1970 - that whatever lasting good was going to come out of the U.S. military involvement would be through whatever the advisors could do with the Vietnamese as the U.S. forces were drastically withdrawing.

Compared to my experiences on my first tour, the situation was quite different when I went to the advisory team with the Vietnamese 3rd Area Logistics Command based in Saigon. It was the logistics headquarters for all of Military Region 3, all of the six or seven provinces around Saigon and Saigon itself. During that time there was almost no fighting going on inside Military Region 3 or, indeed, much of the rest of Vietnam. All the combat was in Cambodia, with the South Vietnamese taking the fight to the North Vietnamese. The forces from Military Region 3 were heavily engaged in fighting in Cambodia, so much of what we were doing as advisors was helping them with logistical backup and helping coordinate things that they couldn't necessarily coordinate themselves. For better or worse, we were not allowed to accompany our Vietnamese units into Cambodia. I would have been happy to go along. But it was quite a transformed situation, really.

Q: Transformed in what manner?

O'NEILL: With the North Vietnamese having failed repeatedly in these various offensives, they were very much on the defensive. The locus of combat was in Cambodia not in central and southern Vietnam as it had been. There was a lot of heavy combat way up in the northern part of South Vietnam, but in the areas where I was the burden was really on the North Vietnamese in Cambodia.

Q: By the time you left, this would be in what?

O'NEILL: I extended six months basically to get out Saigon and left the Saigon team in the end of December 1971. Next I was assigned to the advisory team for Long An province, southwest of Saigon. It was the main route to what we Americans loosely referred to as the Mekong Delta but which was officially known as Military Region Four. Long An was the southernmost province in Military Region Three.

I left Vietnam for the last time in July of 1972, nine months before the cease fire. By that time there were almost no American ground units left in Vietnam, if any. I was in Long An province for Easter 1972 Offensive where the brunt of the fighting was, again, taken up by South Vietnamese units. We had a good amount of fighting in Long An during the offensive. The province senior advisor had me accompany the provincial forces' tactical headquarters which controlled its subordinate units in fighting the North Vietnamese. On the South Vietnamese side, we had a regular Army mechanized infantry battalion and Regional Force battalions which were provincial forces.

They were fighting, as I recall, five North Vietnamese infantry battalions, a sapper battalion which had explosives experts, and an anti-aircraft battalion with heavy machine guns. I hasten to point out I was not being shot at. I was there in case there was any availability of U.S. tactical fighter bombers. Then I would be the one calling in the U.S. airstrikes in support, but as it happened, all the airstrikes we got were from the Vietnamese Air Force.

Q: Al, when did you leave Vietnam?

O'NEILL: In July 1972.

Q: What was your feeling about whither South Vietnam?

O'NEILL: Some of this I know from letters I wrote to my parents at the time, that they fortunately kept. Also, thinking back on it, by the time I left I thought that as long as we continued to provide air support and logistics support and ammunition for the South Vietnamese forces, they would be able to manage against the North Vietnamese.

The Viet Cong as a military force had been almost completely destroyed in the Tet '68 offensive, so the military problem was the North Vietnamese regular army. In fact, during the Easter '72 offensive in Long An, some of the enemy units had Viet Cong unit designations, but the soldiers were all North Vietnamese. So the VC as a military force was just long gone, though they still had a political underground in many places.

The South Vietnamese forces were doing things that they had never done before. They were resupplying themselves by helicopters, the larger Chinooks as well as Hueys, and they were doing quite well overall. During the Easter offensive, there was a big emblematic battle at An Loc on the Cambodian border. It was under siege by the North Vietnamese with tanks and artillery for quite a long time, certainly over a month.

In that battle, South Vietnamese soldiers were destroying North Vietnamese tanks with shoulder fired rockets. These were Russian- and Chinese-built medium tanks. If you can get an infantryman to do that, he's really brave by any standard. The Germans in World War II had a special badge for the single handed destruction of a tank by an infantryman, so it kind of gives you an idea what weight the German army put on that kind of bravery. The ground forces were getting good combat air support from the Vietnamese Air Force. I left with a fair amount of optimism having spent two and a half years there out of the previous four. Things got very depressing in 1975 when the whole thing came apart, by which time I was in the 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood in Texas.

Q: Did you run across some of the classic things that discouraged our people: the corruption, the problems of Vietnamese high command where there were more political military? Did that affect you or did you see that?

O'NEILL: Yes, you always did. It was kind of a mixture of politicking and political influence and corruption large and small, mixed in with other people who were very dutiful soldiers and were not corrupt. Sometimes the honest ones suffered for it. My counterpart for the year in Saigon was Captain Nguyen van Yen who was a North Vietnamese who had gone south at partition in 1954. He had been a soldier since I was in fourth grade. I was a captain like he was but I obviously always deferred to him.

Captain Yen commanded a field depot that was responsible for feeding and equipping all the 300-some thousand Vietnamese forces in the Saigon area and the provinces around it. He was very dutiful. You could say that his lack of politicking and lack of corruption was the reason he was a captain in what should have been a lieutenant colonel's slot.

We saw other situations in the headquarters above him. One of the majors was a real crook who was also running for the Vietnamese National Assembly. He was a good example of the other side: the corruption that was both institutionalized and personal, too; you'd have some individuals who were very corrupt and others who weren't. Of course, the ones who were did a great deal of damage and undermined the ones who weren't.

We had other instances, too. In Long An, around the time of the Easter 1972 Offensive the U.S. advisors in one of the districts were pulled back to the province headquarters temporarily because they had been investigating corruption on the part of the district chief. Like all district chiefs he was an army officer, and we had learned through various means that the major had put out a contract on the American district advisory team. And on the sound basis that the contract killers probably couldn't figure out one American advisor from any others, we were all told not to go into that district for the time being. Well, after some weeks, somehow that major got very badly wounded in an ambush and I guess you could say was medically retired from his district chief's position. As the logistics advisor, I got possession of his jeep which was quite thoroughly riddled with bullet holes. It looked like Bonnie and Clyde's car from the famous movie. I don't have any idea who the miscreants were, but they ended that problem, and the district advisory team was allowed to go back into the district.

Q: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but you didn't see that at the time as a fatal wound?

O'NEILL: No, I didn't think it was fatal because I think I knew by that time that corruption was endemic throughout Asia. Even with the revolutionary fervor of the North Vietnamese, that was sometimes the case. In fact, we got defectors every so often from the North Vietnamese units in Cambodia who our intelligence people found had dipped their hand into their till just one time too often or were fooling around with the battalion commander's girlfriend or something else and had to run to the South Vietnamese side.

But the corruption didn't seem fatal, no. You knew it was there and you could see it, but the main thing we had to do was to continue the logistics support and to some degree the air cover because we had built up this American-like army with all the equipment that you would expect. It needed maintenance, needed all the backup the American army needs, although any given size or type of Vietnamese unit was far less well equipped than its American counterpart in terms of weapons, radios, etc. We had helped build their army like ours and naturally I felt that we had to continue the support. To answer the basic question, no. The corruption which was there at various levels and various levels of intensity was not as far as I could tell a fatal flaw at that time.

Q: Did you have any connection with the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program or the embassy or anything like that?

O'NEILL: Well, during my eight months from November '68 to June '69 in Quang Duc province, we were under CORDS Two Corps, then for the six months I was in Long An from January to June 1972 we were under CORDS because that was a province advisory team, too, CORDS Three Corps in that case. The province advisory teams had a mixture of U.S. military and civilian people. There'd be a national police advisor. There'd be CIA guys advising the provincial reconnaissance units in the Phoenix program or Phung Hoang in Vietnamese. There were AID civilians. In fact, in both cases, Team 32 the Quang Duc province team and Advisory Team 86 in Long An province, the deputy senior advisors were AID reserve officers.

Q: Did you even have any chance between 1969 and '70 to go to the embassy to get a passport or anything like that?

O'NEILL: I went to the embassy in Saigon to get a passport in 1972. I was going to take leave in Thailand and I had the idea that I needed a passport to do that. So I still have a passport showing me in jungle fatigues. That was the only contact that I had with the embassy. In fact, I was hardly ever in Saigon proper. The headquarters of the 3rd Area Logistics Command was in Cho Lon, the Chinese "twin city" of Saigon and the little hotels that I was billeted in were both in Cho Lon.

In 2000, I went with my wife to Vietnam from Manila, first time since 1972. We were in Saigon for a while, and I saw a few things that I remembered from my time there, but most of it was new, things I had never seen even though I'd been there for a year. The field depot that I advised was beyond Tan Son Nhut Air Base, and our headquarters was in Cho Lon. We had a sub-depot in Tay Ninh that I used to visit with my counterpart Captain Yen fairly frequently, probably once a month by jeep, to check on its operations.

To get back to the corruption issue: during the time that I was there in 1971, there was a U.S. program to bolster the Vietnamese army's field ration program. It was called the ration supplement program. The Vietnamese were getting from the U.S. large consignments of the canned meals that were components for C-rations and some other dehydrated rations of the kind which the U.S. was not issued. Those were designed for Vietnamese forces, rice and shrimp and fish and things like that.

During that period, investigators from what was then called the General Accounting Office (GAO) come out to do a long investigation of how the ration supplement program was going. For a couple of weeks, the GAO people were at Captain Yen's depot and gave his unit a clean bill of health. That was one example where corruption was possible and they didn't find anything. But again, that's probably why Yen stayed a captain. He didn't play that game.

Q: To finish off your Army career. We're getting to 1972?

O'NEILL: Right.

Q: Then you went where?

O'NEILL: From Vietnam to Fort Hood, Texas to the Division Support Command of the 1st Cavalry Division. I was a Quartermaster captain at that point.

Q: How did you feel about your career as an officer?

O'NEILL: I had mixed feelings about it. I had asked for the second tour in Vietnam, otherwise I probably wouldn't have been sent back involuntarily. When I went to Fort Hood in 1972, it was the first time I'd ever served in a U.S. division. Between my tours in Vietnam I'd been at Fort Lee, Virginia, near Petersburg, at first in Quartermaster training and then for a year in a unit that supported the tens of thousands of Army Reservists and National Guardsmen that came to Fort Lee every summer for training.

I had no interest in staying at Fort Lee; so I was happy to volunteer to go back to Vietnam. Then when I got to the 1st Cavalry, it was the first time I was with a major U.S. ground unit. It was quite an experience in a lot of ways. Again, I was in the logistical end of the division, the division support command commanded by a colonel. The first two commanders in a row were infantry veterans of the Korean War who then later served in Vietnam either in aviation or Special Forces.

In the early seventies, the 1st Cav had all the problems of the late Vietnam era Army, including a severe lack of money; so it was very hard train especially at brigade and division level. We had major shortages of personnel and a lot of people who were the wrong kinds of people for their jobs, assigned willy-nilly to units. Added to that were significant racial tensions, especially between whites and blacks, although sometimes between whites and Hispanics, blacks and Hispanics, but the big arena was white and black and that was a very serious command problem. This was true even though the last division commander I served under, Major General Julius Becton Jr., was black, as was Lt. Colonel Hudson, the Division's provost marshal, the top military police officer.

I took the Foreign Service oral and written exams while I was a company commander. In my last year in the Army, I was commanding the headquarters company of the division support command, which had 330 soldiers. I got out of the Army of September 1975.

Q: How did you find out about the Foreign Service and what attracted you to it?

O'NEILL: Good question. It was a combination of things. One of my brothers who was finishing up his two year commitment here at Arlington Hall was trying to figure out to do after the Army. His two main thoughts were law school or the Foreign Service. He took the Foreign Service exams but went to law school. Then a friend of my father's who had been working for Thiokol took the exams and entered the Foreign Service.

Another big influence was being an officer in the mid-'70s at a time of real disaster in the Army and my thinking that - this sounds rather overblown - but thinking that I wanted to do what I could to help make sure this Army never goes to war again without very good justification. Also, as I thought back on my two and a half years as an advisor with the Vietnamese I realized that it was interesting to be deeply involved in a foreign culture, to be dealing with people who often thought "non-American" thoughts and try to persuade them to do things a certain way for perfectly good reasons.

Today is the 29th of August 2008 with Al O'Neill. You took the Foreign Service exam when and where?

O'NEILL: I took the written exam in Dallas in December 1974 and the oral exam also in Dallas in May of '75. I was a captain in the Army, commanding the headquarters company in the division support command of the 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, Texas. I passed both exams the first time I took them.

Q: How was the oral exam conducted when you took it?

O'NEILL: When I took it four senior officers comprised the panel. They asked me a number of questions. When I took the written exam, you had to take the so-called functional field test in a specific cone. For a variety reasons I took it in the consular cone. I don't remember exactly the cones of the various people who made up the panel but at least a couple of them I'm sure were consular officers, and at least some of the questions were consular related.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions?

O'NEILL: There was one about an American coming to you in your embassy and saying that he had lost his passport and he had no other identification. What do you do to figure out whether he is who he says he is and actually has a right to a passport? I remember another question, too, about the ambassador being concerned about morale at post which he thought was very bad, and he wanted you as a junior officer to find out what the cause. You learn very quickly that the problem was the ambassador himself and what do you do? How do you present it?

The third question was that some say the period between the end of Reconstruction and America's entry into World War I was the most dynamic period in American history. Whether or not you agree with this, why would anybody make that assertion? That question had you reviewing the 1877 to 1917 period in both domestic and foreign affairs.

Q: I was giving oral exam about that time. Regarding the question about the dynamics of the post-Civil War, pre World War. We had people who couldn't get the era right. All of a sudden Franklin Roosevelt was there, our founding fathers found themselves in the industrial age.

O'NEILL: Were they at the Little Big Horn too?

Q: It was scary! Of course, I am a history major and a history buff. This didn't do much for me when these candidates came up there! This was the time when I assume they told you on the spot whether you passed or not.

O'NEILL: Yes. They conferred among themselves and then told me I had passed.

Q: How long did it take? In that period there was often quite a hiatus. How did it work out?

O'NEILL: It took a long time. I got notified a year later in May 1976 that I had just been put on the rank order register and was immediately offered a class date for the following month. There had been a long delay in granting my security clearance. I had had a secret clearance for the eight years that I was in the Army, but the delay was because the Department's security people had other priorities. Because of the rise in Middle Eastern terrorism 30 years ago, there was a great expansion in what was then the security office or SY, now Diplomatic Security (DS). The background investigators were spending a great deal of their time doing investigations of people who wanted to be SY officers. That pushed the Foreign Service Officer candidates to the back of the line. The day I got my top secret clearance I was put on the rank order register and was given a class date.

Q: In the meantime, you knew that you were slated to go into the Foreign Service. I assume you stayed in the Army?

O'NEILL: I stayed in the Army for a little while. I got out in September of '75. I went from Fort Hood in central Texas up to Dallas and enjoyed not being in the Army for a few months. I took some courses at the University of Texas at Dallas in international management studies, one on the Middle East and one on East Asia. Otherwise I just puttered around and got used to not being in uniform. I arrived in Washington in the beginning of June 1976 and became part of the 125th class.

Q: Were you married then?

O'NEILL: No, I was a bachelor.

Q: What was your impression of your 125th class?

It was an interesting group, and was a fairly large class. As I recall we had about 40 FSOs and certainly at least 10 FSIOs from the U.S. Information Agency and one person from the Foreign Agricultural Service. The Foreign Commercial Service (FCS) did not exist at that time. We had a fair number of ex-Peace Corps volunteers who had served in Latin America, the Middle East or Africa. There were five or six of us who had just got out of our respective military services as captains or the equivalent: from the Navy, Coast Guard, Air Force, and the Army.

We had one fellow who had left North American Rockwell where he was working on the space shuttle which was still in the design stage. Another classmate had been teaching high school in New York and when he arrived in DC had never been in an airplane. He had come down from New York by train to start the A-100 class and then he got assigned to the U.S. Mission to the UN (USUN). I assume he went back to New York on the train. Our paths never crossed thereafter, but he must have flown at some point unless he shuttled between Canada and Mexico for the rest of his career. At the other end of the spectrum, one of our classmates had been Yemen in the Peace Corps which is probably as far back in the past as one could possibly get in the 20th century. Yet another classmate had just retired from the Air Force as a master sergeant with 20 years' service. He had spent most of his career in the Air Force in various embassy DAOs (Defense Attachï¿½ Offices) in Latin America. It was quite an eclectic and interesting group.

Q: How did you find the training?

O'NEILL: It was all right. It was instructive since I didn't really know anything about the Foreign Service, so the Foreign Service specific portions of the training were useful: the organization of the department, how you do things, all that. What tended to be pretty tedious, frankly, was being taken around to some other agencies like Department of Labor to hear briefings on their foreign policy and their Foreign Service apparatus, etc. Overall, though, the training was good. We had good folks from FSI who were our faculty advisors. I thought they were very helpful in just answering questions on the side and giving us some sense of what things were really like in the Foreign Service.

Q: As an Army officer you certainly had been on both ends of the Army training program. An Army that's not fighting is training, and the officers and senior NCOs do the training. Were you comparing and contrasting the Army way of doing things with the Foreign Service or was there much difference?

O'NEILL: Well, there was a good bit of difference. I suppose the fairest comparison of the A100 course to training in the Army would be the courses I took including the infantry officer basis course and other infantry training at Fort Benning when I came in. That training in the Army varied a great bit. The effectiveness of the training depended on the ability of the instructor as much as anything. A gifted instructor could take a very dull program of instruction and make it interesting and vice versa.

Q: How did you find the consular training?

O'NEILL: That was very good, very practical. This was the ConGen Rosslyn course. By the time I finished A100 I knew I was going to Seoul. The job was a language designated position, so I knew I would have 11 months of Korean language training. In between A100 and Korean, I had the consular course. I think it was quite new at that time.

Q: The ConGen Rosslyn course was quite new.

O'NEILL: My recollection is that one of the reasons it was good was that the instructors seemed to grab practical examples from the field whether it was visa work or notarials or American citizen prison visits, and put them to us so it was not as dry as some training might be. When I was doing visa work in Seoul in my first year I sometimes would think, "This is just like ConGen Rosslyn," as one case or another would come up. After that course which I think was five or six weeks, I entered Korean language training.

Q: What sparked your interest in Korea?

O'NEILL: Well, again, harking back to my Vietnam experience, Asia seemed quite interesting to me. As I put it recently, if you could get interested in Asia as a result of the Vietnam War, you know it must be a pretty fascinating part of the world. I saw Asia as a region of huge importance to the U.S., and a region with great and interesting variety in terms of language, culture and history. I hadn't specifically thought of Korea at first, but among the positions opening up for our class Seoul sounded pretty interesting, particularly with the language training thrown in. I had known a lot of people in the Army who had served in Korea either during the war or after, and I knew of the general situation between the North and South and the economic boom that was beginning in the South; so that made it pretty attractive. I think it was my second choice on my bid list, and I was very happy that I got it.

Q: Talk a little bit about learning the Korean language.

O'NEILL: Well, when I started Korean in August 1976, I was the only student, so this meant a four hour day of one-on-one instruction rather than the usual six hours if there had been more students. The only Asian language I'd ever studied before was Vietnamese and that was just 100 hours. Otherwise, I had had Latin, German, and French and a little Arabic in the Army. When I entered I the Foreign Service I got off language probation with German. This was my first full scale attempt to learn an Asian language, and Korean, as you know, is one of the Group 4 languages along with Japanese, Chinese, and Arabic that FSI considers the most difficult. With good reason I learned!

The man who taught the course had a master's degree in Korean literature from Korea University in Seoul and I didn't. It was the two of us in one room for four hours a day. I found that for the first few months, anyway, I was so exhausted in four hours that I'd go to my little place in Arlington Towers, that roach-infested place where a lot of junior FSOs lived, and just lie on the floor and rest before I could eat lunch. I got a good grounding in the language. It was 44 weeks, and I wound up at the end with a two-plus in speaking and a two in reading, better than average.

Q: Did you find as with Japanese and other languages, it's a situational language, isn't it, in that if you're male of a certain rank you speak accordingly as they speak to you. Did you find it difficult to get into that mode?

O'NEILL: Yes and no. Not during the training itself so much because we were being trained to speak at a relatively elevated level. The FSI training, of course, is in speaking and reading, and the reading was mostly newspapers. The training in speaking was at a polite level of Korean because I'm sure the thought was that in most cases the Koreans you were going to talking with are going to be older than you and of higher rank, too. So there was a bias towards a relatively polite or very polite level of Korean speaking.

I found that when I was actually dealing with Koreans, especially my age or younger, that my manner of speaking was too elevated and too flowery, so I had to learn that there were lower levels of speech, more familiar levels in Korean. The FSI language training is job related. You can talk about politics and the chances of the opposition party in the next election, but you can't ask someone to fill your gas tank because that's not part of the curriculum. If you're trying to speak to a child or a much younger person, you've got to use quite a different level of speech too.

Q: I always found that several languages that I've tried to work on, they always had the familiar, and I just hated to talk to children because I couldn't remember the verb endings!

O'NEILL: You get a little bit of that in French and German, of course, but it's not as stark as it is in Korean. I found out later that even though there is a difference in Korean between men's speech and women's speech both in terms of vocabulary and to some degree conjugation of verbs, there's a much sharper difference in Japanese. Fortunately in Korean when we got additional students in January or so, we also got a woman as an instructor, so we had both teaching us for the last few months.

Q: Having one instructor gets very long for both.

O'NEILL: Yes, especially for the "teachee" though it was probably tedious for the teacher too.

Q: You were in Korea from when to when?

O'NEILL: That time was August 1977 to July '79.

Q: Unfortunately for you, your first job was where?

O'NEILL: I was in the consular section working for one Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Tell me about consular work there. In the first place, describe the situation as you were getting it before you got there from your reading and from your instructors. What sort of a South Korea were you going to?

O'NEILL: I was going to South Korea under President Park Chung-Hee who was very authoritarian, a former general who had taken power initially in a coup d'ï¿½tat in 1961. It was a Korea that was really beginning to take off economically because of Park's policies and the industriousness of the Korean people. It was also a Korea that was unsettled by Jimmy Carter's campaign promise in 1976 to pull out all the U.S. ground forces.

Q: Which meant essentially the 2nd Infantry Division.

O'NEILL: The 2nd Division was the centerpiece unit but there were others as well. Carter's campaign promise, sight unseen, was to take all U.S. ground forces out of Korea and, I would emphasize, without seeking any concessions from the North Koreans at all. It was a Korea that was beginning to make its mark among other places like the Middle East because you had these huge Korean companies like Dae Woo and Hyundai landing gigantic contracts in places like Saudi Arabia and Libya for seaports, container facilities and air ports. It was a Korea that was beginning to find a new place for itself in the world. It was a pretty interesting place.

Q: What were you getting from your colleagues and your own observation about Park Chung-Hee, a leader who was a military dictator, but in a way of a different caliber than so many of that type? ?

O'NEILL: He was very definitely an authoritarian figure. He had rigged elections, he had, in fact, rigged the whole National Assembly. When the assembly existed, which was intermittently, he had rigged it with an appointed group called in Korean Yujonghoe, which guaranteed him a majority no matter who got elected from the opposition parties. The main opposition figures at that time were Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-Sam, both of whom became presidents of Korea in succession in the 1990's.

Park's policies were obviously ruthlessly anti-communist, ruthlessly directed toward anybody who he decided under the National Security Law were leftists or in any way out of the Korean mainstream as he defined it. Both Kims - Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-Sam spent a good bit of time either under house arrest or in jail, I think mostly under house arrest, and they were allowed out from time to time.

There was very strong press censorship. In fact, what was then called the KCIA, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, took a very hands-on approach, shall we say, to the news media. Usually the editorial rooms of newspapers and the TV stations had KCIA officers assigned to them to make sure that they: a) printed the right things about President Park and his policies, and b) essentially ignored the opposition almost entirely except occasionally to excoriate them. The KCIA had been established by another Kim, Kim Chong-P'il, a very close associate of Park Chung-Hee who was a principal organizer of Park's 1961 coup. So it was a very authoritarian society and yet one in which the middle class was beginning to take a big role in the economic life in Korea and would later take a similar role in the political life of the country.

Q: As I recall it, during that time, and I may be off, the average income of the population had reached a thousand dollars, and a thousand was a big deal in those days particularly in Asia. Every expectation was going up. At least at my level as consul general, I think conventional wisdom was that Park Chung-Hee might be an authoritarian, but he's taking a very unruly country and making it very strong militarily. Far more than that, he had very good economic plans which probably couldn't have been carried out in a more rambunctious democracy. Also, he was seen as a transitional figure. I'm not sure that was really the case, at least how I and some others perceived it.

O'NEILL: That's basically true. He did a lot of good and an awful lot of harm. In the now nearly 30 years after he was assassinated, a considerable number of Koreans have a much more positive view of his time mainly because of the economic transformation that he brought. They tend to downplay the harshness of his rule which was quite harsh, indeed, if you were on the wrong side. But they also look at Park himself. He was from a very poor family, had graduated as a lieutenant from the Japanese Manchurian Military Academy, served in Japanese forces, which is another thing a lot of Koreans held against him, then became a ROK Army officer immediately after liberation from the Japanese.

Q: ROK is R-O-K.

O'NEILL: R-O-K, Republic of Korea. But many Koreans also look at aspects of his personality like the fact that he was an extremely abstemious person. He had essentially no personal wealth. When he was assassinated there were no bank accounts or gold bars in his safe or anything like that. In fact, he was more or less penniless which fit the Confucian ideal that Koreans hold up as a model.

Also, although you saw his unsmiling picture in government offices there were no gleaming statues of Park Chung-Hee all over Korea. The closest he came to that was identifying himself with a late 16th Century Korean hero, Admiral Yi Sun-sin, who defeated the Japanese in a couple of naval battles using iron-plated oared warships that are known as turtle ships. Park had a huge statue of Admiral Yi Sun-sin erected on the main avenue, Sejong-Ro in Seoul and refurbished shrines to Yi around the country. Everyone knew that Yi was a stand-in for Park, but Park himself didn't have statues all over the place. He had a complexity that is getting evaluated better by a lot of South Koreans in the years since his death. His wife the First Lady was assassinated in 1974 at the National Theater. A Korean from Japan who was working for the North Koreans tried to shoot Park with a pistol and missed him and killed her. Her family name was Yook, and she was always known as a tempering influence on Park, so there was a great deal of genuine sorrow when she was murdered, even among the political opposition.

Q: One of the things, too, that make Park's regime successful was that he made the decision that he wasn't going to play the usual game of "tax the peasants and cater to the city workers." He made working on the soil lucrative for the peasants which, looking at trends in other parts of the world made very good sense.

O'NEILL: In fact, one of his programs that is in recent opinion polls now seen as a real landmark was just that. It was called in Korean the "Sae Maul Undong," which means New Village Movement. It was a means of transforming traditional village life in Korea by providing loans for new houses, for motorized roto-tillers and other farm equipment, etc., and for distinctly improving the lives of Korean farmers. To some extent this was Park's way of paying homage to his impoverished rural childhood. Sae Maul definitely transformed rural Korea.

Q: You arrived and you were put in the consular section. Could you describe the consular section when you arrived in '77 and what you were doing?

O'NEILL: I was in a junior officer rotational program in the consular section. I did a six month rotation in non-immigrant visas and then another six months in immigrant visas. I never got to do American citizen services because of the demands of the rotational program in a two year tour.

The non-immigrant visa workload at that time was very much shaped by Korean government policies. It was extremely difficult to get passports to go abroad simply for tourism, and there were foreign currency restrictions on a person who did get out for tourism. In general if you were below a certain age, under 60, as I recall, it was particularly difficult for a husband and wife to get passports at the same time. If they were over 60, husbands and wives could get passports to go as tourists together.

Much of our workload was in other visa categories than what it is now, with the current huge B-2 (visitor) visa workload in Seoul. We had a fair number of business travelers. Also, there were a number of official visitors whether they were going on Fulbrights or on other U.S. official exchange programs.

We had a large number of transit visa applicants for work on cruise ships in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Largely they weren't merchant seamen themselves; they were people who wanted to work as waiters or cooks or busboys, etc. There was also a fairly booming business in fianc¿½e visas for young Korean women who wanted to go marry GIs whom they had met in Korea. In these two areas, fraud was a major problem.

I was dealing with quite a number of transit visa applications for the men who wanted to work on cruise ships. In large part, these applicants were an unheralded sidelight of Carter's plan to withdraw all U.S. ground forces. The majority had been working on U.S. military facilities in various service capacities, cooks, etc., and as a result of Carter's announcement many saw their livelihoods coming to an end. As things developed, of course that enormously ill-advised policy was stopped after only one U.S. infantry battalion was withdrawn. But those men didn't know that and they were just looking out for themselves. We discovered an enormous amount of fraud in that whole business of the cruise ship job offers. We wound up working with INS particularly in Miami to authenticate the letters of employment that these visa applicants were bringing in. I also figured out that in the Embassy's commercial library there was something called The American Bureau of Shipping Register, a compendium of the world's merchant ships. One revelation from that register sticks in my mind. One of the alleged Caribbean cruise ships that supposedly was offering employment was actually a ferry in the Oslo harbor.

We had a lot of fraud in other categories of visas. There were a number of religious workers who were going to the United States, members of the many Christian denominations in Korea who were going either for study or work. Many of them were bona fide applicants. Others, despite their religious inclinations were a little shadier, and that was also a rather delicate problem to work out. We had huge numbers of notices from INS of people who got to the U.S. as alleged temporary religious workers or students who were quickly adjusting to immigrant status. We had a big box full of those kinds of fraudulent applications, separated by denomination. There was a tangle of good applicants and very bad applicants in those religious cases.

Q: How did this impact on you?

O'NEILL: It was not a lot of fun. In those days the consular section occupied the entire second floor of the chancery. We had about 30 minutes to eat lunch in the cafeteria on the first floor. At the time the cafeteria wall was all plate glass and the stairway to the consular section was right next to it. You would be wolfing down your lunch as the line was forming for your afternoon's work. That wasn't a terribly restful way to spend your 30 minute lunch. There was certainly times when it was extremely difficult to keep your temper. Most of the time it was pretty tough.

Q: How about, you might say, extra-curricular activities? Did you find outside the consular section attempts of bribery or attempts of offered sex or antiques, what have you? That whole...

O'NEILL: Not a lot. I would say a little bit of both but surprisingly not that much given the general modus operandi of Koreans who wanted to get something for themselves. Maybe that was just my personality. Maybe other consular officers seemed to be more attractive prospects for such attempts. I can say there were a few but not a whole lot. It reminds me of another thing. I wanted to drag on too long about Seoul.

Q: No, no, that's all right.

O'NEILL: At the time one of the biggest visa pushers in Seoul was the Honorable Benjamin Tirona who was the Philippine ambassador, the dean of the diplomatic corps, and one of the original Philippine Foreign Service officers trained at FSI.

Q: Trained at FSI!

O'NEILL: Yes. Ambassador Tirona was shameless about pushing really bad visa cases. I remember one time consulting you because he wanted to invite me, a mere third secretary and vice consul, to the Seoul Plaza Hotel for a big steak lunch. The last thing I wanted to do was get indebted to the dean of the diplomatic corps cum major visa pusher. Your guidance to me was, I recall, "Enjoy the steak and do what you're supposed to when it comes to visa applications." So that's what I did. I knew Tirona's reputation from other colleagues in the consular section like Liz Raspolic who was a wonderful consular officer. Anyway, that was all part of the strange atmosphere for visa operations in Seoul.

Q: How did you find the local staff?

O'NEILL: They were very helpful. I found them very knowledgeable and very helpful to me. Also as far as I could tell, they were quite uprighin most cases. There were a few who were not and some of the Korean consular staff were fired for corruption.

Q: How did you find student visas?

O'NEILL: That's an interesting thing. They fell into two categories as far as I was concerned: really good and really bad. The really good ones were, for example, young Korean musicians going to Julliard, of whom there were more than a few. Also, one of the sons of Hyundai Group founder Chairman Chung Ju-yung was going to Columbia, and I interviewed him. He had no problem getting his visa of course. He later became a national assemblyman and was a sometime presidential candidate.

Others were really awful including people who had the student visa approval, called I-20's, for alleged institutions of higher learning that as far as I could tell occupied an upstairs room someplace in the United States. Those applicants weren't quite sure of the name of the institution of higher learning, and their English was really shaky.

The other really bad collection of student visa applicants was a really sad group. There was in Korea at the time, and I think still is, a Chinese minority mostly based in Seoul and Inchon, and I suppose there were some in Pusan. These people had Republic of China (Taiwan) passports. They were discriminated against by the Koreans in the same way that Koreans in Japan were discriminated against by the Japanese. They had a precarious existence largely running restaurants in Seoul and Inchon, and their sons and daughters were trying to get out of that dead end.

Because of peculiarities of Taiwan or Republic of China law, they didn't have any "right of return," to use an Israeli expression, to Taiwan. They had to get visas in their Republic of China passports from the ROC embassy in Seoul to go to Taiwan. That meant that they were cut off or at least not guaranteed a place to go to outside of Korea and they had little reason to return to Korea. That made them unfortunately, bad bets for U.S. student visas.But many of those young Korean-Chinese were trying to get student visas. In many cases they really trying to work at their uncle's or aunt's restaurant in California or Washington and many of them had very little English. Their I-20s were for pretty shaky schools. You felt very bad about keeping them in the rather dire straits which they were in, but under the law you had no real choice but to refuse them a student visa.

Q: I can recall one time one of the young Korean ladies in our file room came to me and said, "Oh, Mr. Kennedy, my brother has a chance at some sort of scholarship to two institutions. Which one do you think he should take?" I said, "Well, what are they?" She said, "One's called Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the other's California Tech." I thought, "Oh, my God!" The Koreans are really a remarkable people.

O'NEILL: "Goal directed" is an expression that keeps popping into my mind when we talk about Koreans.

Q: Over on the immigrant side. You talked a little about your experiences as an immigrant visa officer.

O'NEILL: I spent six months as an IV officer. It was during a period that you probably remember not so fondly when we were beginning to armor the consular section with that very tasteful battleship grey armor plate and the bullet proof glass called Lexgard. During the whole time I was doing NIVs and I'm sure for years before that we just had the applicants come into our little offices for the interviews. There was really no security as such other than the Marines in the waiting room.

Q: The Marines weren't even in the waiting room.

O'NEILL: Not normally. It was easy to get them sometimes when that was necessary, too. But there was essentially no security. Anyhow, while I was doing immigrant visas we were working in industrial conditions, I guess you could say, with many workmen all day hammering, riveting, banging, and sawing to wall us off from the applicants we were dealing with.

Doing immigrant visa work in Seoul in that period presented its challenges, too. I would say that the overwhelming majority of cases were family related, as is always the case in the U.S. immigrant visa structure. A great number were brothers or sisters of American citizens and parents of American citizens, etc. A great deal of this had its origins in Korean women who had married GI's, gone to the States, and after becoming Americans, were petitioning for the parents, brothers, sisters, etc. There was a real mixed bag in terms of educational levels and work history in this. To over-generalize, we were not getting the cream of Korean society as IV applicants in those days.

There was also a great deal of fraud. And also because of the peculiarities of Korea, there were a lot of documentary problems resulting from the Korean War. The basic Korean document for immigrant visa purposes, for family reunification, was called the family register, in Korean hojeok tungbon. This was not an individual document like American birth certificate. This was a Confucian record of an entire family with the patriarch of the family, usually the oldest male still living, at the top of the register and his wife and children and his brothers and sisters, etc. and their children and on and on and on. It was, if you will, a kind of official family tree. This was what was kept by families and local offices to show relationships, births, marriages, divorces, deaths, etc.

In some cases you got the impression that the North Korean army spent the entire three years of the Korean War blowing up offices where those records were kept because so many of them had been reconstructed after the war. Also, because of the large number of South Koreans whose family origin was in the north, and there were millions including people in quite high places in government and business, accurately assessing the necessary family relationship in an individual case could be very difficult. You had a lot of missing links so to speak, and you had to think of the situation of the war and aftermath and consult with the FSNs and others to make sure you were coming to the right decision. It was a challenge but you soon learned what to look for and what questions to ask and what ancillary documents to ask for, like school and church records.

There was a lot of fraud. Some of the fraud came from the fact that a lot of Korean men in that era and certainly before had concubines and children by these concubines. Their documentary connection to the families especially if they were female children of the concubines was shaky. You had to drag in other records, school records, family photos and all these other things to try to figure out whether the person really had the necessary relationship in U.S. law or was a fraud. That was very frustrating, but since we were all dealing with it, it gave us visa officers a certain perverse amount of camaraderie.

Q: I was going to say that the visa office, well, the consular officers, were a very good crew. I was very impressed.

O'NEILL: We went out and hung out together a good bit in the off hours as well. We'd go on picnics on weekends with the Korean local staff and have parties or dinners around our apartments and that kind of thing. That helped a lot. I think we were very cohesive group. I remember very much the feeling of fighting a two-front war in dealing with these visa applicants. More than a few of them were legitimate applicants; others were distinctly not. That was the first front.

The second front was with the Immigration and Naturalization Service in the U.S. The impression I certainly had, I think many of us had, was that once somebody, however fraudulent, got through the turnstile at LAX, they were home free. That was it. You felt very distinctly being undermined by the people in the immigration service who seemed to let really egregious frauds stay in the U.S with little or no trouble. I'm sure they thought they were all dutifully trying to do their jobs. But that is an impression I still have 30 years later and it affected our morale.

Q: I had the same impression. One of the stories that came to me from one of you all was that there was somebody who presented family registers that showed she died and then was born again a few days later. Apparently she had been born in an inauspicious day, so they killed her off and had her born a few days later.

O'NEILL: I'm not surprised by that at all. That reminds me of a very strong Korean prejudice against multiple births, twins, triplets, etc. In the Korean ethos this was associated with litters of animals. It was not unusual to see in a family register that a woman had given birth to one child on a Monday and four days later had given birth to another child. Then you asked, "Are they ssangttungi?" which is "twins," and the answer was always yes. Very bashful, very embarrassed, but that's what it was. So these things were, again, part of what you learned.

That resurrection thing also came up in the enormous family dislocation in the Korean War. Often you had a family of North Koreans who more or less cohesively got down to the south but with some people left behind or presumed dead or whatever. If they came across a missing relative much later, often the way that person would be put into the family register was "resurrected" or brought back from the dead. I'd see this in the English translation, and I asked one of the FSNs one time, "What does this say in Korean?" She read it, and she said, "It means 'brought back from the dead'." You ran into things like that all the time, the results of that devastating war. I actually got to be fairly good at reading family registers which were written mostly in Chinese characters and also partly in Hangeul, the Korean alphabet. But I was certainly no expert at it.

I can't remember any case where that kind of odd entry turned out to be fraudulent. There were other things where people sort of miraculously arrived on family registers in their 20's, 25 or so, and it would be very suspicious particularly if the person was a male. You could imagine Koreans forgetting for 20 years or so to register a daughter but not a son. Indeed, those almost always were found to be fraudulent. In visa work you had to learn a good deal about Korean culture and realities if you were going to do a proper job.

Q: You're making a case which I've always felt was valid was that somebody who learns rigid rules and particularly if they have a legal background. I'm talking about Americans on the visa officer side, and somebody who's so afraid of making a misjudgment or mistake wants to be sure to obey the law especially just being rigid. You can't do it in some cases. You just sort of have to operate to a degree by sense and touch.

O'NEILL: You have to look at the big picture, as frustrating as it was and considering that the work load was pretty overwhelming. I can't remember the daily caseload, but it was large. I think they were at most five officers doing IVs at the time. I seem to recall doing about 1,000 IV cases a month for those six months; so I did about 6,000 in half a year. Some of it was relatively easy and straightforward work, but a lot of it was not.

You had to do a lot of consulting with your colleagues during the course of the day, too, in part because of the Federal poverty guidelines for immigrant visa applicants so they would not be a "public charge." You'd look at paperwork for this family, and the former GI and his wife in the states who were the petitioners would have a modest income. You figure, "Well, according to the poverty guidelines, they can just barely make it over the wire." Then you realize that this same couple in the U.S. was petitioning for another family that John was interviewing and another that Harry was interviewing, too. So you really had three different families, all of whom were supposedly going to be dependent on the same modest income. That became pretty tough. You'd wind up usually insisting that there be some kind of job arranged for the family, and that became yet another element of difficulty later on. They were supposedly going to LA and the job offer was in Fairbanks, Alaska. It was tough work, it really was. You're trying to be fair because you really didn't want to refuse somebody who was eligible, but you also didn't want to vandalize the Immigration and Nationality Act.

Q: I know after I left in '79, shortly thereafter they exposed a major fraud ring. You might explain what this is.

O'NEILL: I forget what triggered it the discovery, and I don't remember the details, but it turned out there was an enormous amount of fraud among the FSNs doing immigrant visas. I don't recall that it affected any of the non-immigrant visa FSNs, but it was deep and pervasive on the immigrant side, and they were making bundles of money in helping to fake documents and all that kind of thing. A lot of FSNs on the immigrant visa (IV) side were fired, including many that I had worked with without suspicion.

Q: Moving from that what did you do after you had a year of that?

O'NEILL: And now for something completely different, as Monty Python says, I became the ambassador's aide. In those days there was a staff aide to the ambassador as a six month rotational position for first tour junior officers. Later the inspectors knocked that out for a long period which I thought was a stupid thing to do. Then after a gap of many years the staff aide position has since been restored in Seoul. I got to be the staff aide for Ambassador William Gleysteen. He was an Asia hand par excellence, for one thing having been born in China of missionary parents.

Q: I think there were three Gleysteens in the Foreign Service.

O'NEILL: There were; he and his brothers Dirk and Culver. He was the only one I knew. He was the quintessential Foreign Service officer as I had imagined them. I think he went to Yale. He spent a great deal of time working on China. His Chinese was fluent by the testimony of Koreans I knew whose specialty was China. He was a perfect gentleman and a fine person to work for. I learned a lot from him.

He did a number of things that I think impressed the Koreans a great deal from his arrival that summer of '78, replacing Ambassador Richard Sneider. Ambassador Sneider, incidentally, was also a career officer with an enormous amount of Asia experience, Korea (including during the war), Japan, and back in Washington, too. Ambassador Gleysteen became the first American ambassador to call on the director general for North American Affairs at the Foreign Ministry, who in the normal course of things was the natural counterpart of an American ambassador. But because of the peculiar setup in Korea, American ambassadors before him had never gone that "far down" in their round of courtesy calls. It made a big splash in the Korean press that he would do this. The other thing was that he didn't fly the flags on his car unless he was doing something like going to the Blue House or to call on a senior ROK official.

Q: The Blue House meaning the president's offices.

O'NEILL: President's offices and residence, yes. Or to some other major ceremonial occasion. In the normal course of things, he didn't fly the flags on his car, which was partly his being self-effacing, the other aspect being his way of signaling less of a pro-consular image to the U.S. presence in Korea, to treat Korea on more of an equal plane.

Q: If I recall, we were trying to disengage from this idea that we were running things. We were pretty comfortable with the Koreans trying. It had looked before like we were manipulating them.

O'NEILL: Right. Overt manipulating almost invariably backfired on us because as anybody who has dealt with the Korean government over the decades knows, they don't get manipulated, at least not easily. In fact, much later on, about ten years ago or so, Ambassador Gleysteen wrote a book about this, and the title was Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence. That sort of epitomized where we were in Korea at the time.

I know he could see that by looking like we were the proconsuls, it was easy for Koreans in opposition to Park Chung-Hee to blame us for so many things that President Park did. A lot of Koreans blamed us then and still do now for support to dictatorial governments under Park Chung-Hee and his successor Chun Doo Hwan. So we were gaining few of the benefits and much of the opprobrium for the relatively little influence that we really had. This was true on the military side as well as on the embassy side over the decades.

My next comment is no reflection on the leadership of the consular section, just a fact: when I went from the consular section to the ambassador's office I felt like I was going from the engine room of the ship to the bridge. This was in terms of what I as a junior officer could see about how the U.S. mission in Korea interacted with the U.S. forces, the 37,000 U.S. military people under a four star general and with the Korean government.

It was an eye opening experience which is one of the reasons why I thought that the inspectors made a big mistake when they eliminated that staff aide spot for quite a number of years. I don't know how much help I was to Ambassador Gleysteen, but I know I learned a great deal from him and also from Tom Stern the DCM, not only about dealing with Korea but also how you deal with foreign policy situations in general.

It was a period of considerable turmoil in U.S.-Korea relations because of two things: One was President Carter's determination to withdraw U.S. ground forces, a position that he wound out having to drop almost entirely in the months leading up to his 1979 visit. But it was also the period of the so-called Koreagate scandal in which the Park government through a fixer named Park Tong-Sun (no relation to President Park) was funneling large amounts of money particularly to the House of Representatives. I don't recall that any senators were involved. It was a huge scandal and reverberated to the detriment of U.S.-Korea relations. The Koreans presumably saw that other rather unsavory governments were buying influence in Congress and apparently thought they should do the same but they were not very subtle about it.

I should also say that President Carter came into office with the idea of making human rights a major element of his foreign policy, so this put him on something of a collision course with Park Chung-Hee who was not a fan of human rights, certainly not as interpreted by President Carter. So being the ambassador's aide at that time was a very interesting learning experience, and I found it very valuable.

Q: If you're interested you can go to our website, the Library of Congress, and we have an interview with Ambassador Gleysteen done by one of our volunteers named Tom Stern.

O'NEILL: That's good! I'll look that one up.

Q: Did you get any feel about military- embassy relations? You understood the military thing from the inside and you were seeing this relationship.

O'NEILL: Yes. It was, I wouldn't say unique, but it was certainly very different from what I saw later in Japan in terms of scale and influence. The U.S. military organization in Korea was and still is a multi-layered thing. The senior U.S. military person had the title of Commander of Chief, UN Command, the CINCUNC (pronounced "sinkunk"). He was also the commanding general, 8th U.S. Army and commanding general U.S. Forces Korea, including the other services. In 1978, he got another four star "hat" as they say when the U.S.-ROK - Republic of Korea - Combined Forces Command (CFC) was established as the overall war fighting command for the Korean peninsula. So he had these four major responsibilities.

The impact of the U.S. forces on the Korea situation was such that every week the CINCUNC and the ambassador would have a breakfast that would alternate between the general's quarters and the ambassador's residence. This was a fixture of their schedules when they were both in the country. There was a lot for them to discuss all the time. The Koreans had over the years got more or less used to the idea of that American military behemoth headquartered in Yongsan in central Seoul and its influence on the Korean political scene, etc.

There was often a good bit of friction to work out with the command and a good bit of cooperation as well. The U.S. armed forces wherever they are, are so large, so self-sufficient and so self-contained that they sometimes forget there's anyone else around including other Americans.

One example of this was when Defense Secretary Harold Brown was visiting Korea, the then CINCUNC was going to host a dinner for him. As the ambassador's aide I was trying to get the seating chart from the protocol group at US Forces Korea. Time was getting short, and I was getting frustrated because I had been asking for the seating chart for quite a while. When it finally did come, I saw that the Army protocol people had General Vessey and Harold Brown together side by side at the center of this very long table that had sort of a block U shape to it. Then they had many U.S. assistant secretaries of defense ranged alongside them, and then finally around the corners of the table were the Foreign Minister of Korea and the ambassador, below all those assistant secretaries, who were of course much lower ranking than the ambassador and the foreign minister.

I had to get on the phone right away to USFK protocol, told them that they couldn't possibly have the seating arranged this way because the ambassador was actually the highest ranking American civilian in Korea. He technically outranked the secretary of defense although he obviously would defer to Brown as a visiting cabinet member, but he had to be seated next to Vessey and Brown and the Korean foreign minister had to be right next to the top Americans, ahead of all those assistant secretaries of defense, unless they wanted official ROK protests at the insult and screaming outcries in the Korean press. Controlled as the press was, that would have been a major insult, and any nationalistic Korean KCIA censor would be happy to show up the rudeness of the Americans to a senior ROK official. In the end order was restored and the banquet went off without any untoward incident.

Let me backtrack to something that happened when Ambassador Richard Sneider was still in Seoul. Again, it shows the testy relationship between the U.S. and Korea even under a military dictatorship like Park Chung-Hee's. It was spring of 1978; Ambassador Sneider was giving out awards and I was getting a 10 year service pin for my eight years in the Army and two years in the Foreign Service.

At the moment that was taking place upstairs, representatives of the Korean veterans' associations, all very conservative pro-government groups, burst into the chancery and trashed the lobby. They were protesting against an incident a few days before in which former ambassador William Porter had said to a U.S. reporter, a propos of nothing as far as I know, that before he had come to Korea in the early 1970's we used to routinely bug the Blue House, presidential mansion. Of course, that wasn't being done during his time as ambassador, he said. Despite the stringent controls that the Korean government had on access to the chancery and who could demonstrate and all that, somehow all these war veterans managed to burst in through the outer chancery perimeter into the lobby in front of the Marine guards. They trashed the place while shouting anti-American slogans and then as ordered by their commander, they left. Nationalism trumps most anything in Korea. Korea was an interesting place: always was, always will be.

Q: What were you getting from your contacts and also general talk about the northern threat at that time?

O'NEILL: Good question. It was certainly accepted doctrine that the North was a huge threat, and in those days it really was. Whether or not they would actually attack the South, I was certainly questioning that even at that point, but you couldn't rule it out. Certainly it was only around 1975 or '76 that South Korea's GNP had begun to surpass the North's. It was difficult to compare the two because the North Korean GNP was so heavily focused on industrial/military production to the detriment of the general public where South Korean GNP was more evenly spread. In fact, the ADB, the Asian Development Bank, and World Bank were giving South Korea high marks at that time for the relatively narrow gap between the top and bottom incomes in the country.

This was also the period during which a number of tunnels were discovered under the DMZ, and the belief was there were many more that were as yet undiscovered. The belief was that each North Korean division along the DMZ had to build a tunnel for infiltration in the event of war. And then as now, the main North Korean forces were heavily weighted toward the DMZ in what a U.S. intelligence analyst at the time told me was "a classic Soviet offensive array."

There were a number of incidents including a famous one which caused quite a shakeup in Korea. In the fall of 1978, a group of three or four North Korean infiltrators was dropped off by boat near Pusan. And over the span of the next few weeks, they traversed the entire Republic of Korea from southeast to northwest. This was known because they were killing people along their route. These were villagers, for example, who were gathering ferns and herbs in the mountains, as part of traditional Korean cooking. If they happened to blunder upon these North Korean infiltrators, they'd be killed. This was how the Korean Defense Security Command (DSC), the Army and the police were keeping track of more or less where the North Koreans had just been. What exactly their mission was, I don't know. It was certainly not to kill people gathering herbs in the mountains but they did that to cover their tracks.

They eventually exfiltrated in the vicinity of Inchon and got back to North Korea. Meanwhile, the entire police force, the armed forces and the reserve army were all out trying to find them. Once it was known that they exfiltrated, there was a huge shake-up. The lieutenant general commanding the Army's Defense Security Command was sacked. A lot of other senior military people and senior police were fired, too.

Then an unknown - at least to us - major general named Chun Doo-Hwan became commanding general of the DSC in the aftermath of that infiltration scandal. That appointment, as it turned out, positioned Chun Doo-Hwan to take over the ROK government a year or so later, following Park's assassination in October 1979. So in a bizarre way you could say the North Koreans put Chun in a position to run South Korea.

Remember this period was not long after the axe murders at Panmunjom in August 1976 in which two American military officers and some Korean workers were killed by the North Koreans. You had a very distinct sense of ominous and unsettling situations along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). I don't know what the North Koreans' actual intentions were at the time. They certainly would have liked to take over the country by force but they obviously decided that they couldn't do it. Attempts to subvert the ROK from within may have offered more promise, especially since it was rather easy to rally opposition to Park's authoritarianism.

As part of the atmosphere at the time was there was a curfew at midnight in Seoul and all but one of the provinces. Only in North Chungcheong Province there was no curfew because there was no sea coast. Armed Korean soldiers manned roadblocks in Seoul. We could be out after curfew because of diplomatic IDs and diplomatic plates on our cars, but I knew from my military experience that I didn't want to be out around armed guys who couldn't get out of guard duty after midnight, especially determined young Korean soldiers. I was only out after curfew twice in two years. Once was inadvertent; I was being driven by somebody else and couldn't get back from Yongsan before curfew, so we drove very gingerly back to our embassy housing area near the Blue House. The other time was during the Carter visit and I was couriering classified documents back and forth between the embassy and the hotel where the White House party was staying.

Q: As I'm sure I told you and everybody in my section, having been a GI myself and knowing who ended up on guard duty after midnight that he's not the swiftest guy in the world.

O'NEILL: I was a big believer in that. I remember your advice at the time.

During Park's time the government was taking other actions besides the curfew to rally patriotic feeling and alertness against the North Korean threat. As a minor example, each day at 5:00 pm, the national anthem was played over loudspeakers throughout Seoul. I don't recall that cars had to stop but pedestrians certainly did. There were also air raid and civil defense drills at least monthly, some of which were quite elaborate, including columns of tanks and armored cars driving up the main avenue, Sejong-ro. And lastly, there were hortatory slogans everywhere. On the front of Seoul's central rail station, a big placard warned "ban kong, bang cheop," which means "oppose communism; defend against spies." This was all part of the atmosphere is Park Chung Hee's Korea.

Q: I think we'll stop at this point. This is an important period. I'm not going to let it go. I wanted to end now, so we'll discuss some things the next time. One, the social life and your feeling about Koreans and off-office hours. The other is about the Carter visit because this is an important one, about Carter and you impression and the whole thing about the 2nd Division. That was significant. I think all of us figured that Carter had made this promise about withdrawing the 2nd Division out of reaction against Vietnam. We'll talk about that and then about human rights and our feeling about human rights. It so happens that I'm going to a small dinner at Tex Harris's house tonight with Pat Derian, Carter's former assistant secretary for human rights.

O'NEILL: Okay.

Q: Today is the 3rd of September 2008, and this is being done with Al O'Neill. Al, as I recall we left this off, you were in Korea from when to when?

O'NEILL: Summer 1977 to summer '79.

Q: We covered a good number of things, but let's now talk about the presidential visit. You said you had only a small part of it, but you were there picking up the atmospherics, so let's talk about that.

O'NEILL: Carter was scheduled to visit Korea in July of 1979. On the Korean side, there was a combination, I think, both of anticipation and worry because Carter had made Park Chung-Hee an object of his human rights policies. Park was very authoritarian but was at the time same time working very hard to prime Korea's economic development. There was a good bit of tension about the arrangements for the visit, especially since Carter had made that famous campaign promise, with no apparent knowledge of Korea at all, to pull all U.S. ground forces out. In the end, actually only one battalion from the 2nd Infantry Division was pulled out - the 2nd Battalion 9th Infantry Regiment nicknamed the "Manchus" from its Boxer Rebellion service.

The Defense Intelligence Agency was developing studies of North Korea which showed the North Korean forces were much larger than originally estimated and were growing. This was used by cooler heads around Carter in his White House, NSC staff and the State Department to cause him to be able to back off that promise. That campaign promise was quite unsettling to Park, and I think quite unsettling to the general public in Korea, too.

Also contention over human rights was shaping up as a major issue. I think the Park government wanted to reinforce with Carter the need to have a strong U.S. military presence. Plus I think they wanted Carter to assert that the U.S. commitment to the defense of Korea was very strong and do that all while in Korea.

Incidentally, this was a period that spring in April of '78 there was an incident which a Korea Airlines airliner was shot down by the Soviets on a flight that was supposed to fly from Paris over Anchorage to Seoul. The pilot had made the worst navigational error in civil aviation history, was over the heavily defended Kola Peninsula near Murmansk and was shot down by a Soviet fighter. This pilot who had made the worst navigational error in civil aviation history was nonetheless very capable as a pilot. He actually brought his heavily damaged airplane, a 707, down on a frozen lake on the Kola Peninsula. Only two people were killed, a Japanese businessman and one other. (note: the actual date of the incident was April 20, 1978.)

The strange thing about this and the reason I mention it is it had an impact on Korean foreign affairs. The first reaction generally in Korea to this incident was one of horror and shock that the Soviets were going to turn over the Korean crew and passengers to the North Koreans. I'm sure that was never part of Soviet thinking at all. When it became clear that the Soviets were not going to do that, the second reaction in Korea was, "How can we turn this incident into a bridge to perhaps develop relations with the Soviet Union?" Little if anything came of that notion at that point, but it was an interesting sidelight on Korean thinking, this belief that the Soviets and the North Koreans were so in league that that's where these crew and passengers would end up. Then the second reaction was more practical: "Let's see if we can develop this to our advantage."

In any case, aside from that in the run-up to the visit there was a good bit of work between the U.S. and Korean governments over the events and also the substance of the visit, too. One of the things I didn't know as a very junior officer in the political section that I only learned from Ambassador Gleysteen's book Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence is that out of the blue, Carter decided it would be good to invite Kim Il-sung to come to Seoul during his state visit with Park Chung-Hee; so they could all meet together. One, this idea was further evidence of Carter's astonishing naï¿½vetï¿½ towards the Korean peninsula and its problems and two, it's a little bit ironic in that in July 1994 Carter as an ex-president became the highest ranking American to meet with Kim Il-sung, a month before Kim's death. Gleysteen says in his book that he so totally opposed this notion that he told the NSC he would resign from his post rather than acquiesce. I don't know to what degree the Korean government was clued in on this at all. My guess is that they couldn't have known because that would have caused a gigantic blowup.

I was assigned as the embassy event officer for the main welcoming ceremony at Yeouido, the big island in the Han River where the National Assembly building is. Tens of thousands of people lived in high-rise apartments there, and there were tall office buildings as well. It was between Kimpo Airport and downtown Seoul.

The visit was a bit strange. Carter was going to Vienna, then Tokyo then Seoul, as the last stop. We had an advance team from the White House that was, well, a motley crew is the best way to describe it. It was the least capable and least organized of the advance teams I ever dealt with in presidential visits, including two by President Bush 41 to Seoul and Reagan in the 1983 visit to Tokyo. For example, the person that I was working with as the White House advance person for the main welcoming ceremony was a Teddy Kennedy campaign worker from Boston who kept saying over and over, "I can't wait for Teddy to declare," because he wanted to be part of Teddy's challenge to Carter for the Democratic nomination for 1980. I had to work with him on that very public ceremony.

The site at Yeouido was originally a Japanese airfield which had been paved over and named May 16th Plaza in honor of the date of Park Chung-Hee's 1961 coup. We were to have a large throng of Koreans, the National Assembly, the cabinet and other luminaries there. Part of the security package for this event was a brigade from the Korean airborne division out of sight behind the buildings.

The ceremony and the sequence of events were bit odd in that Carter had arrived the day before. His first event was to visit the 2nd Infantry Division headquarters near Uijongbu just south of the DMZ. From there he was to helicopter down to Yeouido, so he would have been in Korea overnight before he met with Park which was a little strange. As it happened, fog prevented him from helicoptering, so the U.S. party came down by car.

The ceremony itself went off very well. The Koreans arranged the crowd size that the White House advance team thought was necessary to fill the plaza so it would look good on television, always the central consideration in any presidential visit. Park and Carter reviewed the Korean honor guard in Park's open limousine. Then the two presidents changed into Carter's closed limousine for the motorcade from Yeouido through downtown Seoul to the Blue House for the first round of meetings. At least once Carter had the motorcade stop and had the roof of his armored limo opened so he could wave to the cheering throngs. To the best of my knowledge, this was totally unplanned by anyone including our Secret Service. It certainly wasn't Park's style. The Korean people were very glad to see an American president and I'm sure more than a few of them were glad to see a president who had a record of trying to push for better human rights in Korea. The meetings between Park and Carter, in which I was not a participant, were very contentious. There was a heated discussion between the ambassador and the president.

Q: There's something about Carter and Gleysteen staying in a car a long time.

O'NEILL: They were in Carter's limo at the ambassador's residence just south of the Blue House. One of my friends who was there said he saw the car actually shaking as the two of them were carrying on their discussion about U.S. policy towards Korea.

The visit itself in terms of logistics went quite well, as the result of a lot of hard work. The political counselor at the time, the late Bill Clark, tasked me with doing the wrap-up cable on the visit which I thought was a nice thing for him to do for a junior officer. This was distinct from the extremely restricted cables on individual meetings between Carter and Park and other senior officials and their Korean counterparts.

In the final analysis, I think Carter's visit succeeded on several levels. He reaffirmed the U.S. security commitment to the ROK after he had worried a wide range of Koreans with his ill-advised troop withdrawal notion. The general understanding in Korea was the wholesale removal of U.S. ground forces was over. He was able to confront Park Chung-Hee directly over human rights and also made clear to the Korean public U.S. support for Korea's democratization. And, Carter did get a chance to see what Seoul looked like and what the area between the DMZ and Seoul looked like, probably a more realistic view by car than he would have by helicopter.

Q: What's the distance between the DMZ and Seoul?

O'NEILL: It's 30-some miles. It's not much of an hour's drive between the Joint Security Area at Panmunjom and Seoul. The usual analogy is the distance between the Capitol Building in Washington and Dulles Airport. Carter got to see that on the ground.

Q: It's very impressive by the sheer propinquity of the capital to North Korea. At that time I think it was the general assumption was that Seoul would fall to the North Koreans and then there would be a surge back.

O'NEILL: It would have been a much tougher fight for the North Koreans than it was in 1950. Whether they could have held on to Seoul for any length of time no one will ever know. Certainly the extent of the damage to Seoul would have been tremendous whether or not it fell to the North Koreans. It would have been huge, indeed.

Q: Carter, although he was a Naval Academy graduate, had shown a certain naï¿½vetï¿½ about the political and military situation in Korea. There's nothing more sobering than to drive up from Seoul to the DMZ and seeing how close you are and look at the North Korean border guards and then be told how many artillery pieces were pointed at Seoul.

O'NEILL: The drive, particularly in those days, between Seoul and points north brought you under many concrete camouflaged archways that were rigged with demolitions to bring huge blocks of concrete down on the roads. That would have somewhat inhibited truck traffic. It might not have done so much for tanks which could go around them. I accompanied Ambassador Gleysteen by Huey up to the 2nd Infantry Division, when he was the reviewing officer for the parade in which the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry, stood down before going back to the States. We were flying over tanks in revetments. You could see plenty of artillery pieces and all sorts of other military equipment. It was a very heavily defended area. Still is.

Q: How stood your Korean at this point?

O'NEILL: I'd had the year at FSI for 44 weeks before going to Korea. I had a speaking rating of S2 plus and a reading level of R2 when I left FSI. In my consular work I wound up using it a good bit. I probably had, although I didn't test, an S3 in consular Korean, but in my work both in the ambassador's office and the political section later, I was mostly dealing with Foreign Ministry officials and other Koreans whose English was so good it was pointless for me to try out my clumsy Korean on them.

There were some odd moments using Korean in visa work. It was interesting that with some Koreans I could speak in Korean, and they would understand me well enough. I spoke with an American accent and obviously did not speak like a Korean, but they could understand me enough that they would answer me coherently in Korean. There were other Koreans who did what I call "listening to my face." They would see this Caucasian face and were paralyzed. They assumed that whatever noise I was making couldn't be Korean. There was a total mental block.

One of the weirdest examples of this was one immigrant visa interview where the beneficiary - the direct applicant - was a woman with her husband and a son who I guess was in his late teens or early 20s perhaps. The woman spoke not a word of English, so I was speaking to her in Korean. She clearly didn't understand a word I was saying. The son repeated my questions to her in Korean, and she answered me based on the son's reiteration of my question. So we had this triangular situation: I'd ask a question in Korean, the son would repeat the same question in "real" Korean, she would answer me based on the son's reformulation of my question. No English was spoken during this entire interview. She was just totally paralyzed by the Caucasian face.

Q: Did you get any impression of what I call the "Korean hands," mid-career junior officers who specialized in Korean? In Japan there's the Chrysanthemum Club. I don't know what you'd call it. The Kimchi Club?

O'NEILL: I'm trying to remember how many people there were in that group in the embassy. There were not many. The real origin of a cadre of Korea hands in the Foreign Service was Peace Corps Korea. Kathy Stephens, who just arrived in Seoul last month as the Ambassador was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Korea in the mid-1970's. Another State officer via Peace Corps was Doug McNeill, who was extremely good in Korean. Among other State FSOs from Peace Corps Korea were Dick Christenson, Roger C. "Chris" Nottingham, Dennis Halpin, Ted Kloth and Joe Donovan, also Mark Mohr, whom I met later and who became mainly a China hand. There were USIS officers including Nick and Mary Miele - Nick was the officer - who were Korea Peace Corps veterans. Bill Maurer was another. Jim Pierce had been in the Army in Korea in military intelligence and was in Korea at the time that I arrived. He had been in Korean language at FSI the year before I got there. David Straub, an A-100 classmate, arrived in Korea as I was leaving in 1979 and went on to a distinguished career in Korean affairs. The Korea hands in the Foreign Service were a new group at that point. It obviously has gotten a lot better and more widespread, and there is now quite a large number of people who have developed that expertise.

There were several people including Bill Clark, the political counselor who had a lot of Japan experience. Spence Richardson came as the deputy in the political section in 1979. Spence had at least a couple of tours, maybe three tours, in Japan, in Tokyo, Fukuoka and also good Japanese language skills. One of the difficulties with developing that Korea Hand cadre was a combination of the extreme difficulty of the language coupled with the fact that for State officers you only had the embassy in Seoul. There was a consulate in Pusan but I think it had only one State FSO position. There were more US Information Service branch posts in those days, which gave more scope for USIS officers.

We can leap over two of my next three years in the Foreign Service because they were spent in Japanese language training. I had wanted to get a second year of Korean. The embassy was very interested in that, too; Bill Clark was very supportive. At the time there was no FSI Seoul, so in those days the State Department sent people to Yonsei University's Korean language institute for the second year. At the time they were only doling out the money to send one person per year, again a reminder of how little attention the State Department was paying to Korean expertise.

The embassy kept cabling the State Department recommending me for the second year at Yonsei. The department kept refusing and finally, Bill Clark said it was hopeless. With his blessing I sent a cable asking for Japanese language training, and State immediately agreed. So, to get across the Sea of Japan from Seoul to Tokyo took me 11 months, via language training in Washington.

Q: While you were again in Seoul, were you able to take the temperature of Japanese-Korean relations or did you get any feel for it?

O'NEILL: I can't remember any particular incidents during that period that would have stoked things up. The interesting thing was that Park, of course, had a strange relationship with Japan as a former Japanese army officer. He had gone to their Manchurian Military Academy during World War II. He was one of a group of Korean military people who got their start in the Japanese forces including some who rose quite high during the Korean War and who were very important in the development of the Korean army. Park had opened diplomatic relations with Japan in 1965, four years after his coup, in the face of huge domestic opposition. Koreans in that period had grown up in the education system fostered by the first ROK president, Syngman Rhee. He was as rabidly anti-Japanese as he was rabidly anti-communist, which is really saying something. You could almost say that Koreans who had grown up in the Japanese period might not necessarily have been as strongly anti-Japanese as those who went to school under Rhee's fiercely anti-Japanese curriculum.

The major Korean business combines or "chaebol" were attuned to the idea of using Japan as a business model. In other words, they were following along the path of economic development that the Japanese had taken after World War II and also were quite open to business ventures with the Japanese to boost Korean technological ability. Incidentally, chaebol is the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese characters that are pronounced zaibatsu in Japanese, so you can see where the motivation came from.

In the end, of course, Koreans got to be extremely important competitors of the Japanese in such things as specialty steels and ship building and later on in autos and electronics. So there was a practical willingness to deal with the Japanese but that was overlaid over a cultural and ethnic antipathy toward the Japanese from their depredations during the colonial period and their extinguishing of Korean sovereignty. But I can't recall during that period a huge outburst of anti-Japanese feeling.

Q: You took Japanese as a two year course. How did this go?

O'NEILL: In my case it was a year at FSI, Washington, from 1979 to 1980 immediately after Seoul. The idea was I would then go to Tokyo. The Department was putting one person into Japanese every year who didn't have a specific onward assignment, because it had proven true that invariably somebody either "cracked up" in the training or otherwise was unable to go to Japan and, they needed an extra body. I was the extra body in 1979.

We had I think 10 students in Japanese, maybe more. That year, FSI wound up hiring extra teachers for Japanese, most of whom had no teaching credentials at all. They were simply native speakers of Japanese but many had been in the U.S. for a long time and were detached from everyday Japanese as it was being spoken in Japan. They were also hobbled by the FSI approved text book. In Japanese there is an even greater differentiation between male speech and female speech than in Korean. It's really stark in Japanese. We were male and female students being taught entirely by female teachers. A friend of mine from Kanazawa once described what we learned at FSI Washington as "Meiji Era ladies' Japanese," which was discouraging. Accurate, but discouraging.

We had 44 weeks of Japanese. I wound up again better than average, with a speaking score of S2-plus and an R2 in reading. In fact, having had Korean, especially the Chinese characters which were then taught as part of Korean, made it a lot easier for me to develop my Japanese vocabulary faster than most of my fellow students. Many of them came to Japanese thinking that Spanish was a foreign language, and they were soon disabused of that notion. By the time I finished Japanese in May 1980, two things had happened: One was I had acquired a wife who was one of the Korean language teachers. Jin had not been teaching Korean when I was taking it a few years before. We met and married, and by that marriage I acquired a six year old son because Jin had been widowed a few years before.

Q: Could you give a little bit of her background?

O'NEILL: Jin was born Jeong Jin-Ok in Cheong-Ju in central Korea south of Seoul. She had gone to the U.S. in 1969 originally as a Korean language and culture teacher for the Peace Corps in Hilo, Hawaii. This was a Korean Ministry of Education designation. The ministry picked the people who were to teach Peace Corps volunteers. She taught a number of Peace Corps volunteers some of whom later became FSO's.

She went back to Korea and was again selected to teach Peace Corps. By that time the training had been moved to Brattleboro, Vermont which at least during the winter time bore a greater resemblance to Korea than did Hilo. After that she began teaching at Defense Language Institute (DLI) which then had a branch in Rosslyn. She wound up staying on and in 1973 she married a Korean scholar who was in graduate school. He and she got very active in the ï¿½migrï¿½ democracy movement. Her husband died of cancer at a young age in October 1977. She was hired in 1979 by FSI. While I was getting to the end of my training, and preparing for my final exams, I was also trying to get Jin expeditiously naturalized so she could go to Tokyo with a U.S. diplomatic passport instead of a Korean ordinary passport.

Also, the person who was next in line to become Ambassador Mansfield's aide was diverted to another job, and so I was slotted to do that after the language training. The three of us, my new son and wife and I, all moved to Tokyo that summer. I started working for Ambassador Mike Mansfield which was quite an experience.

Q: You were there from 1980 until when?

O'NEILL: To 1984. The first year was in Tokyo as ambassador's aide, the second year - from 1981 to '82 - was the second year of Japanese language training at FSI Yokohama. From 1982 to '84, I was back in the embassy in the external branch of the political section dealing with Japanese Asia policy.

Q: Before we get to working for Ambassador Mansfield, what was your impression? First, a little compare and contrast Japan and Korea in your eye, Seoul and Tokyo and all. Was this quite a change or not?

O'NEILL: It was in certain respects. Both were huge metropolises, of course. The biggest obvious difference between Korea and Japan was the absence of a North Korean-style military threat to Japan. The military threat the Japanese were concerned with was the Soviet Union, not North Korea. Even though there were large U.S. military forces in Japan their principal mission was first the Soviet Union and secondly North Korea. The Japanese were in those days certainly happy to hide behind the American force presence including the nuclear umbrella.

The level of development between the two countries was still very widely different. Korea was on the very upward path to where it is now. Japan had already been there, and it was a gigantic economy and one that was years away from the economic doldrums that it's mostly been in since the mid-1990s. It was a real powerhouse. You'd start seeing these American books about Japan as number one, and Japan was being touted as the model for American businesses, etc.

In the U.S., nobody was thinking of Korea in those terms. Tokyo was a more glitzy city, a more developed city. Obviously, there was a great deal of construction going on in Seoul at the time, replacing these buildings that were post-war construction with better and more modern apartments, office buildings, etc. So there were a lot of physical differences. It was also a lot easier to get around Japan. We could walk out of our apartment in the embassy housing compound and get on a subway line to one of the major railroad stations in Tokyo and go by rail to anyplace in Japan except Okinawa or Hokkaido. The rail network in Japan was extraordinary particularly compared to Korea at that time. It was also a much bigger country with a much larger population.

Just one example of the difference was in the way that the respective embassies dealt with the military relationship. As I mentioned earlier, in Korea it was normal once a week for the ambassador and the top American four-star to have breakfast once a week when they were in the country. In Japan, the number of U.S. military total was larger than in Korea perhaps by 10,000, counting people on ships based in Japan. The main periodic connection between the embassy and U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) Headquarters at Yokota Air Base outside the city was usually a lunch between the DCM and the Marine major general who was the deputy commander and chief of staff, USFJ. It was a lower level relationship. The ambassador and the commander could certainly talk when they needed to, but the routine connection was somewhat lower and less close than it was in Korea. No surprise, really.

Q: Let's talk about Mike Mansfield, your impression of Mike Mansfield as a person, and then what you were doing with the embassy and with Japan.

O'NEILL: It was a fascinating year. I never expected to be working for somebody who was a real historic figure in American political terms. Mansfield had been born to Irish immigrant parents in New York on the day before St. Patrick's Day in 1903, March 16, 1903. The family moved to Montana when Mansfield was very young. As you may know, Mansfield had a military background. In 1917, during WWI, he had dropped out of school and enlisted in the Navy. He was kicked out when they found out he was only 14. He was living proof that a fraudulent enlistment was not always a bar to future success.

Mansfield then went into the Army for a year or two and then right after World War I he joined the Marine Corps. As a Marine private, he was sent both to the Philippines and China. He was very proud of having been in the Marines. In Tokyo, if he wasn't wearing a U.S. Marine Corps tie, he wore a Marine Corps tie bar, with the Marine eagle, globe and anchor on it. The only inscription on his tombstone at Arlington is his name, his dates (1903-2001) and "Private, U.S. Marine Corps. There's nothing about being the longest-serving Senate majority leader or the longest-serving U.S. ambassador to Japan.

Mansfield used to tell Japanese visitors that he first saw Japan in 1922, often long before some of those visitors were born. When the ship was taking him back from China to be discharged, it stopped in Nagasaki for coal. He said - of course, the Marines weren't allowed off the ship - he could look out and see lines and lines of Japanese women with baskets full of coal on their heads. They'd dump the coal into the chutes of the coal bunkers on the ship. That was his first view of Japan.

After he had got out of the military service he began teaching at the University of Montana. He was elected to the House of Representatives I think in 1942, anyway during World War II. Then he was elected to the Senate in 1952. I heard him tell Lady Bird Johnson, who was visiting Tokyo, that that was the year Lyndon Johnson, John F. Kennedy, and Prescott Bush all entered the Senate. At the time that he was appointed ambassador in 1977 he had been the Senate majority leader longer than anybody else.

Mansfield was quite an extraordinary character. When I got there in summer 1980, of course, we were heading towards the election in which Carter was running against Reagan. Lots of people were telling me that I'd have an exciting time as the ambassador's aide because there'd be a new ambassador after the election. They were saying it would be fascinating dealing with the Imperial Household Agency over ceremonies involving the emperor and helping the new ambassador get adjusted to Japan.

Mansfield was very much like a Liberal Democratic Party politician of Japan in some ways. One is that he had spent his entire political career in the legislature which most Japanese politicians do in their parliamentary system. The other is that he was somewhat older than the average American ambassador even at that time. He also was pretty soberly dressed all the time.

In contrast to lots of ambassadors he didn't necessarily want his staff aide to be in his office as early as he got in. He tended to get in around 7:30 and he wanted the time to read all the newspapers in English and press translations that had been provided. Then I would come in and go through all the cable traffic to select the small amount that he really needed to see. Mansfield had a tremendous ability in his 70s to absorb what he was reading and put it to use in meetings or in instructions to people in the embassy. He was a courtly gentleman who also had an enormous appetite for information.

One of the many fascinating things about him was the range of his correspondence and the range of contacts he had. He had spent a lot of his career in Congress focusing on Asian affairs and had many contacts among very senior Asians including Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia. In his correspondence file, you'd find letters from him to and from everybody ranging from Kirk Douglas to Sihanouk and just about everybody in between. People were constantly coming to see him and pay their respects and ask his advice, etc. There was one time that Melvin Laird was then meeting with the ambassador.

Q: The secretary of defense.

O'NEILL: The former secretary of defense. The meeting with Laird was going long. The next person he was supposed to meet was Harold Stassen, the former "boy governor" of Minnesota who had run for president certainly four or five times. Stassen was out in the waiting room, and I kept going out and saying to him, "Sorry, Governor, but things are running a little late. The ambassador will be with you soon." After one of those trips to look in on Stassen, my phone rings, and it's John Kenneth Galbraith, wanting to "say hi to Mike." He was just passing through Tokyo. I said he had this line of visitors; Galbraith said, "Just let Mike know I called," which I did. This was just one moment in a Mansfield day. It wasn't always that way, but it illustrates the kind of person that he was and the kind of people who sought his advice. They all wanted to say they'd been talking to Mike Mansfield about Japan.

That was a tough time in U.S.-Japan relations because of huge discord over trade, particularly automobiles, exports from Japan in the United States, and the fact that when it came to automobile imports from the U.S. to Japan, there were two big factors, two barriers. One was Japanese non-tariff barriers to trade including a lot of their hyper-attentive inspection routines. The other thing was that the American automakers resolutely refused to make cars for the Japanese market, and nonetheless demanded that Japanese consumers buy them anyway. So you had the American Big Three, furious that the Japanese were not buying huge American cars with the steering wheel on the left hand (wrong) side and cars that were, because of their size, real gas guzzlers in a time when gasoline in Japan was many times higher than it was in the United States. Had they been to Japan, the Big Three's executives might have noticed that the streets were narrower than LA's too. Managing that issue was a big problem during that year.

As it happened, these thoughts about my getting to deal with the arrival of a new ambassador were put on hold by President Reagan. Mansfield's reappointment was as far as I know Reagan's first ambassadorial nomination. In the springtime the often rocky U.S.-Japan relationship got rocky, indeed, because of a series of incidents. One happened in April 1981 when George Washington which was originally built as a Polaris missile submarine was running submerged near Japan in international waters. It struck and sank a small Japanese freighter, the Nissho Maru with the loss of the captain and the first mate. This accident caused a huge uproar in Japan. To help cope with the outcry, the ambassador made a formal call on Foreign Minister Abe, the father of the recent Prime Minister Abe, and was photographed bowing deeply before Abe. This didn't sit too well with some in the U.S., but it certainly did in Japan to have this distinguished and broadly admired figure doing what Japanese would have done in the same circumstances. His bowing publicly to the foreign minister did help contain the uproar over the accident.

Not long thereafter Prime Minister Zenko Suzuki made an official visit to the U.S. to meet with Reagan. Either in the course of that meeting or right after it, Suzuki, who was as bland a politician as has ever been prime minister, stated that Japan would defend its sea lanes out to 1,000 nautical miles. Also, PM Suzuki used the word "alliance" to describe the Japanese relationship with the U.S., which as far as I can recall was the first time that a Japanese prime minister had done so. This was 21 years after the revised Mutual Security Treaty had gone into effect but Suzuki's statement also caused quite a stir in Japan. (The American public of course, thought that was the relationship with Japan all along.) Responding to Suzuki's statement about defense of the sea lanes, Foreign Minister Ito promptly resigned on the grounds that this whole question and public announcement had not been vetted with the foreign ministry. The White House quickly issued a statement saying that this had been the most successful U.S.-Japan summit meeting in history, which probably did little to repair the damage.

Then a third thing happened in that eventful spring of 1981. I went to the office one morning, and Bill Sherman, the superb DCM, a Japan hand of the deepest hue, and just a consummate FSO, was looking at one of the newspapers. The big story was former Ambassador Reischauer who had been Kennedy's ambassador at Japan, upon his retirement from Harvard took it upon himself to announce to a Japanese reporter that of course we had brought nuclear weapons into Japan over and over again, and the Japanese knew it. Bill Sherman was never rattled by anything. He always knew what to do; he always had the right answer. I had never seen him so unhappy. His face was just white, and he was furious. In the aftermath of the George Washington-Nissho Maru accident and the flap over the Suzuki visit, now this, Bill Sherman said, "What else can go wrong?" Bill said some uncomplimentary things about Reischauer that morning. There was a good bit of fancy stepping to put that particular genie back in the bottle, and eventually the Japanese wandered on to other subjects.

Q: It was one of these unspoken things, that Reischauer had spoken, wasn't it?

O'NEILL: He did it for no good reason at all. Whether he felt on his retirement he had to get one more headline, I don't know. I never met Reischauer. I knew of him as a great scholar of Japan and, presumably, a successful ambassador. But, yes, what he raised in public was one of those things was never spoken of. The U.S. press guidance was always very fixed and very bland. Both sides always wanted the issue to go away.

Q: How important was the emperor, the court, the court protocol, and all that, from your perspective?

O'NEILL: In the Japanese constitution the emperor's not even described as the chief of state. He's called "the symbol of the state and the unity of the people." So his constitutional role was to be very ceremonial, indeed. When there was a presidential visit, there would be ritualized meetings with the emperor, and the emperor would welcome the president. Ambassadors presented their credentials to the emperor in great ceremony.

There was an annual cycle of events for the diplomatic corps hosted by the emperor, including the emperor's garden party. There was even an annual trek for the luminaries of the ambassadorial corps out to the imperial pig farm, and there were other events like concerts of an extremely traditional form of music called gagaku at the music hall of the imperial palace to which the diplomatic corps was always invited. But the emperor played no role in politics. He would have a nominal role in opening parliament and giving a rather stilted speech on those occasions, and the emperor's birthday on April 29 was a holiday, the anchor holiday of the so-called "Golden Week" but he was not a political figure. Had he tried to be so, it would have been quite disturbing in Japan.

Q: As the ambassador's aide, did you get any feel for the relationship between Mansfield and Reagan and Alexander Haig when you were doing that?

O'NEILL: I'm trying to think. Haig was Reagan's first Secretary of State. I don't know how much contact that Reagan had ever had with Mansfield before Mansfield was nominated as ambassador. The communication that I remember most between senior Washington figures and Ambassador Mansfield was with trade officials - commerce, the U.S. Trade Representative, etc. - over autos, steel, and all the other major issues in trade relations. Haig didn't visit during that year. In that year, I don't recall that we had any cabinet visits except, perhaps, on the trade side. I don't think the treasury secretary did.

Q: It's interesting. Here's a major ally.

O'NEILL: Just let me add some atmospherics about Ambassador Mansfield who was a very fine gentleman of the old school. If he would be coming to an elevator at the same time as one of the female Foreign Service Nationals, one of the Japanese employees, Mansfield would always step back and try to usher her onto the elevator. Of course, this would paralyze the FSN because there was this towering figure to whom she was supposed to be bowing deeply, trying to let her on the elevator ahead of him.One of the well-known things that he did to help put visitors at ease was his ritual, particularly with Japanese visitors, of making instant coffee for them. This was in total contrast to the Japanese way of doing things which was to have OLs or office ladies serve tea to everybody. Of course, in Japan the great person himself who was hosting the meeting would never think of doing such a thing. But Mansfield did this, trying in his way to put people at ease.

Another thing, in his office on the bookshelf next to where he would meet visitors, he had photographs of the Republican and Democratic congressional leaders. He would almost invariably point these out, particularly to the Japanese politicians and also business leaders. His advice was, "When you're looking at Washington, don't think only of the executive branch which is obviously very important, but these people are very important to you, too."

Q: When you were his aide, did he go down to Okinawa, which was "Marine territory?"

O'NEILL: "Marineland of the Pacific." He didn't go to Okinawa that year at all. He had been I'm sure. I went with him and Mrs. Mansfield on a long trip to three of the prefectures on the Japan Sea coast of Honshu. He made quite a number of trips to the U.S. during that period, and I always went out to Narita Airport with him and Mrs. Mansfield to see them off and to welcome them back.

Q: How about Mrs. Mansfield? Ambassadors' wives run the gamut. How would you describe her?

O'NEILL: She was a lovely person. She was really wonderful. Ambassador Mansfield was absolutely devoted to her all his life. She was in frailer health than he was overall but she was fascinated by Japan, really enjoyed learning about Japan. Aside from visiting places and meeting people, she did a lot of reading on Japan. She was a lovely lady, a fine hostess, and absolutely essential to him because he was so devoted to her.

Q: How did he run the embassy?

O'NEILL: The DCM ran the embassy. The ambassador knew the embassy officers whom he dealt with, but he didn't go around the embassy shaking hands and that kind of thing. In that respect he was different from an FSO ambassador who would have been more likely to spend more time just on a periodic basis going around the various sections. Those in the embassy who didn't normally come in contact with him in their work weren't necessarily happy with that fact.

But he always had very strong, capable DCMs who were real Japan hands. The one I first dealt with was Bill Sherman who as I recall had gotten a start in language training at the end of WWII. He was one of the people the Navy trained in Japanese. I'm not sure if he was overseas during the war, but he was thoroughly involved in Japan thereafter. That was the way Mansfield wanted it. He wanted to be able to deal with senior Japanese and have the DCM run the embassy and give him good advice.

Q: We'll move into a different sphere in a minute, but from your staff aide's viewpoint. I would think Japan would be hard to deal with because you have a Diet that doesn't seem to be a functional legislature. One party that's been in forever and...

O'NEILL: Of course, in that era, the Liberal Democratic Party or LDP always had the majority in both houses in the Diet, the upper house and more crucial lower house, and always picked the prime minister. An interesting factor in Japan, though, was that even when the LDP had an absolute majority, and therefore could pass any law, there was a compulsion because of cultural strictures to get, for example, votes from the Japan Socialist Party the main opposition party and, perhaps, some of the smaller parties, too, to at least give the...not even the illusion of consensus but a certain amount of consensus. That was the practice. The LDP would make concessions that would be unheard of in the U.S. Congress. If the Republicans or the Democrats had the absolute majority, they would pass whatever they want and devil take the hindmost. Japanese tended to be more conciliatory, but the factional infighting among the LDP tended to produce prime ministers prized for their timidity and for their lack of willingness to take bold initiatives. This has been an interesting phenomenon all along with few exceptions like Prime Minister Koizumi early this century.

The other thing that marked Japanese politics was the jockeying for the prime ministership among faction leaders in the LDP. They were usually vying for cabinet positions that would position them later for a run for the top job. This produced a certain amount of turmoil and turnover in the cabinets, more than you might want, and also some cases where cabinet members who had decided a career path to move from one ministry to another were not all well versed in their portfolios. The bureaucrats, the permanent bureaucracy which started at the vice ministerial level in all these ministries, were determined to control their ministers and make sure the ministers did what they wanted. Bills that went to the Diet were normally drafted by the bureaucracy and presented to be passed with as little discussion as the bureaucracy and the PM's office could manage.

There was and still is the opportunity to vent opinions in the Diet, however. Every year in the springtime, March and early April, the diet budget committee sessions were televised. Despite the name, these budget committee hearings were a concentrated form of the "question time" that you would see at the House of Commons in London. It was an opportunity for all members of the Diet to - and certainly all opposition parties at least - to throw rhetorical rocks at the prime minister and various other ministers about anything that came to their minds.

The bureaucrats, during the budget committee hearings, usually camped out in their ministries because they were up all hours of the night writing Qs & As, questions and answers, for their ministers or the prime minister, and otherwise sat in their offices all night playing mah jongg, waiting for some new question to come in. They were prisoners of their ministries during the budget committee hearings. It was an opportunity for the general public to see the ministers and prime minister be baited with leading questions and having to respond, and measuring their quality as government officials based on this.

Q: You moved after a year to the political section?

O'NEILL: In Tokyo, the staff aide's job was a one year assignment. During that year, the DCM decided I should get the second year of language training in FSI Yokohama and after that go to the political section's external branch, which dealt with Japanese foreign policy. I was slated to be cover Asian affairs, which was to my mind the best job in the political section for a mid-level officer.

Q: How did you find the second year of Japanese?

O'NEILL: In some ways it was easier than the first. But it necessitated moving down to Yokohama which was only about 30 miles away, and living in a house "on the economy" as the military says, rented for that period of time from a Japanese realtor. It was a wrench in that we had already moved twice in Tokyo because of the reconstruction of the embassy housing compound. We moved to Yokohama knowing that 11 months later we were going to move back up to Tokyo into the newly rebuilt embassy housing compound.

I found that during the year I was staff aide, my formal Japanese had fallen off alarmingly, because mostly I was dealing with senior Japanese officials who all spoke exceptionally good English. During that year most of my Japanese language practice came in running around to little towns sightseeing or going around in Tokyo. So I had a certain re-learning curve at the beginning, but it was excellent instruction.

The teachers were all experienced, and both male and female in contrast to the situation at FSI Washington. That was very helpful in and of itself. The program was more elaborate. We had field trips at different times during the year of two different types. Sometimes the entire group of students would go with teachers off to some place, usually of historic importance, to spend several days in a Japanese environment. There were two or three times at least where you'd go out for a couple of days at a time on a program that you designed yourself to see a particular part of Japan, etc., and then you'd report on it. There was a lot more active use of the language during the course of the year than there could have been at FSI Washington. It was quite good instruction and I wound up with three-plus in both speaking and reading at the end of that year, which is above average.

We moved back after that to Tokyo, after home leave in the U.S. to the new embassy compound which was built on the site of the old one. This was in September of '82, and I worked in the political section for two years.

Q: Before we move to that, how was your wife adjusting to this? She's Korean, and the Japanese... I mean, both sides aren't very nice to each other in normal.

O'NEILL: She was quite good about it. She adapted extremely well to the whole business of being in the Foreign Service, and she adapted very well to Japan. In the first year when we were in Tokyo, Jin spoke no Japanese, and I had had a year. When we'd go into a shop, I would speak in Japanese and the person would invariably answer my wife who had not said a word, and because she looked like she ought to be saying something in Japanese. But I can't think of any instance of overt prejudice against her.

When we were at FSI Yokohama, spouses could take Japanese on a space available basis. There were sufficient teachers that this was possible, so Jin took Japanese full time, the whole 11 months. Of course, she knew essentially the same Chinese characters that the Japanese use. Koreans and Japanese don't exactly use these characters in precisely the same way, but she knew them from her schooling. Korean and Japanese are grammatically very similar; so Jin had a built-in leg-up. By the end of the course, she actually had a four-four which was full proficiency in both speaking and reading Japanese. The official score she got was a three-plus, three-plus because the person who was then the head of FSI Yokohama - a Korean whom she'd known when she was teaching Korean for Peace Corps - explained to her that it would be damaging to the morale of the diplomats who were studying Japanese for a second year if she got as high as a four-four after one year. So he gave her a "very strong three-plus, three-plus."

As an aside, in contrast to FSI Washington, FSI Yokohama also trained Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand diplomats. Those governments paid. We had some Australian military officers in FSI Yokohama, who were great fun to be with but not necessarily deep scholars of the Japanese language. All of them usually did two full years back to back at FSI Yokohama, which would have really sent me around the bend. As it was, by the end of that second year of Japanese, I had spent three of my first six years in the Foreign Service in hard language training, which was not something I'd recommend to anyone else. It was fine with me though.

Q: I'm looking at the time and maybe this would be a good place to stop. We can pick this up in '82 when you're coming out of the language thing. We've got quite a bit to talk about in your time dealing with external affairs.

O'NEILL: Yes, a time including among other things the KAL007 shoot-down and the Rangoon bombing of the Korean cabinet and other...

Q: And also the Soviet attitude toward Japan's Northern Territories.

O'NEILL: One of the things we'll want to talk about in that time period is Prime Minister Nakasone's rather surprising trip to Korea to meet with Chun Doo Hwan. It was early in '83, I think, but I'll double check on that. Nakasone who eventually developed a great relationship with Reagan broke tradition, which was that the first overseas trip for a new Japanese prime minister was always to Washington.

Q: Today is the 12th of September 2008. Continuing with Al O'Neill. Al, we left it when you were just getting out of Japanese language school in '82 was it?

O'NEILL: Yes, summer of '82.

Q: Summer of '82. We've got a lot of things to talk about Japan including Nakasone going to Korea, the shootdown of KAL 007, the Soviet-Japanese relationship, the Rangoon bombing and all this. You were in, external affairs?

O'NEILL: Yes. The political section in Tokyo was divided into three branches. One was external which dealt with Japanese foreign policy. The second was internal which dealt with the Japanese political parties, the Diet and domestic politics in general. The third was the political-military branch which focused on the U.S.-Japan security relationship, Japan being a treaty ally of the U.S. In fact, we were their only treaty ally. There was a branch chief and at least a couple of officers in each of these branches.

As far as I was concerned, I had the best job which was Asian affairs. Normally that dealt Japan's relationship with the countries which were under the State Department's East Asian bureau although depending on staff shortages, I sometimes covered everything from Pakistan to the Trust Territories of the Pacific Islands. It was a very interesting time.

Q: I would think that whoever or those who had the portfolio for internal political affairs must have been very bored, something like reporting on politics in Switzerland. The ministers changed and the prime ministers changed, but nothing happened.

O'NEILL: That was why I was glad I was in external. In the internal branch, unfortunately the main thing that they had to watch was which LDP faction leader was going to become prime minister next.

In the political military branch, there was a lot of work because there was usually a good bit going on in the U.S.-Japan defense relationship. Sometimes it got pretty difficult. A big theme during that period 1982-84 in the political military realm was what was known as the Kanto Plain Consolidation. The Kanto Plain is the area that includes Tokyo, Kawasaki, Yokohama, Yokosuka, and into Chiba Prefecture on the coast to Narita Airport, one of the most densely populated areas in the world and one of few relatively flat areas in Japan. The U.S. military was consolidating a lot of bases that had been held since the occupation and, indeed, had occupation era buildings in most cases, largely vacating Yokohama and then consolidating into Yokosuka Naval Base and into a much smaller area of Yokohama. Other consolidation was going on among U.S. Army and Navy facilities elsewhere in the Kanto Plain. There wasn't to my recollection much change in the Air Force structure in the area.

In the external branch, that period 1982 to '84 was pretty busy, particularly 1983, in which there was one major event after another in Asia. By late 1982, Yasuhiro Nakasone had become the prime minister. He was very conservative which was not unusual for LDP prime ministers, but he was a more energetic person than, for example, his immediate predecessor, Zenko Suzuki. Nakasone put his stamp on things from the very beginning. Let me mention that at the end of World War II he had been a junior officer in the Imperial Japanese Navy, which was a little unusual for the LDP politicians at the time.

The tradition was that the first overseas trip for every prime minister was to Washington, to meet the president and senior U.S. officials and show the people back home that he was getting the approval of the U.S. government. Nakasone decided to make his first trip to Seoul to meet Chun Doo-Hwan, the former general who had taken over the Korean government in a more-or-less bloodless coup that then led to the very bloody Kwangju uprising of May 1980.

Not only was Nakasone doing this very precedent-breaking thing but he's obviously been preparing for it a good while because he had learned a few Korean pop songs to be able to sing at drinking parties with Chun. He had also given strict instructions not only to the staff of the Kantei, the prime minister's residence and office, but also to the Foreign Ministry that they were not to tell the U.S. about the visit in advance and after the announcement only to say what he was going to let them say. When this little bombshell dropped on us, the political counselor at the time was just beside himself.

Q: Who was that?

O'NEILL: Bob Immerman. He and Rust Deming, the external branch chief, and I were frantically calling our contacts in the Foreign Ministry to get more information. They were telling us that they were under instructions not to say anything, which was not the happiest situation for us. Ambassador Mansfield himself, that very revered figure, called the vice minister of foreign affairs who was the senior professional Japanese diplomat. The vice minister told Ambassador Mansfield that he was under instructions from the prime minister's office not to say anything more than that the visit had been announced.

Q: I would think that particularly you being a Korean hand would say, "This visit is a good idea."

O'NEILL: Yes, in my "personal capacity" as they say in Japan, but in my official capacity in the political section, I wanted to at least find out the basics. If the prime minister wanted to break precedent, that was a remarkable point to begin with, but we wanted to find out what was going to happen, what they were going to discuss, what kind of aid or loan packages the Japanese had in mind, etc. From the workaday professional standpoint, this was not a happy moment. As I recall, before the visit we did get more information. It was just a two or three day embargo.

I think that the visit went very well. Nakasone did, indeed, party with Chun Doo-Hwan who was a pretty nasty character, but it was important for Japan to have a good relations with Korea and, indeed, it was important for us for the two to have good relations, too, since they were both our treaty allies. The fact that Nakasone made a good impression on the Koreans was good for the three countries.

Let me think of other things that happened during that year. Well, the next big event of 1983 took place on September 1. I happened to be on leave in my apartment, when the first word came out that a Korean Airlines 747 was missing on a flight that was to take it from Anchorage to Seoul across the Pacific. This happened to be the 60th anniversary of the Kanto earthquake which had devastated Tokyo and Yokohama on September 1, 1923.

Q: That was when Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel was about the only building to remain standing.

O'NEILL: Exactly. A devastating earthquake that not only flattened and burned Tokyo, Kawasaki, and Yokohama with a huge death toll but also as an offshoot produced a number of anti-Korean riots and the killing of Koreans based on rumors that in the aftermath they were poisoning wells and that kind of thing, another unhappy moment in Japanese-Korean relations.

First, the flight was supposedly just overdue. Then there was a report that it had been forced down in the Soviet Union, and then as more and more details came out it was clear the Soviets had shot the plane down. Ronald Reagan was president, George Shultz was secretary of state; Casper Weinberger was secretary of defense. It was a time, anyway, of rather significant tension in U.S.-Soviet relations, and this was just an outrage. I said before that it was in April 1979 that the Soviets shot down the first Korean Airlines airliner, Flight 902. It was actually April of '78; I was off by a year. In that case the pilot managed to land a very badly damaged airplane on a frozen lake in the Kola Peninsula near Murmansk. In this case the aircraft was destroyed, and it crashed with loss of, I think the total number of people on board was 269.

Q: Including an American congressman.

O'NEILL: Congressman Larry McDonald who was if not the head of the ultra right John Birch Society was one of its high level officials. There were other American victims, just ordinary Americans. The high school age daughter of one of the senior people in the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan was on that flight and she was killed. There were just people of lots of different nationalities, mostly Korean.

The Soviets first denied any knowledge of the whole thing. Then one of our embassy officers who was a Soviet expert and Russian language officer was given the audio tapes from the Japanese Air Self Defense Force listening station at Wakkanai on the northern edge of Hokkaido. That was the transcript of the radio transmissions between the Soviet air defense ground control with the Sukhoi-15 interceptors that were tracking the plane.

The plane was way off course from Anchorage, starting with a tiny angle of deviation from the intended course. The farther along you go, of course the wider the deviation actually gets. The tiny little navigational error that was somehow built-in in Anchorage got bigger and bigger. Instead of going south of Kamchatka and Sakhalin over Hokkaido and down to Seoul, it was actually going over these very sensitive parts of the Soviet Far East where they had missile installations, submarine pens, and large fighter interceptor bases to protect against American bomber attacks just as we had similar bases in Alaska and radar stations. It developed that the plane was shot down. It was clear that the plane was being tracked by the Soviets. They lost it two or three times, and there was no evidence at all that the KAL pilot or crew knew anything was going wrong.

I knew a Pan Am 747 pilot at the time, who had been a Navy pilot. In the aftermath of this terrible business, he said several things. One is that every 747 has three inertial navigation systems on it - INSs - which are supposed to guide you even if you're flying over the polar area where there is a lot of magnetic distortion. He told me that according to the instructions each of these INSs is supposed to be set by the crew individually before the flight, zeroed to the precise location to where you are on the runway, say in Anchorage. But he said nobody does that; everyone "gangs" them and programs all three INSs at once. Thus any error that's put into one of them is going to be in all three of them. Once you start these little mini-computers putting in the positions, if the ground crew happens to move the aircraft even a small amount, that's all you need for an eventually major navigational error.

He also talked about the Soviet claim that they had fired warning shots from one of the interceptors behind the 747, which would normally include tracer rounds that should be visible at night. Most SU-15s didn't normally have guns. They were armed with air-to-air missiles although some of them did have external gun packs, so maybe the Soviet pilot did actually fire warning shots. My friend said it wouldn't matter. You're at night in a brightly lighted cockpit. You couldn't see tracer rounds no matter what. He was speaking not only as a Pan Am pilot but as a Navy fighter pilot as well.

This turned into a huge row in U.S.-Soviet relations. We were obviously supporting the Koreans and their attempts to recover whatever remains, etc., could be found. The Japanese were weighing in on our and the Korean side and were providing support, as I said, from the SDF radar installation. It was a huge incident.

My boss, the external branch chief Rust Deming, and the Director of the Foreign Ministry's Soviet division, Minoru Tamba, had the lead role in Tokyo on dealing with the incident, along with a senior Korean diplomat whose name I can't remember. Tamba was quite a character, who eventually rose very high in the Japanese foreign ministry. I think he became a deputy foreign minister eventually. He had been born on Sakhalin, when it was still Japanese held. Tamba, Rust Deming and the Korean diplomat eventually got permission to go to Sakhalin to deal with the Soviets, mostly military people, on this shoot down and the attempts to recover remains, etc.

The Soviets they were dealing with were obviously under very tight control as to what they could say, and I was told that in one of the rooms they were working in was a little glass booth with a man in it watching and listening to all the meetings. You can bet he wasn't from the Soviet Red Cross. Even after the Soviets admitted that they shot the plane down they were saying it was an intruder, and began hinting it was on an intelligence mission. The "usual suspects" in the West and even some in Japan took up that conspiracy line and ran with it. It was all nonsense; the real story was simply that for the second time in five years a KAL flight crew had made a terrible navigational error and this time it cost the lives of all on board. Sadly, I'm sure the botched Soviet attempt to destroy KAL 902 in April 1978, which was a huge embarrassment to the Soviet air defense, caused them to be even more ruthless and unforgiving in 1983.

The Soviets in Sakhalin were under extreme pressure to not give out any information. And also meanwhile U.S. and Japanese vessels were searching the straits north of Hokkaido to try to find remains and the so-called black boxes from the aircraft. While they were doing this they were dodging Soviet destroyers which were out not only to find the black boxes first but also to harass our vessels as well. That was a big event that had fairly long lasting negative effects on U.S.-Soviet relations.

One of the other things that happened in that same period was the assassination ofBenigno Aquino as he was coming back to Manila from U.S. exile in August 1983. He was murdered on the steps of his airplane by two men from the Philippine Aviation Security Command. That murder lit the fuse of resistance to the Marcos dictatorship that eventually caused Marcos's ouster by his widow Corazon Aquino's People Power movement in 1986.

While the uproar over the KAL shoot-down was still in full spate, Chun Doo-Hwan was making a state visit to Rangoon, Burma in October. While he was there three North Korean army officers set a bomb in the open roof of the mausoleum where Aung San was buried. He was the Burmese national hero whose daughter Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest in Burma since about 1990.

That mausoleum was analogous to the National Cemetery in Seoul or Arlington Cemetery here. A state guest would go there and pay his respects to the national founding hero; so the North Koreans knew Chun Doo-Hwan was going to do that. Chun apparently got held up in traffic en route to the mausoleum. It appears that the North Koreans mistook the Korean ambassador, who I'm told resembled Chun to a degree, for Chun. Because Chun's retinue was largely there, the bomb was detonated killing the ambassador, the much respected Foreign Minister, Lee Bum-Suk, and most of the senior Blue House staff including Hahm Pyong Choon, a presidential aide who had been ambassador to Washington, and a number of the senior ROK military people. A number of other people, Koreans and Burmese were gravely wounded.

We were watching this from afar in Tokyo, but we were also interested in getting the Japanese to do whatever they could to support the ROK. It was pretty obvious that the North Koreans were the only ones who would have done something as atrocious as this particularly in a country whose people are as superstitious as the Burmese. No Burmese whether he was a Kachin, Karen, Burman, Chin or from any other ethnic group would ever blow up a grave because they're so concerned about spirits. As an aside, when I was in one of my language stints at FSI, the senior Burmese language teacher had originally come to the U.S. as a diplomat when Burma became independent in the late '40s. He said one of the Burmese diplomats died while at the embassy in Washington. Because of the fear among some of the embassy staff of this man's ghost continuing to linger at the embassy, they asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to cut orders transferring him back to Rangoon posthumously, which was their way of getting rid of the ghost.

From that and stories that my father told from his World War II service in Burma, I knew that no Burmese group, even anti-government groups, were going to get involved in blowing up a tomb. Particularly Aung San's because he was one of the rare Burmans who actually had gained the trust of most if not all of the minority groups who were usually being oppressed by the Burman majority.

One fear that we had and I think the South Koreans also had was with Burma's long history of neutrality they would say we're just getting rid of both, breaking relations with both North and South Korea. We didn't want that kind of outcome which would have muddied the situation and let the North Koreans off the hook to a degree. That was a big fear. We were trying to encourage the Japanese to do what they could to get Ne Win, the dictator of Burma, to come down against the North Koreans. (Ne Win had been trained by the Japanese in WWIAung San, too, for that matter.)

In fact, the Ne Win government actually managed to capture two of the North Korean officers. One was badly injured by a grenade that he set off, another was killed by his own grenade, and the third man, a major, was captured unharmed. The two living North Koreans were put on trial by the Burmese army and convicted of the murders and of the assassination attempt on Chun.

In the end, we needn't have worried about a muddled outcome. Ne Win not only broke relations with the DPRK and expelled their diplomatic mission but also withdrew recognition of the existence of the North Korean state, a serendipitous twist that I don't think anybody had done in diplomacy before. But it was clear. By the way, this assassination attempt enraged the Chinese as well. They published, I'm told, the Burmese account and the North Korean denial in The Peoples' Daily using exactly the same number of Chinese characters. That symbolized Chinese anger at this crime. When you think about it, not every state, even a pretty nasty one, would go to the length of blowing up the tomb of a friendly state's national hero in order to get at one of their enemies who was on a state visit. Fortunately the Burmese were as outraged as they should have been.

Our last big project of 1983 was on Veterans' Day weekend when President Reagan made a state visit. This was my second presidential visit having done the Carter visit to Seoul in '79 as we discussed earlier. Once we knew that this was going to take place, I immediately volunteered for all of the events having to do with the emperor. I wanted to have the experience of dealing with the Imperial Household Agency which is known as the Kunaicho in Japanese. It's the group of extremely traditional gentlemen who basically control everything that has to do with the emperor or the imperial family and the outside world's dealings with the imperial family.

Q: They had quite a reputation along with the Hapsburg emperor's court.

O'NEILL: Right. But in terms of longevity, the Hapsburgs were Johnny-come-latelies in comparison with the imperial family which they say goes back to descent from the Sun Goddess about 2300 years ago. Reagan was visiting for quite a number of reasons. It was natural for the president to visit one of our top Asian allies, one of our top trading partners with which we had difficulties, particularly over auto exports from Japan to the U.S. and the balance of trade in general.

On the positive side, obviously, we wanted to affirm the relationship with Japan in the military sense and to remind the Japanese, obviously, that we were with them in the face of the Soviet Union which in those days the Japanese saw as their main threat and on which they collaborated with us a great deal in defense planning.

All U.S. presidential visits are an enormous strain on the host government and the embassy. Reagan's visits were no less so than any others. In part it was because every president realizes that these things have to look good on TV back home, and their staffs realize that too. So there is a great deal of searching out the best local color venues and for imbibing the local culture and history, etc., and portraying the president's interest. Again, it's a legitimate purpose both to the U.S. population and also for the host government's population to show that the president is interested in this or that aspect of host country's history and culture. But it's very time consuming because the people from the White House included people like Mike Deaver, who was probably Reagan's longest standing and most important advisor other than Nancy Reagan herself.

Q: And Deaver was extremely close to Nancy Reagan. That was a very powerful combination.

O'NEILL: It was a very powerful combination. What you usually have with the presidential visit to country X, Y, or Z is a series of at least two advance teams. In this case, we had a survey team, a pre-advance team, and then two advance teams before the actual visit. There were two levels of events. One series of events was the ceremonial ones involving the emperor which included welcoming Reagan to the Akasaka state guest house, a courtesy call on the emperor by Reagan and his entourage at the imperial palace, then the state dinner, and then just before the departure there was to be the farewell call by the emperor.

I was assigned to the events at the Akasaka palace, where the Reagans were going to stay during the entire visit. One of the other embassy officers became the event officer for the courtesy call on the emperor and the state dinner. We were both fully occupied. Working with the Imperial Household Agency was very interesting because their idea of precedent was that something had been done exactly the same way for the last 1200 years.

A particular twist in this visit was the security requirements in the aftermath of the Rangoon bombing, the KAL 007 shoot down and the Aquino assassination. Nancy Reagan was really security conscious and so of course was the Secret Service. Reagan was supposed to have gone to Manila. That leg of the overseas trip was cancelled because of Aquino's assassination, both to show our strong belief that the Marcos government was behind it and also Nancy Reagan's concern for the president's safety made it impossible.

In the event, the very distinguished and able diplomat Mike Armacost who was then our ambassador in the Philippines came to Tokyo to brief Reagan on the Philippine situation.

We had weeks and weeks of more and more White House people. They included people like Mike Deaver and the Secret Service in great profusion because they had to be able to cover all of these various visit sites before and during and were also responsible for flying in the President's limos and helicopters on USAF transports. There was White House Communications Agency or WHCA, a military organization part of the executive office of the President who do all the communication set-ups in every place he's going to be. The White House public relations people also. There were mobs of U.S. officials to start off with, plus there was going to be the news media, too.

When we got the word of the visit dates, the embassy initially reserved 1200 rooms at the Okura Hotel right across the street from the chancery and the ambassador's residence. It was one of the great hotels of the world and one which was very accustomed to American presidential visits over the decades. Eventually I think we only needed about 700 rooms.

One of the principal duties of an embassy is to make sure there's only one visit being planned, not a host country version and a White House version, because if you let the two of them get away from each other, you'll have a real disaster. The host country players, the people from the Imperial Household Agency, the foreign ministry's protocol office, the prime minister's office, the Japanese police, all were working on planning. The White House whether Republican or Democrat has its own ideas as to what the visit is supposed to do for their own domestic and foreign benefit. The host government whether it's Japan or whoever else, has their own imperatives, too, things they want the president to do, things they want him to see, people they want him to see, all that sort of thing.

Q: Did you get any feel for Nancy Reagan and her astrologer?

O'NEILL: This was 1983, so I don't know how long the astrologer had been around. The astrologer was not part of the presidential party. That would have been a minor thing. The biggest thing was security, and it got to a very serious impasse. One of the major sites to be visited by President and Mrs. Reagan was the Meiji Shrine, a huge Shinto shrine in downtown Tokyo, devoted, to the Meiji Emperor, the first emperor of modern Japan and the grandfather of the then emperor, Hirohito, the Showa emperor.

There were two events at the Meiji Shrine: One was to pay respects at the shrine proper, and then there was also going to be an exhibition of what is called yabusame or horseback archery in which men in 12th Century samurai costumes ride down a dirt track and shoot sideways at targets with those great long bows that the samurai used before they got into swords as much. That was to be one of the big televised cultural things on the itinerary.

The Secret Service wanted to bring dogs - and I'm not making this up as Dave Barry says - into the inner sanctum of the central building of the Meiji shrine and go behind the altar to check for bombs. The Japanese were just about overcome. They were really reaching for their smelling salts.

Q: Dogs in Oriental culture are not...

O'NEILL: Yeah. Not a great idea. Not a great public relations gambit to begin with, particularly not in something like this. It would be somewhat similar, to, say, the British prime minister's security staff saying that they wanted to have their dogs up in the private residence of the White House to check things out because the PM is coming for a visit. It would be like that although without the religious character that you've got with a Shinto shrine. At one point, Ambassador Mansfield had to meet with PM Nakasone over security issuepretty unprecedented in itseland I'm sure the dog search was on their agenda. Eventually the secret Service had to back down. They couldn't do this. Among other things, they were told by the Japanese that the regular Japanese national police can't even go into that inner sanctum. There's a separate shrine police force who are the only security people allowed into those precincts. Even thereafter, all through the visit there was a lot of tension between our Secret Service and the SPs or Security Police, which is the Japanese equivalent. Of course, they are proud of their ability to protect foreign dignitaries, and their view was when a foreign dignitary, even the president of the U.S., is in Japan, they protect them.

Q: Everything was overlaid with the whole Rangoon business.

O'NEILL: Yes. You had all these major incidents, great tension with the Soviets after KAL 007, the Rangoon bombing, Aquino's assassination, all back to back, all in early fall of 1983.

But in the end, Reagan arrived, over Veterans' Day weekend. It all looked great on television which, I'm afraid, is often the main thing. Behind the scenes it was often more frantic, especially at times at the Akasaka state guest house where the Reagans were staying. It's sort of a miniature samurai Versailles in downtown Tokyo.

The first event was the emperor's welcoming ceremony. Air Force One and the press plane were landing not out at Narita Airport but at Haneda, the downtown airport which was no longer used for international flights. They were to be picked up by Marine helicopters, both Marine One which had been transported from Andrews in a giant C-5 as well as other, larger Marine helicopters from units in Japan. The party would be helicoptered from Haneda to the palace.

The uniform for the Emperor's welcoming ceremony was morning coat, formal striped trousers, etc. We had to outfit Ed Meese, James Baker, the deputy treasury secretary, and all the White House party who were to greet the Emperor. We had gotten their sizes with the help of the White House advance team, which was extremely professional. They really knew what they were doing. In different rooms in the guest house, we had the formal outfits laid out with nametags. Our job was to run out to the chopper pad next to the palace, find all "our" White House senior staff, who were getting off the helicopters in a swirl of dust, all wearing blazers and polo shirts and chinos because they had just flown across the Pacific, run them up the steps of the palace, into the right rooms, get them dressed, run them back down the steps, and line them up before the emperor got there. The time for this was really short, but we did it!

All along since the summer, a couple of us had been working with the Imperial Household Agency on every detail of the Emperor's events. Fortunately they had people from the Foreign Ministry on detail, and the senior official we usually dealt with was an ambassador named Yamashita. He was indispensable to making the events with the Emperor go as planned. Aside from the security and press issues, the White House Communications Agency (WHCA) needed to have several vans at the Imperial Palace during the state dinner, which was not the usual Japanese practice for other state visits.

Q: Was somebody keeping an eye out for World War II issues? After all, by many accounts Hirohito could have been considered a war criminal. Were there things that arose on the visit that would have raised the ghost of World War II?

O'NEILL: Certainly not that I can think of on that visit other than we were meeting with the emperor. First of all, a relatively small handful of people in the United States knew or cared that Reagan was going anywhere outside the U.S. Nothing in the visit itself in terms of where they were going, the specific places like the Meiji shrine, etc., would immediately raise in the minds of any Americans, any association with World War II. They weren't going to Hiroshima or to Iwo Jima or Okinawa.

In terms of what the American people saw on television it was a great visit, smoothly run, great visuals and all that. There were good discussions. Reagan and Nakasone cemented what was known as the "Ron-Yasu relationship," which was the closest personal relationship to date between and American president and a Japanese prime minister that I can think of. I don't know that they completely solved any of the top issues between the United States and Japan, but these visits are always the chance to move things forward and make some progress on most of the issues. The Japanese were delighted that the American president was making a state visit.

Earlier, I think I mentioned that I developed a measure of success for presidential visits which is if bilateral relations are no worse after the visit than they were before it was a great success. This one exceeded that cynical standard. I think most of the remainder of my time there, another eight or nine months in Japan, was pretty much the routine stuff of diplomacy between the U.S. and Japan. Fortunately, 1984 in Asia did not match 1983, with the Aquino assassination, KAL 007 and the Rangoon bombing.

Q: Let's talk a bit before we leave about Japanese attitudes. Let's start with the Philippines. This was during the Marcos regime. Of course, the Aquino assassination led eventually to Mrs. Corazon Aquino overthrowing Marcos and becoming president.

O'NEILL: Two and a half years later.

Q: Prior to that, how did we view the Japanese relationship with the Philippines?

O'NEILL: To my mind at the time, it was overwhelmingly commercial and aid-related. The Japanese saw big business opportunities in the Philippines and they always had. This was something they have been interested in since before World War II. There were lots of Japanese business concerns in the Philippines when it was still a U.S. Commonwealth before independence in '46. Nothing sticks in my mind of any instance where the Japanese criticized the Marcos regime, as far as his destruction of the Philippine economy, or human rights depredations throughout the country. The Japanese usually kept a very low profile almost everywhere, often to our annoyance because 25 years ago Japan did not attempt to match its economic importance in the world with anything approaching diplomatic and political importance.

Let me mention too the important Soviet relationship with Japan. Even under normal circumstance, even without KAL 007, Japanese relations with the Soviet Union were very bad. Evans Revere, who is now the president of the Korea Society and who served both in Korea and Japan, once commented to me, "Only people who served in Japan during the Soviet era would realize how bad Soviet-Japan relations normally were."

The focus was the Northern Territories, the group of islands just north of Hokkaido that the Soviets took in the immediate aftermath of World War II. After Japan surrendered they moved forces into those northern islands and have never given them back. It was the only issue that united every Japanese political party from the far right fringe to the Communist Party, the Japan Socialist Party and the LDP. Everybody was united on that: Give back the Northern Territories. It was a really neuralgic point.

The animosity toward the Soviets was evident at the Foreign Ministry as well as a matter of policy. When we'd go over to the ministry, we'd just call ahead to the particular office, Southeast Asia I, China, or whatever, talk to the person we wanted to see, and then we'd just go up to his office. It was different for Soviet diplomats. The only office in the Foreign Ministry that they were normally allowed to visit was the Soviet Affairs Division. There was a little doorbell at the front of the door of the Soviet division, and it said only in Russian, "Please ring the bell."

The Soviet diplomats would then be taken to a separate room down the hall. Their Japanese interlocutors would be seated in front of a gigantic map of the Northern Territories. It was as big as the wall behind you. The Soviets would be facing the map of course. This is known as "oriental subtlety." [laughter] Regardless of what issue the Soviet diplomat came to talk about, that would be the setting.

The Soviets almost never missed a chance to irritate the Japanese whether wittingly or unwittingly. They just had a tremendous knack for doing so. In fact, when something bad would happen in the U.S.-Japan relations, miraculously you could almost count on the Soviets doing something really stupid that would help draw attention from the problem in U.S.-Japan relations and get the Japanese upset about the Soviets. They were wonderful!

They also had a track record of sending as ambassador to Japan whoever happened to be the most recently failed minister of agriculture. He would be dismissed and disgraced because of two or three years of failed harvests, and sure enough he would be appointed as ambassador to Japan. There was one case during that time in which the new Soviet luminary was dismissed from the Party Central Committee of the party after arriving as ambassador to Tokyo. It was hard to know if the Party did that to insult the Japanese or for their own obtuse internal reasons but it was easy for the Japanese to feel insulted.

Q: How about China? Let's talk Taiwan first. How sat things during the time you were there?

O'NEILL: Between Japan and Taiwan? It was very interesting. In those days in the Japanese Diet and elsewhere in the Japanese political world, there was a Taiwan Lobby, not quite as virulent as our so-called China lobby in the '40s and '50s, but nonetheless people who were still powerful and protective of the Taiwan relationship. To backtrack: The Japanese opened full diplomatic relations with the PRC, People's Republic of China, shortly after Nixon's visit. That visit is still known as "the Nixon shock" in Japan.

Q: The Nixon shokku?

O'NEILL: "Nix-on shokku." Nixon and Kissinger unfortunately did not tell our Japanese allies about their secret visits to China, so they were absolutely blindsided by Nixon's extraordinary visit. It was a vitally important visit for Japan, but we could hardly have handled it worse. In fairness to Nixon and Kissinger, they probably figured that as leaky as Japan's political world was, advance word would have gotten out. The Japanese press was all over the ministries and all over the prime minister's office and the Diet all the time. There was a certain amount of reason for not telling the Japanese in advance.

The Japanese under Kakuei Tanaka, the famous and eventually disgraced prime minister, a much more activist prime minister than the normal run of the mill, was very quick to open full diplomatic relations with the PRC which meant breaking relations with Taiwan. But, there still was a large body of people in Japan who were linked to Taiwan and wanted to do whatever Japan could do to help Taiwan.

Part of this went back into history because one of the immediate results of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 was that Japan got control of Taiwan (or Formosa) which had largely been neglected for centuries by the central government in Beijing. It was mainly inhabited by two groups of people. One group was aboriginal tribesmen somewhat similar to people of the northern Philippines, who had been there for eons. The other group was ethnic Chinese who were largely from Fujian province across the straits. Those people had been in Taiwan for a long time too. They were sort of left to their own devices more or less to be traders and pirates by the central government of Beijing. Anyway, Japanese had control of Taiwan for half a century. In contrast to the Japanese colonial period in Korea, the rule over Taiwan was relatively benign and beneficial to the people. The Japanese did a good bit of infrastructure development. The people certainly didn't resist the Japanese, at least not like the Koreans did because the circumstances were so different. The Japanese came in and treated them pretty well.

Q: It was also a resort area for the Japanese.

O'NEILL: It became so, yes, in a way that Korea could probably never been for a lot of reasons, including Korean outrage at having been taken over by the Japanese. That control over Taiwan was lost in 1945. But there was still a lot of trade between them, political, educational and personal ties as well.

The Japan-Taiwan relationship was rather protective with many of the Japanese conservative politicians trying to look out for Taiwan. They couldn't do much because again, Japanese foreign policy was just not very assertive. Whatever support they could provide quietly, they would. The catch phrase for Japanese diplomacy in those years and before and afterwards was "omni-directional peaceful diplomacy," zenpou-i heiwa gaikou in Japanese. That rather mushy phrase exemplified Japanese diplomacy for some decades. Don't get anybody angry at you, don't ruffle anybody's feathers and just muddle along and hope you get another big commercial contract for Mitsubishi or the like.

Q: From your perspective were we ever going after the Japanese to support something in the UN or in the Japanese moves toward Taiwan during this time?

O'NEILL: Nothing that I could remember. Obviously we were always after the Japanese and many other countries to support us in this or that committee in the UN and this or that General Assembly vote. I don't remember that Japan was on the Security Council as one of the temporary members during the time I was there, but had they been we would certainly have been after them for their vote. The Japanese would normally be with us. They would tend to get uneasy if we were after them, for example, to join us in a vote condemning a dictator in whatever country we happened to be focusing on at the moment. They would not want to do that, and they would tend to want to abstain. Positive things they would get on board with, things they would consider negative or in any way sticking their necks out a way they'd be reluctant.

Q: Al, we're touring the horizon right now. How stood things in the People's Republic of China during this two year period from our perspective from Tokyo?

O'NEILL: I'm trying to think of anything that blew up! [laughter] There was one visit which was good and significant. Hua Guofeng, the Chinese party leader at the time... I recall that this was in the spring of 1984. I'd have to check the dates, but my recollection was it was the spring of '84.

Hua made an official visit to Japan. It had been some while since a Chinese of his rank had visited Japan. He turned out to be a very affable guest. Hua wasn't a cold, aloof type of party apparatchik that you might expect but was quite an outgoing, bubbly sort. He was a big hit in the Japanese news media. I think Hua went to Osaka to see that big commercial hub and I think he made a good impression on the Japanese in generano gaffes. He helped with the reasonably good relationship that existed then between the Japanese and the Chinese at that moment. The Japanese were trying to encourage the Chinese toward economic reforms which eventually did take off. The reforms were actually on their way because Mao had died in 1976. The Japanese were encouraging the Chinese to continue moving in the same direction.

Q: Was the problem of the Japanese textbooks about World War II alive at the time either vis-a-vis China or Korea? Certainly in Germany this subject is treated in depth in the school books, but in Japan it's almost completely glossed over.

O'NEILL: Yes, I should have mentioned it. There was a blowup about textbooks right before I arrived back in Tokyo to begin my job in the political section. In August of 1982, the Japanese had come with new guidelines for history textbooks. The Ministry of Education does not write the text books, but it puts out guidance for those who do and also this guidance is often used by the prefectural school systems in picking textbooks.

That blowup involved the Republic of Korea and the PRC but that to the best of my recollection, had been smoothed over long before Hua was visiting. If the issue had still been alive, Hua probably would not have come. It's one of those things that's episodic. The larger underlying issue is that the Japanese had noand have nocome to grips as well with the World War II situation as the Germans. Shame is a serious problem in Japan. If somebody does something that they consider shameful, it really is a disgrace, so many cannot bring themselves to believe that they did anything shameful in World War II. Some do and some don't, but certainly in those days many followed the line in that the Japanese were liberating the Chinese, the Koreans, the Burmese, Filipinos, and those in the Dutch West Indies from western colonial rule. They never quite figured out, "Yeah, we killed several million of them doing that, but they should be grateful anyway."

In those days, when you spoke with Japanese who had served in World War II or were old enough to experience it as teenagers, they tended to speak as if it were a typhoon or an earthquake. It didn't seem to have any human agency at least as you were talking with them about it, it was just like a natural disaster. They certainly were not willing to recognize how they were seen in almost every part of Asia with the possible exceptions of the Burmans, the majority people of Burma.

The Burman majority pretty much welcomed the Japanese invaders, who expelled the British in 1942. Ne Win and Aung San and others who were Burmese independence heroes, the so-called Thirty Comrades, went to be trained during the war on Hainan Island by the Japanese. They got infiltrated back into Burma because they saw the Japanese as the Japanese saw themselves: as the liberators from western colonialism. Elsewhere whether in Hong Kong or Singapore, the Malay Peninsula and certainly the Philippines, the attitude toward the Japanese in World War II was quite a bit different.

Q: How about some of the last ones, unless there is another, unless you want to talk about Southeast Asia? What about the North Koreans? There were two things. One, the relationship with North Korea as a state and also North Koreans in Japan. How was this in your time?

O'NEILL: Any time you see a statistic about the Korean population of Japan, in whatever year from the 1950s through today, it always seems to be 600,000, no matter who's writing about it. It's hard to believe that such a population could be so static, but that's the figure that's always given for, say, for 40-something years.

Most of the ethnic Koreans in Japan originally came from southern Korea or from Cheju-Do, not from the northern half of the peninsula. Some went voluntarily because there was a better economic opportunity even while Japan was the colonial master, and more were either forced into laboring jobs there or perhaps drafted into the armed forces. Anyway, you had this population of ethnic Koreans who were settled in Japan, sometimes for many generations. They were divided politically once the peninsula was divided and two states were set up in 1948. Their allegiances went in different directions.

There was a large group that was called in Japanese Chosen Soren, short for the "General Association for Korean Residents in Japan." That was the pro-North Korean group. The South Korean group went by the abbreviated name "Mindan." They were roughly similar in size, I think. If you were part of Mindan or pro-South Korea, you would normally have a Republic of Korea passport, a South Korean passport, and you could travel out of Japan. You'd have to have a visa to come back to Japan or a resident certificate. If you were an adherent of North Korea, a member of Chosen Soren, you didn't have a passport, or at least the Japanese didn't recognize the North Korean passport. You were more or less stateless residents of Japan because of Japanese antipathy toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the communist North.

Of course, the Japanese had full diplomatic relations from 1965 with the South and an embassy in Seoul. There was an ROK embassy in Tokyo. There was a good bit of antagonism of course between the two Korean groups although not that I can recall any violence. Also, there was a weird feature of the Japanese political system in that, rather than the Japanese Communist Party, it was the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) that was closest to North Korea and friendliest to their policies.

While I was in Japan the Japanese communist party newspaper which was called Akahata or Red Flag, published an article bitterly attacking North Korea, saying that the worship of the Kim Il Sung personality cult was just like the emperor worship in the Meiji era. Further, the North Koreans really did start the Korean War which was totally contrary to what the North Koreans were saying and certainly an issue on which the Soviets and Chinese at least remained silent. I don't know what prompted this outburst. The Socialists got a lot of support from the North Korean population of Japan, and a source of revenue for this population was these Pachinko parlors. Pachinko was a Japanese pinball game. The prizes were things like packets of Kleenex or a comb. It wasn't like you were winning at Las Vegas. Nonetheless, pachinko was a major source of revenue for North Korea and for the Japan Socialist Party.

In fact, in later years when the Japanese government began to cut down on revenue sharing from the North Korean residents' group to North Korea, it was also cutting into the revenues of the Japan Socialist Party, which may have helped contribute to what I consider its well-deserved demise as a major player in Japan's politics. But something that became a major issue in Japan relations with North Korea years and still is the top issue now is the abductions of Japanese to North Korea.

I was aware that the Japanese National Police Agency strongly believed that a number of the disappearances of Japanese from coastal areas in the '70s into the '80s were caused by North Korea. They were quite certain that this was the case, but they were not in a position to make any public declaration about it.

Q: At the time you were dealing with this, was there any rationale for these abductions?

O'NEILL: That's always been one of the major questions. The purpose of bringing them there was to train North Korean intelligence operatives to be seen as Japanese, to be able to speak Japanese without a Korean accent, to be able to understand Japanese customs and culture and all of that well enough that they could pass, at least, in a third country as Japanese with fake passports.

The question always arises, why didn't the North Koreans use this large community of several hundred thousand ethnic Koreans? Most spoke at least a good bit of Japanese, and some of them spoke Japanese as their first language and Korean as their second language which they were learning in Chosen Soren schools. Part of my answer is the North Koreans are so suspicious of everybody that they would even be suspicious of these pro-North Korean people as being not quite loyal. There's a reason for my thinking this, and I'll get into that in a second. Also, being outsiders in Japan in the final analysis, they might not be able to pass for "real Japanese." But if you grabbed real Japanese who spoke nothing but Japanese, who know no other customs than Japan's customs; you were really getting the genuine article.

Bizarre as this whole thing is, kidnapping people from another country to bring them to your country to train your intelligence operatives, it's what they did, including to train the two people who blew up KAL 858 near Burma in November of 1987. That's pretty weird, and yet that's what was done. The North Koreans may also have been wary because of the unhappy history of a lot of Koreans from Japan who went to North Korea starting in the late '50s and early '60s. There's a great book about this called Exodus to North Korea by Tessa Morris-Suzuki.

A lot of those true believers, originally as I say almost all from hometowns in South Korea went to the North expecting to be in a nationalistic Korean paradise in which everyone was going to be equal and they were going construct socialism, following great leader Kim Il-Sung. Everybody was going to live happily ever after. Many of them got very disenchanted very fast with the realities of North Korea which was then as now a brutal totalitarian state. When those ï¿½migrï¿½s began making suggestions to North Korean officials about improving economic processes or industrial production, that was not what the central committee was planning. If they kept pushing they got into trouble. In a lot of cases, they and their entire families wound up in the North Korean gulag.

Another book that came out about 2000 or 2001 was called The Aquariums of Pyongyang. It was written by a man who's now in the south who was of such a Japanese-Korean family. His grandfather and grandmother took his family from Japan to North Korea. The entire family wound up for, in his case, 14 years in an incredibly primitive and horrible existence in a prison camp. The writer eventually learned the reason that they went was because the grandfather was criticizing the North Korean system. Off they went, the whole family, even ones who had done nothing like the writer, who was a teenager. After the grandfather died, the problem was removed and they got out of the prison camp and were back, though under great suspicion, in North Korean society in the provinces. This suspicion about their loyalty of the ï¿½migrï¿½s, I'm sure, was a key reason why the North Koreans resorted to the bizarre tactic of kidnapping Japanese.

Q: Did you generally find that North Koreans in Japan as being a spy problem or something of that nature?

O'NEILL: They were certainly watched. Sometimes North Korean infiltration vessels would use Japanese waters. In other words, instead of trying to go down the coast to infiltrate South Korea, they'd come over to Japan. Sometimes they'd both land and pick up agents and information, etc., in Japan, but also as a sort of ruse went to infiltrate South Korea. Instead of the South Korean coast guard or navy seeing a vessel coming down the coast from North Korea, they'd see what might be a large fishing boat coming from Japan, so it would help fuzz things up especially at night. The Japanese knew this, and they just couldn't bring themselves to make an issue about it because I guess in some cases there was a limit to what they could do about it.

Q: Did you pick out from your Japanese contacts any concern that all of a sudden North Korea might invade South Korea? I mean, Japan would then have to be heavily involved.

O'NEILL: No. Not really. Had there been a major clash that, let's say, prompted a North Korean invasion, the Japanese would have been very upset on a number of levels, one of which was just the fear of how far it could spread. The involvement of all the U.S. forces in Japan in the Korean contingency would have been not only immediate but also sustained during the entire conflict. All the forces in Japan would have headed for the Korean peninsula right away, plus there would have been huge air, naval and ground forces coming through these same Japanese bases, particularly air and navy, flowing through to sustain the defense of the south and the defeat of North Korea. That would have been pretty alarming to the Japanese.

Q: Did you and your wife have any contacts with South Korean diplomats?

O'NEILL: Oh, yes.

Q: What was your impression of their attitude toward serving there?

O'NEILL: I think most of them were Japanese speakers; largely they had good Japanese language skills. I think they liked Tokyo; they liked Japan, and we knew quite a few of them. We had good close relations with the Korean embassy people, the political section mainly because that was who I normally got in touch with. I think they were under the same kinds of strains dealing with the Japanese government as Japanese diplomats were in their embassy in Seoul. It's generally a relatively good though touchy relationship, but there were times things were pretty strained. The Japanese relationship was second only to the U.S. for Korean diplomats certainly at that time and they wouldn't have been assigned to Tokyo had they not wanted to be.

Q: Okay. Today is the 17th of September 2008. This is an interview with Al O'Neill. Al, I think we were talking about 1985 or '84?

O'NEILL: Yes. I left Tokyo in summer 1984 and went back to my first State Department assignment that summer. I was assigned to the political-military bureau in what was then called the Office of Strategic Technology Affairs. It was the office that dealt with COCOM, which was the Coordinating Committee for Strategic Technology Controls, based in Paris. That was a multi-national organization aimed at preventing the Soviet Union and its allies and the PRC and others from getting what was called "dual use technology," cutting edge technology that had both military and civilian applications, the purpose being to restrict their ability to increase their military technological level.

The office was quite small. It had only five officers: an office director and four other officers one of whom was an Air Force captain. The rest of us were Foreign Service officers. At the time the political-military bureau was, as I put it, under the command of Lieutenant General John T. Chain, Jr., USAF, who later got a fourth star and became commanding general of Strategic Air Command. We had quite a large number of responsibilities for such a small office in addition to having a leading role in COCOM for the State Department, a mission that we shared with the Office of East-West Trade in the economic and business affairs bureau or EB.

We also had the U.S. government lead on what later became the Missile Technology Control Regime to try to restrict both the payload and ranges of ballistic missiles worldwide. When SDI - the Strategic Defense Initiative - of the Reagan administration became internationalized, we helped negotiate agreements on SDI cooperation. That was when the U.S. government decided that they wanted to have international partners like Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Israel. We played a role in those negotiations with those countries trying to reach agreements with them on their cooperation with the SDI operation itself. Largely this was going to be in the realm of technological research in those countries that might ultimately benefit the entire SDI project which was, of course, an anti-ballistic missile project, popularly known as Star Wars.

Q: What piece of the action did you have?

O'NEILL: For most of the two years that I was in that office I worked almost exclusively on the COCOM part; that is, the multilateral arrangements to restrict strategic technology to the Soviets and others. This was a time when the U.S. government was learning a great deal about the large apparatus that the Soviets had set up to penetrate western industries particularly in Europe and to a lesser degree in Japan and in the United States to try to carry away whatever they could in the way of, not so much material but information, technical data that would allow them to replicate Western advance technologies for military purposes.

As part of this, too, as time went on we tried to reach specific agreements with countries that were not yet members of COCOM including Singapore and the Korea. In both those cases I was part of the negotiating delegations to try to reach agreements which would put them in association with COCOM if they didn't actually want to join the organization for whatever reason.

Q: First, what was your office's attitude towards the Strategic Defense Initiative, because this was viewed with great skepticism at the time and I think probably still is.

O'NEILL: Right. My attitude was we were supposed to try to reach out to these countries to achieve whatever degree of cooperation we could. I had no way of judging the ultimate practicability of this space-based and ground-based missile defense system. I didn't feel terribly encouraged, but I was a history major, not a physicist or a chemical engineer. We were just trying to do the mission the State Department had assigned us. It was going to be for other people to figure out in the future whether SDI would actually work.

As I say, it was my first State Department assignment after quite a few years overseas. It was also my first real chance to see how powerful the Defense Department was. I would say this was one era in which the militarization of U.S. foreign policy was advanced significantly and that has certainly made great strides since that period.

Although our distant opponent was the Soviet Union, I'd say our proximate opponent was Richard Perle and his vast apparatus in DOD. Perle was then the assistant secretary of defense for International Security Policy (ISP) as distinct from International Security Affairs or ISA which was their collection of regional offices. After Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and President Reagan, Perle was perhaps the most powerful figure in the U.S. government in the areas that he was interested in, essentially the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

He could more or less do whatever he felt like, and there was nobody to call him on it. He would send critical letters to foreign cabinet members without the slightest reference to the State Department and little or no clearance even within DOD. He would just do whatever he felt like. At State, in addition to our office, there was a modest number of people in the Office of East-West Trade in the Economic Bureau who were working on the same issues, but Perle had under him a huge number of people and a more or less unlimited budget certainly compared with us. If we sent one person to a meeting, he could easily send three or four to the same meeting. We were constantly outnumbered. I think the senior officials in the State Department who dealt with Perle and his apparatchiks, whether they agreed with him or not, recognized his power which went, as I say, up to Weinberger and Reagan himself. It frankly intimidated them. Perle could also always call on the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) to come with information that would support his assessment of the Soviet threat.

Q: You were talking about getting Singapore and South Korea. I would have thought that both of them, particularly South Korea but also Singapore, would not want to get out of line with western Europe because there was nothing to gain by getting close to the Soviet Union.

O'NEILL: No. It wasn't a question of their getting close to the Soviet Union. It was a question more of, I think, two things. One was buying into our view of the threat that the Soviet technology acquisition effort represented. This was not always clear to them partly because in some cases the Defense Department exaggerated the threat that certain technology could pose in the hands of the Soviet Union. The other thing was that this, in both cases, Singapore and Korea, was something they really hadn't thought very much about before and didn't necessarily know how to organize.

The other thing was they were concerned, particularly in the case of Singapore which not only was trying to build up its own high-tech industry and, indeed, was a very security conscious government for a lot of reasons. But it was also a country that lived on trade. It was an entrepï¿½t and huge amounts of goods flowed through Singapore. Some of the things that we were asking for would have required a considerable amount of money and manpower, to monitor this enormous trade.

We had to try to convince them, and we succeeded to a good degree, that an uninhibited or unregulated amount of trade through Singapore could result in the leakage of a good bit of high technology through smuggling. The other thing that was harder for these countries to deal with was the question of technical data: plans, blueprints, descriptions, etc., of processes that could go to get into the wrong hands and be almost as valuable as a computer controlled lathe, for example, that might be used for the most advanced silent propellers for a submarine. We were trying to introduce these countries to somewhat new worlds and also to processes which could, indeed, cost them financially in terms of their annual trade in furtherance of objectives that they might have shared, but might not exactly have shared our Reagan administration enthusiasm for, for one thing. They also might very well have had doubts about the threat information that we were presenting to them in a number of cases.

Q: You mentioned the submarine propeller thing. Did the Toshiba incident happen on your watch?

O'NEILL: I'm trying to remember if it did. I think it did.

Q: You might explain what that was.

O'NEILL: It was a case where the Japanese conglomerate Toshiba sold computer controlled milling machines, machine tools to somebody, and I can't remember who....

Q: Maybe it was Sweden.

O'NEILL: It may have been. That was another problem that we faced throughout was that often times the initial seller was selling to a customer that was not within the Soviet bloc or otherwise under COCOM controls, and the seller might or might not have had any suspicions about the ultimate end use. In this particular case ,Toshiba sold these machines that could produce an advanced propeller design for a submarine to allow it to run more silently and therefore be less susceptible to sonar detection.

Anyway, ultimately as far as I can recall, and it's been quite a few years, I think the Soviets did get at least some of these machines from Toshiba. The Japanese government was for a long time a part of the COCOM arrangement, but they always had kind of a schizophrenic approach to the Soviet Union. On the one hand, Japanese-Soviet relations were often, perhaps usually, worse than U.S.-Soviet relations. In any case, they had this great fear of the Soviet Union. The Self Defense Force mission was almost totally directed toward the Soviet threat and a potential invasion of Japan during that whole period. Yet Tokyo was loath to take measures that would restrict to sales of high technology to what looked like legitimate users in countries outside the Soviet bloc.

Q: Did you have any dealings with U.S. government people who were dealing with India? India, I would think, with its close partnership with the Soviets would be sort of beyond the pale, wouldn't it?

O'NEILL: I'm glad you mentioned it because one of the things that at least one of the people in our office was very deeply involved with was negotiations with India and, again, DOD, the National Security Agency (NSA), Commerce, and the NSC staff and seemingly everyone else in the U.S. government was involved in this as well.

The issue was whether to approve the sale of a supercomputer to India for what they called the "monsoon project," a meteorological project to predict the monsoon which was, of course, of enormous importance to a country like India. There was a prolonged negotiation which to the best of my recollection lasted beyond my tenure in PM, and I think in the end it didn't go through. The idea was to sell what the U.S. government considered an IBM supercomputer. IBM kept maintaining that the computer at issue wasn't a supercomputer. That was a separate argument, the centerpiece of which was if it was not a supercomputer it would be subject to a lot less export control than one that was. Therefore, it was in IBM's interest that their exceedingly fast computer not be seen as a supercomputer.

The U.S. government's concern, of course, was that India would use it in their nuclear weapons program. So there was an interesting dynamic on the U.S. side which included a willingness at least in principle to sell or allow the sale of this IBM product to India.I recall that the talks with the Indians continued after I left in 1986 for Rangoon, but I think the deal fell through ultimately. Of course, we were trying to make sure at the same time that a company like NEC - Nippon Electric Corporation - would not sell its most advanced computer to the Indians in our stead.

Q: What was your impression during this time - this was '84 to '86 - of some of the major players and how they worked within COCOM: England, Germany, France, and Japan?

O'NEILL: As a general rule we tended to think of the Europeans, the continental Europeans anyway, as being relatively lax, certainly compared to our enthusiasms. I think the Japanese and the British were more amenable to our arguments and probably saw the Soviet Union more the way we did than the continental Europeans.

Of course, this was a period when Germany was still divided and where this was the Germany of Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik, his form of dï¿½tente with the Soviets and East Germany. That spirit was there even after he was the chancellor. The idea was the West Germans would live with and accommodate the Soviet Union, not to the extent of endangering themselves, but just looking realistically at the Soviet Union as a major figure on the European continent and one they had to deal with. They didn't want to antagonize the Soviets unnecessarily, and yet the West German government was still willing to engage with us in controlling certain strategic technology.

On the U.S. side, we were often hurt in our effort because of the wild exaggerations that sometimes came out of Richard Perle's shop at DOD. I'll give one example. An Italian company had a contract to install a ground control approach radar system at one of the Moscow airports. This had been licensed through COCOM. Again, one of the things that COCOM did was when there were questions about major sales of technology to a Soviet bloc entity, there was a review process for deciding whether the risk from such a sale was worth it. The ground control approach radar system had been approved as being appropriate for sale. It was in the process of being installed.

Perle's people always worked from the worst case scenario. That was the starting point for everything and then they seemed to work from there to "beyond worst case scenario." Well, his technological people put forward the idea that with minimal modifications, who knows - maybe telephone wire, duct tape and flashlight batteries - this ground control approach radar system could somehow become a part of the Russian anti-ballistic missile or ABM system . Perle, of course, leaped on this, and his immediate response was to send a letter - a rather stinging letter - to the Italian defense minister. As you know better than I from your service in Italy, the Italian cabinet was always made up of people who had been prime minister several times and would become prime minister several times in the future. The defense minister and I think it was Spadolini, but I'm not absolutely sure, was one such person.

Well, Perle sent off a harsh missive to him. We first heard about it when the defense minister called the American ambassador in Rome and says, "What is this?" Our ambassador at the time was Maxwell Rabb who was among other things been in the White House under Dwight Eisenhower, a staunch Republican of long vintage. He had no idea because we didn't know anything about it at all. So he was trying to find out from our European bureau and the political military bureau what was going on.

It took us as I recall several days before Perle's minions condescended to fax us over a copy of the letter of accusation. The first thing I saw before I even read the text was that DoD had misspelled the minister's name in the heading of the letter. That was not a good lead-in to the rest of the letter which accused the Italian company of helping the Soviets defend against a ballistic missile attack. That in a nutshell was what we were dealing with in the normal course of things within the U.S. Government.

Speaking of the Germans, one of the things that I got directly involved in was an ultimately successful attempt to create a U.S.-German memorandum of understanding on strategic technology controls that would bind them more closely to our thinking on COCOM while deferring somewhat at least to their views towards the Soviet Union.

I expended a good bit of effort within the U.S. interagency process to come up with a draft U.S.-German agreement. The interagency process included Customs, Treasury, Commerce, DIA, DOD, the Joint Staff, and National Security Council staff. If I didn't mention the CIA, they were very not only instrumental but also I thought very judicious at the way they looked at this whole business. Anyway, that was the amorphous entity in which I was working to get internal U.S. approval of a draft U.S.-German agreement.

In my draft I consciously built in things that I knew the Germans weren't going to like and I figured that we would negotiate out in the course of Part II which was actually negotiating with the Germans. I couldn't absolutely tell you that Part I, the intra-U.S. government negotiations, were more difficult than the one with the Germans. It's hard to say. It was exhausting, but ultimately I got a draft document which then leads to another example of how State took a backseat role to DOD in the business of technology controls.

The chief negotiator of this draft memorandum of agreement was none other than Richard Perle. His German counterpart was a man named Lorenz Schomerus, an assistant secretary-level official from their ministry of economics. To illustrate the German approach to strategic technology controls, it was not their foreign ministry or defense that had their lead, it was their economics ministry. Perle succeeded in reaching agreement with Schomerus, who was a typically sharp and smooth European official. Ultimately that agreement was signed by the German minister of economics Manfred Bangemann and Caspar Weinberger, not the U.S. secretary of state, but Caspar Weinberger! It became a stick that we could use to beat the Germans with if they were straying from our view of orthodoxy on strategic technology controls. I'll mention that this was the major reason I got my first Superior Honor award when I left PM/STA in 1986.

Q: Al, in government during the Reagan time there was nothing greater than the friendship between Caspar Weinberger and George Shultz. I'm saying that with a great deal of cynicism. Could you ever call Shultz in? I mean, did you have a feeling that you, not personally, of course. Was Shultz ever a factor in this?

O'NEILL: I certainly don't recall his being one, but the principal figure that we were dealing with on the State Department side was then still known as the Undersecretary of State for security assistance, science and technology, hence, T. At that time "T" was William Schneider. He was a political appointee; from Hudson Institute and naturally was very much a committed Reaganite. As T, he oversaw the PM bureau among others. I don't recall that anything that did or perhaps even could have gotten as far as Shultz.

Let me say I had the greatest admiration for Secretary Shultz and still do, not only for his diplomatic skills then and since, but also because he was one of those rare secretaries of state who actually realized that there was a department under him that he was responsible for. I am a great admirer of George Shultz, but I don't recall anything that was being battled out at his level in the issues that we were dealing with. He had plenty of pol-mil issues to deal with both regarding the Soviets, Weinberger and Perle, largely strategic arms control. I don't think he got down to our level, so to speak, on COCOM issues.

Q: The French, were they a factor?

O'NEILL: They were in a lot of ways. The French security services and their array of intelligence agencies were very alert to Soviet espionage. There was a very interesting development during that period. A Soviet intelligence officer who had the code name "Farewell" defected to the French or was acting as a double agent for the French. That person revealed the elaborate and extensive Soviet operations to gain prohibited high technology from throughout Europe and the West in general. When the information first came to the French and was passed to the U.S. and other intelligence organizations it was classified top secret. Then as part of the effort to publicize how dangerous the Soviets were in this realm, almost this entire top secret cache of information from "Farewell" was declassified and published by the U.S. in cooperation with the French.

On the other hand, there was an organization called the European Space Agency or ESA which included the Germans, the French, the Brits, and others. They were involved in space launch technology, the start of the space station, etc. As far as we were concerned they had no security at all on their missile technology information, their satellite information. I'm sure that was an exaggeration, but they certainly didn't have any sense of security urgency in the way that we did. We tried through COCOM to try and get the European Space Agency more attuned to the possibilities of technology leakage and outright theft. I don't recall that we had any particular success at all in tightening up their security against technology theft.

Q: This is about the time when DoD was publishing a book about the Soviets.

O'NEILL: Soviet Military Power.

Q: Soviet Military Power which was a gross exaggeration as I recall. Obviously there was a Soviet threat that was not to be discounted, but the fact was that you could take this publication and say in some cases it didn't pass the smell test.

O'NEILL: It was fascinating. I think I still have one or two copies of it just as a souvenir. This large glossy booklet, Soviet Military Power, was produced every year at least in the Weinberger years. It was sent in large quantities with great fanfare to all U.S. embassies to be distributed to foreign defense attaches and host government offices dealing with military affairs and the Soviets. In many parts, it was a gross exaggeration. The tendency in the book was to count everything that the Soviets had as being of the greatest military importance whether it was a tank or a ballistic missile, etc., then to essentially downplay the U.S. counterparts of that equipment. For example, it would look at vast numbers of tanks and ignore the fact that the Soviets still had many that were post-Korea vintage and were at least obsolescent. Nor do I think it made much mention if at all of Sino-Soviet hostility, their eastern flank. Indeed, the Soviets were prepared to invade the west if needed or if circumstances arose, but there was never a mention of the intense difficulties that the Soviets would have had in dealing with their Warsaw Pact allies like the Czechs, the Hungarians, the Poles and to a lesser extent the East Germans.

That was not a pamphlet that put much weight on NATO and the strengths that NATO brought to us and our other alliances, too, with Australia and Japan and Korea, etc. It was the U.S. vs. the Soviet Union on a world scale. I always considered it a DOD budget document as much as anything else. It was a way to say to Congress "We're just completely defenseless. You need to double our defense budget now and give us everything we want." It was emblematic of the time.

Q: It's probably a place to turn when you went to...after two years there?

O'NEILL: Right. I fled from the Department after 23 months to an assignment in Rangoon as the consular section chief. There were a lot of reasons for this. I had come into the Foreign Service as a consular cone officer. When I took the written exam in 1974, you had to take the functional field test in one of the cones. For a variety of reasons, I took it in the consular cone. I was ignorant of what the Foreign Service was and how it was structured, etc. I really had no familiarity with the Foreign Service. Anyway, I'd come in as a consular officer. As soon as my class entered in 1976 the personnel people told us that there was no cone system for junior FSOs which, in fact was untrue. Nonetheless, I had this consular cone designation all along, but I'd only done consular work in my very first year in Seoul. Thereafter I'd been either an ambassador's aide or a political officer of one stripe or another.

George Vest, one of the great directors general of the Foreign Service, had come up with the idea of a multi-functional promotion system for people who weren't often working in their specific cones. It was a way of reducing the rigidity of the cone system and allowing for a little bit of realism so a person could compete for promotions the outside of his specific cone under certain restrictions. Well, "the system" quickly grabbed hold of this and began putting into place implementing regulations which undercut George Vest's wonderful idea. I learned indirectly that he was quite frustrated by this development.

I realized several things. First, that I was not going to get promoted any further unless I did consular work after an absence of eight years. Two, I had not had a hardship assignment, and I thought the best thing to do would be to go to a hardship post that I wanted to serve in rather than have the Department send me to Lower Slobovia or Atlantis where I didn't want to serve. Rangoon was a 25% differential post, then the top hardship rating. Also, I wanted a section chief's job plus, as I mentioned, my father had been in Burma in the Army Air Forces at the end of World War II, and I'd grown up on Burma stories, hearing about places like Myitkyina, Shingbwiyang and Lashio. Once in 1945, my father was rescued from the jungle by Kachin tribesmen after he had to bail out of a crippled transport plane. As another factor, I knew from people who had served in Rangoon that the international elementary school was remarkably good despite its modest circumstances. The teachers were terrific, and as my son was going into seventh grade, this was another attraction. The upshot was that I got the assignment as consular section chief from 1986 to 1988.

It was a fascinating assignment in a lot of ways. People used to ask "What's the time difference between Bangkok and Rangoon?" The joke answer was 50 years. In fact, it was 30 minutes, because the Ne Win regime had decreed that time difference as one more way to separate Burma from its neighbors. Ne Win had been in power since 1963. He was very xenophobic and had pushed out all the foreign missionaries who had been in Burma since the 1800s, had pushed out almost all the foreign companies, at least the ones that were resident there as distinct from ones that might be operating on, say, Asian Development Bank or UN projects on a temporary basis.

My wife and son and I arrived in Rangoon in August 1986 at either the height or the depths of the rainy season depending on how you want to look at it. That year we had 120 inches of rain - 10 feet - in Rangoon from the beginning of June to the end of October which was not an unusual rainfall. Burma being a tropical country you had three seasons: dry, hot, and rainy in sequence.

Rangoon was a 25% hardship differential post largely because it was so isolated and because the military government was so restrictive but also there were major health hazards. If you think of central Africa as the health environment of Burma, you get a good picture. Almost every disease known to mankind was endemic there including things like polio and measles, not to mention typhus and malaria in areas north of Rangoon. For a variety of reasons, I had a lot of contact with the embassy doctor Eldon Bell. We used to talk about what I called the "comprehensive disease program." There was almost nothing you couldn't get except yellow fever which is a Western Hemisphere disease. So keeping yourself and your family from getting too sick too often was a major task, although everybody got sick fairly regularly. The idea was to manage the severity and the frequency of whatever illnesses you got.

The diseases we were concerned about were endemic among the Burmese. I once asked a Burmese pediatric surgeon about the main types of operations that he and his pediatric surgical colleagues performed. One was repairing cleft palates. Another category was children whose stomachs were so impacted by worms that they couldn't eat and would starve to death without surgery. Medical care throughout the country was rudimentary unless you were a senior military person or a senior member of the Burma Socialist Program Party in which case you might have pretty good medical care, but even that was dicey.

I became friendly with the Anglican archbishop of Burma who was an ethnic Karen, Archbishop Gregory Hla Gyaw. We had him and his wife over for dinner a couple of times. He used to see me with visa cases of at least reasonable merit. His bona fides added merit to the case, and that's how I first met him. He was a tragic example of the medical system there. Once I went one time to Bangkok to get some dental work done. We didn't dare get dental work done in Burma, and we would always go to the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group - JUSMAG - in the embassy in Thailand, which had a dentist. When I got back a week later from one trip Archbishop Gregory was dead.

He was diagnosed with an allegedly cancerous kidney. There was an operation to remove the kidney, which turned out not to be cancerous. While he was trying to recover in the hospital, he died, and that was that. He was I guess in his late 40's or so. It was really quite tragic. That kind of thing just happened all the time.

The whole business of having nannies taking care of kids was a health concern. Parents always had to be terribly concerned about what the nannies might feed the kids because for example kids got typhoid fever easily if they ate Burmese ice cream. Typhoid fever was a constant problem among the children at Embassy Rangoon.

At that time, of course, by the time I got there I'd spent two and a half years in Vietnam, two years in Korea and four in Japan, so I had a certain amount of experience with Asia. But the Rangoon experience opened whole new vistas. The Burma desk officer at the time referred to Burma as "the world's largest outdoor museum" because it was so locked in the past. You entered Burma from Bangkok by air because all the land borders of Burma, with Thailand, Laos, China, Bangladesh, and India were closed, because the Burmese government didn't control their border areas. They were all in the hands of either ethnic insurgent groups that had been fighting for autonomy since the 1940s or '50s or held by the Burma Communist Party in some parts of far northern Burma.

The many ethnic rebels did not want to overthrow the central government. They wanted to get the majority Burmans off their backs and have autonomy or independence in their traditional ethnic areas. These struggles had been going on decades before I got there, and were still going on after I left.

Burma was a fascinating place, and people who served in Rangoon at whatever time, when they find a fellow Rangoon survivor will talk about it for quite a while. This is partly because it didn't change very much no matter when you were there, and because it is so different from almost every place else they had ever served. It was and is a deeply Buddhist country. The overwhelming majority of all Burmese whether they were from the Burman majority or not, were Buddhists. Some of the other ethnic groups were Christian. For example, one of the major subgroups of the Karen ethnic group was largely Christian, partly because of American missionaries going back to the early 19th century.

Q: The name Seagraves sticks in my mind.

O'NEILL: Doctor Gordon Seagraves was a Christian medical missionary particularly among the Kachins of the northern highlands of Burma before and in the early years of World War II. He was still during his work as a medical missionary in 1942. When the Japanese invaded he retreated from Burma with American and Chinese and Burmese under the leadership of Lieutenant General Joseph "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell. Seagraves later wrote a book called Burma Surgeon about his work.

After he took power in 1962, General Ne Win established what he called Burma Socialist Program and Party the BSPP, and put forward the so-called "Burmese way to socialism." In many ways, in terms of the economic and political structure, all that differentiated Burma from communist countries was that Ne Win hated communists, and he decreed that Burma wasn't a communist country. In fact, one of his great rivals from years past was the Burma Communist Party which was largely either underground or in the jungle in the north in those years. However, in terms of his harsh one-party rule and economic autarky, it was difficult to distinguish the main structures of Burmese politics and economics from a communist country.

Ne Win was a charismatic figure, a very frightening figure for Burmese. Burmese almost never spoke his name. They normally just referred to him as Number One. He terrified most of the people who worked for him. By the time I got there in 1986 Ne Win had given up his position as the president of Burma and retained supreme leadership as chairman of the BSPP. The president, such as he was, was another general named San Yu, a man who gave new meaning to the word "nonentity." His job was to meet foreign dignitaries, which is one of the reasons why Ne Win ditched the job of president. He didn't want to do that. San Yu's other major function seemed to be to look on with rapt attention as Ne Win gave "necessary guidance" about something or other. A scene like that was usually the top photograph on the front page of the newspapers every morning. As you know, Kim Il-Sung used to give on-the-spot guidance, and his son still does. Well, Ne Win gave "necessary guidance," which was the same thing.

The embassy was relatively small - by U.S. standards. We had about 55 Americans I think. There was a combined political-economic section in addition to the consular section. The U.S. Information Service had a fairly large operation, mostly Burmese employees trying to get our word out to the Burmese population. AID, the Agency for International Development, had a pretty large presence there. There were not that many American AID officers but quite a large number of contractors throughout the country on projects like cooking oil production and cultivation of edible beans. There were also some projects that were, I think, largely funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in aquaculture, particularly shrimp farming, and a few road building projects.

Rangoon was an interesting place. It was, of course, very run down. There were many buildings that the British had put up. Rangoon had not been a Burmese capital. It was a British capital, founded by the British when they completed the takeover of Burma in a three-stage process from the 1820's through the 1880's. The traditional Burman capitals were up country in places like Pagan, Mandalay, and Ava, far from the coast and reached from the south only by boat up the Irrawaddy River.

The Burman kings were traditionally xenophobic just like Ne Win and his successor generals, and they wanted to keep themselves as far away from foreign influences as they could. In Rangoon, you were more likely to encounter large British style colonial building than you would in other parts of the country. Those buildings, whether they were government buildings, churches, or hospitals, etc., were still in use but were in great disrepair. They had been built long before the advent of air conditioning and it showed.

There was a small foreign community. If you totaled up the foreigners in Burma during that time, they probably didn't number more than a thousand or twelve hundred in the entire country, almost all in Rangoon. They were almost exclusively diplomats and UN personnel. UNDP and UNICEF were there. They had a lot of work to do.

The foreign community was quite close because it was so small and concentrated in Rangoon. You were always going to various embassies' parties. Most of the embassies were quite small. A lot of them like the Egyptian and Israeli embassies, for example, had just an ambassador and a single junior officer. We, the Japanese and the British had much larger embassies. The Koreans had a fair size embassy, partly because, as in the case of the Japanese, there were several Korean companies working on either road or dam building projects, UNDP or ADB-funded projects. Of course, the Japanese had equities there going back to World War II when they took over the country.

Most of my work in the consular section was fairly routine. We did a lot of non-immigrant visa work, almost exclusively for Burmese officials who were going to the United States on exchange programs of some kind. There were relatively few visitor visas because the Burmese were not allowed out of the country for visiting. Consular work in Burma gave you a good view into the oppressive nature of the Burmese government and the internal prejudices that were institutionalized in Burma. Basically, if you were of Bengali or Indian or Chinese or Perian descent in Burma, you were almost always considered a foreigner by law. It didn't matter how many generations you and your family had been in Burma. To be considered a natural-born Burmese citizen and to escape being designated as a foreigner, you had to have been born to an ethnic group that was within the borders of present-day Burma by 1823. Eighteen twenty-four was the first British invasion of Burma, the first of a succession of three invasions that ultimately resulted in the conquest of Burma. Anybody else was a foreigner.

Those foreigners had additional restrictions on their ability to move from one place in Burma to another, and that was really important because your residence certificate got you your ration card for your government allocation of cooking oil grain, etc. But even Burmese citizens had to resort to what we knew to be fraud, say, to visit somebody, a friend, or a relative in the States, because that person had to get a work passport to depart. In Burma there were only two types of ordinary passports. One was for emigration in which you'd be leaving Burma permanently, and the other was a "work passport" which would allow you to earn foreign exchange abroad which you would then bring back to enrich Burma. At one point in 1988 a couple of months before I left, Burma's total foreign exchange reserves amounted to a mere $13 million. That was it. So getting foreign exchange into the country was a big thing. The government was willing to do anything they could to earn foreign exchange. One of the most sought after jobs in Burma was as a merchant seaman or "shippy" as they were called. They were among the most eligible bachelors in Burma. Even cabinet members' sons wanted merchant seaman certificates to be able to get out of the country and earn foreign exchange. If merchant seamen were out of the country a certain number of months then they could import things like stereo equipment, maybe a motor cycle or motor bike, etc. If they were out longer they could perhaps even import a small used sedan, a Toyota or a little mini truck of some kind which they could convert into a taxi. They could hire somebody as a taxi driver and earn money from that. Being a merchant seaman was very desirable.

Other Burmese who wanted, say, to go to the U.S. to visit had to bring us a work passport with what we knew to be a fraudulent job offer of some kind what they had used to get the passport. Interestingly, too, in Burma the passport issuing authority was not the Foreign Ministry or even the Ministry of Justice. It was police special branch, the intelligence arm of the national police. That illustrated how the government viewed their citizens when they were trying to get passports.

Q: Did you learn to turn a blind eye on these fake documents?

O'NEILL: Absolutely. In fact, we would tell people, "Whatever you do, don't show it to the INS inspector at the port of entry. We know you're going as a visitor." We would give them combined business and visitor visas. That was the only way, and you really went into extra gyrations for people who were emigrating from Burma going to the U.S. as immigrants. Most of the immigrant visas that we issued were for brothers and sisters of American citizens or parents of American citizens. The Burmese government would tolerate emigration for ethnic Burmans and would issue a passport for that purpose, so we didn't usually have too much trouble with processing those. When it came to foreigners, say, Chinese or Indians, they couldn't get a passport because they were stateless. The only thing that the Burmese government would give them was ... I think it was called Foreigners Emigration Certificate. It was a large sheet of brown paper on which the person's passport photo was affixed. Printed on it in large letters was the main point: The bearer is "is leaving Burma for good," and would have no right of return to Burma under any circumstances, including the death of a parent. That was not a travel document as we know them, so we wound up having to get an U.S. INS waiver for those people.

Q: Was there a Burmese-American community anywhere?

O'NEILL: Nothing concentrated that I know of. I would guess in California there may well have been, but the concentration of Burmese of various different ethnic groups was not large. Most of the people who emigrated to my recollection were from the minority groups, mostly Karens, many of whom were Christians. The majority of the emigrants to my recollection were not ethnic Burmans but from the other groups: the Karens, the Kachins, Chins, and Mon, for example, and Chinese and Indians who had been born in Burma.

One of the people that I issued an immigrant visa to was the father of one of our FSNs, Foreign Service Nationals. He was a legendary figure, a Kachin, Major Duwa Shan Lone who had fought against the Japanese during WWII and was very highly decorated by the British. He had both their Distinguished Service Order and their Military Cross. The British were very stingy with decorations, even to British officers, and these were among their top military decorations for valor in combat. The DSO was for sustained valor over a long period of combat. The Military Cross was more likely given for a single instance of bravery. Major Shane Lone was a hereditary Kachin chief and his daughter Elizabeth worked for us in the embassy.

There were lots of vestiges of World War II around. There was a large British Commonwealth War Graves cemetery north of Rangoon Airport, and every year there would be a ceremony on November 11, Remembrance Day for the British, Veterans Day for us. The Commonwealth military attachï¿½s and the American military attachï¿½s and I would go and others would, too, for a small ceremony to commemorate the thousands who were killed in the Burma campaign in World War II. People who had served during World War II were all around. One of the clergymen that I knew was also another Karen, an Anglican canon whose name was John Matthews. Canon Matthews had been a chaplain with the British Army's Border Regiment during World War II. He was still with the Anglican Cathedral in Rangoon.

Let me speak a little bit about the American services part of consular work in Rangoon, which was quite strange. There were severe restrictions by the Burmese government on tourists and where they could go. At that time tourists could come into Burma for a week's stay normally. In those days about 42,000 tourists per year would come into Burma, from all countries. Americans were, oddly enough, the largest group, usually 5,000 to 6,000 out of the 42,000.

These folks would usually come in on the Thai International flight that flew three days a week. Sometimes they'd come in on Burma Airways Corporation, BAC, which had a total of three Fokker-28 twin jet, 60 passenger planes they used for their international flights. Very few airlines served Burma in those days outside of those two. The others were Nepal Airlines, Aeroflot, CAC the Chinese central airline, and Biman the Bangladeshi airline, so that didn't give you a lot of choice. If you wanted to be sure of surviving your flight, you flew Thai International. It was certainly then and perhaps is now one of the best airlines in the world. As you may imagine, BAC was not.

The American tourists were a mixed bag. Some of them were coming in on package tours and were taken around to the main tourist spots. Others were backpackers, and they would come in with a small amount of cash, their backpack, and several bottles of Johnny Walker Red and several cartons of 5-5-5 cigarettes, which was the real financing of their trip around Burma. They were still restricted to the seven day stay, but they were more likely to go out in the areas there the Burmese government prohibited foreigners to be, and that sometimes caused some problems for us.

One of the odd things about the Burmese situation was that a lost passport was not particularly the crisis that it was in other countries. To my recollection, every single stolen U.S. passport during those two years was ultimately mailed back to the embassy by the thief because what they were trying to steal was the camera or purse for the money. They weren't trying to steal the passport. It really had no value to them. When someone would come in and say, "My passport's been stolen along with my purse, my camera bag," it was, even if our computers were down, was pretty easy to figure out that the person was, indeed, an American. You could check with Burmese immigration. They were a little lethargic, but they were usually reasonably responsive. You could figure this out in no time and issue the person a new passport.

There were times when this adventurism on the part of backpackers would cause problems. One time an American tourist had along with I think two Austrians and another European had rented a Jeep with driver in Rangoon because they wanted to drive up towards Pagan, the great old capital along the Irrawaddy River. That was an area where foreigners were not allowed to drive to. The Jeep blew a tire and flipped over, broke the driver's back, killed at least one of the Europeans. The American had a broken pelvis and a number of broken ribs. He endured what I imagine was a wide-awake ambulance ride from the scene of the accident to Magwe, far from Rangoon, where we learned through Tourist Burma that the man was hospitalized. Amazingly, I reached the hospital by telephone and talked to the chief doctor who was very kind. He told me they were doing everything they could to take care of this American. Magwe was served once a week by a BAC Fokker-27 and fortunately, the next flight was in a day or two. They arranged not only to put him on the plane down to Rangoon but also had a nurse go with him. Nobody ever mentioned any expense, either for the nurse or the flight. Doctor Bell and I with a couple of Burmese from the embassy went out to Rangoon Airport to meet this character and take him to Rangoon General Hospital.

Rangoon General Hospital was this enormous sprawling sandstone confection put up by the British sometime I would guess in the 1880s or 1890s. It had multi-layers of dark red and lighter colored sandstone with pseudo-Mogul architectural flourishes here and there. Alas, the British did not put in screens or window glass, nor had the Burmese thought to do this in the 40 years or so since the British had left.

As we were bundling the man out of the embassy van and getting him into a wheelchair to move him into the ward, I looked down one of the open corridors in the hospital, and I saw this little dog which aroused itself from its nap, shook itself off, and wandered farther down the corridor. We got him upstairs, and as you're going up the wide stone staircases in Rangoon General, you pass family members who are camping out in the hospital hallways and stairs because they have to provide food to the family members who are patients. As we were going down one ward, we saw birds flying around inside and geckoes on the wall. We were being helped by the local representative of Tourist Burma a wonderful fellow, Saw Nimrod Paw, a Karen and a Baptist. He kept saying "Don't worry. All the nurses on this ward are Karens. They'll take great care of him."

The next morning I went back to bring the man some magazines. As I was approaching the nurse's station ahead of his ward, a kitten ran out of the head nurse's office and jumped into a drawer of the desk in front of the office. I went on past and there was our man and, indeed, there were two or three Karen nurses with him. Saw N. Paw was hovering over him making sure he was all right.

Fortunately despite the broken pelvis and the cracked ribs, the American was able to sit up and so we were able to get him on the next Thai International flight to Bangkok and out of my consular district. I never again heard a word from him. No note of thanks to Eldon Bell or to the Tourist Burma people who helped him. To the best of my knowledge, he was never billed for the flight down to Rangoon, for the nurse, or anything else. The Burmese could be extremely nice people.

Q: You keep mentioning being assured there were Karen nurses. Was this significant?

O'NEILL: Well, Saw N. Paw was just trying to assure us that this American would be well taken care of. I didn't infer from him that a Burman nurse would have treated him badly or anything like that. It's just that was his way of assuring us that this American would be in good hands, since he was a Karen too.

Burma's just a very strange place. Of the 21 years that I spent in Asia, it was the strangest place that I ever lived. Fascinating in its own way, but it certainly had its trials and restrictions. Again, the threat of various fascinating tropical diseases was very real. One embassy personnel officer came down with amoebic dysentery and was quite disabled for a long time. An embassy secretary got hepatitis which was omnipresent in Burma in various forms. Many Burmese died of hepatitis. My wife got one of the many kinds of typhoid, which made her quite sick and once my son had intestinal worms and later a serious rash caused by bug bites. As I mentioned, typhoid fever was also a common problem among the embassy's children and there were so many varieties in Burma that inoculations were of no real use.

Rabies was something you had to be constantly aware of. Nobody among the local population ever had pets, but there were stray dogs all over the place, and rabies was endemic. I remember one of my colleagues saying he was going to go play tennis at a nearby court, and as he got to the gate of his house, on the other side there was a very wobbly looking dog with foam dripping out of his mouth, so he cancelled the tennis game for that day. One of the servants on the embassy housing compound in which I lived was Albert the Snake Catcher. He was an expert at collecting all the various forms of snakes that there were on the compound which was a handy skill. There were a lot of them, and in Burma there were very dangerous types like cobras, kraits, and Russell's vipers.

Q: What about your son? This must have been anxious for you all.

O'NEILL: It was something everybody thought about and you just kind of tried to prevent problems by being watchful. He was a seventh and eighth grader, and a particularly mature one. He was quite alert to that kind of thing. Younger kids would not necessarily be.

Speaking of the elementary school, one of the interesting things was that International School in Rangoon's - ISR - faculty was largely Burmese. They had an American principal. That was an example of the Burmese cooperating in circumventing a regulation that they had made. You couldn't openly hire an expatriate principal for an international school, so we had to hire an American, usually a person whose spouse was also a qualified teacher. The State Department would give that person an official passport, a maroon passport as the U.S. embassy's "education attachï¿½" and wife would be the assistant attachï¿½ for education. They were so listed on the Rangoon diplomatic list. The Burmese had to know what it was all about because the Burmese military intelligence apparatus was omnipresent and yet they played along. That was part of the weirdness of Burma.

The Burmese teachers at ISR were by and large wonderful. They had grown up in the British education system, and they imbibed all that. Things like elocution contests were part of the curriculum. I want to tip my hat to the British in the field of education. The ISR faculty recognized that there was almost nothing safe for kids to do in Rangoon outside of the school environment or the embassy compound environments, and so they really went all out to arrange all sorts of activities to keep the kids occupied and interested. This included a science fair every year and the elocution contest I mentioned which was a big deal at the elementary school level. Finalists were judged in a competition in the U.S. Embassy Club, and there were trophies for the winners.

The school faculty really stepped up to their unusually manifold responsibilities, which was one of the things that drew me to Rangoon. Then there were school trips here and there to Upper Burma, to places like Pagan, Mandalay, and Taunggyi. It was really a terrific experience for my son and also a real eye-opener for him because he was old enough to realize the difference between the way we lived and the way the overwhelming majority of Burmese lived which was in real hand-to-mouth poverty.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

O'NEILL: I had two ambassadors and two DCMs. When I got there the ambassador was Daniel O'Donohue, a long time East Asia hand. He was succeeded after a year by Burton Levin who was a China hand, who had also been DCM in Bangkok.

Q: How did you find Daniel O'Donohue because I've heard he doesn't have the greatest reputation by people who worked under him? I was wondering what you thought of him.

O'NEILL: He was an extremely intelligent person, but he was not a good leader. Usually when we would be in discussion with him, whatever the subject, he started off his response by saying, "You're not thinking...," and then he would elaborate. It didn't matter who he was speaking to, including his DCM. He was a micro-manager to say the least. And he would, as I recall, approve every single cable that went out of the embassy regardless of the subject. Eventually, as the consular section chief I gained his confidence to the degree that I could sign out on my own the cables that returned immigrant visa numbers to the Department at the end of every month.

Q: Which is as routine as it comes.

O'NEILL: I don't recall that anybody else had that amount of liberty and leeway in signing out cables. That had a distinctly negative effect on embassy morale. As I say, he was very smart. He had a good grasp of the Burmese situation, and he was very energetic.

Q: Was Aung San Suu Kyi a factor while you were there?

O'NEILL: She arrived in May of '88 just months before I left. She had been at Oxford for years, having married a Brit who was a professor of Tibetan studies. They had two sons. She was the daughter of Aung San the great Burmese independence hero who had been allied with the Japanese. When the British reinvaded under General Bill Slim in '44 and '45, Aung San told the Japanese that he was marching his Burma Independence Army northward to confront the British. They said, "Great idea." He went off and promptly surrendered his forces to General Slim. Slim said to him, "You're just doing this because you know we're going to win," and Aung San, who then was a very young man said, "You're right. Absolutely." This won Slim over very quickly. Believe it or not, the day Aung San marched off to surrender to Slim was still celebrated as Burmese armed forces day.

Sadly, Aung San was assassinated by a right-wing rival before he could become the first prime minister of an independent Burma. That was a real disaster because Aung San, though he was from the Burman ethnic majority was one of the very few Burmans, and certainly one of the few Burman political leaders, who had actually won the confidence of the Chins, Karens, Kachins and Mons and all the rest of the minority peoples of Burma. Had he lived and become prime minister there is every reason to believe that the history of Burma would have been quite different from the mess that it has been.

Aung San's daughter was their only child, the only one I ever heard of, anyway. In May 1988 her mother became terminally ill in her 80s. Aung San Suu Kyi came back for that purpose and then in a couple of months got caught up in the democratization movement, which she has inspired ever since. The embassy was aware that she had arrived...

Q: But she wasn't a factor.

O'NEILL: There was nothing for her to be a factor in, so to speak, at that point, although... I shouldn't quite say that. She had no intention of getting absorbed into the Burmese political scene that I'm aware of. This is kind of jumping to the end of the story a little bit, but she arrived at a time when Burma was going through a cycle of major demonstrations of increasing intensity and decreasing duration between the episodes. We'll get into that later, but she was not the political factor that she became starting the month after I left.

We'd jumped to May of '88. Let me mention just a couple of things that I got involved in, my major preoccupations, one of which was this increasing cycle of violence which ultimately led to the major blowup in August of '88, the month after I left Burma; the month that I arrived in Seoul.

Repression was the norm in Burma for decades under Ne Win, and one of the things that the government without warning on the first Saturday in September 1987 was to demonetize most of the currency. Some years before, I think it was in 1985, the largest currency note was 100 kyat which was demonetized by decree. At the official rate it was about $16.00. Ne Win established the official rate at 6.25 kyat per dollar, which was a basically meaningless figure. But he decreed that there was no inflation in Burma, so he set the kyat rate. When we arrived, the so-called "free market" rate was about 27 or 28 kyat to the dollar and when we left two years later it was about 40-45 kyat per dollar. There had been rumors for quite a few months in '87 of another demonetization but nobody knew what was going to be demonetized or when.

Q: When you say demonetize...

O'NEILL: To demonetize meant that the certain currency notes would be declared no longer legal tender, would be scrap paper. It would be like the U.S. government saying that the 100 dollar bill was no longer of any value.

Without warning, these rumors would peak and then peak and fall, and then peak and fall. At one of the troughs in this rumor cycle the Burmese government struck, on the first Saturday in September in 1987. What they did was vastly more sweeping than they had done before with the 100 kyat note which was never replaced. They demonetized the top three remaining currency notes: the 75, 35 and 25 kyat notes were immediately no longer legal tender. This left the 15, 10, and five kyat notes, and the rest were just coins. To make it even worse, the decree said there would be no restitution for the demonetized notes. If you had those valueless notes, they were simply compost.

When they demonetized the 100 kyat in 1985, ordinary people could turn in 100s and get a 75 and a 25, for example, in return. No restitution this time. The only concession was that the government would pay the army and the civil service their August pay - which they had just received - in legal tender: 15, 10, and five kyat notes. But for everybody else it was too bad.

Obviously, all the embassies had large holdings of these demonetized notes. The embassies collectively went to the foreign ministry and that it would violate the Vienna Conventions if the embassies were not reimbursed. Ultimately the Burmese government had to acquiesce in the embassies' taking duffel bags full of demonetized paper down to the Myanmar Central Bank (as it was even called in those days), to be exchanged. The demonetization, particularly the brutality of simply wiping out people's savings which they didn't put in banks, began a process that led to a real explosion over the following year, followed by even greater repression.

It happened that that weekend I was the control officer for a group of senate staff members. I think they were from a subcommittee on refugees. On the Saturday of the demonetization announcement, I was supposed to take them out for lunch at a Burmese restaurant which was a very hazardous thing to do in and of itself, but nonetheless, we were going to do it. (Hazardous for health reasons.) In Rangoon restaurants, you always brought your own ice, forks and spoons and chopsticks, and the restaurateurs, if they minded, didn't indicate that they did. Anyhow, I told the owner that we didn't have any valid Burmese currency. Could I give them U.S. dollars? He said that was against the law and he was afraid to take them. I showed him my diplomatic ID and said I would give him whatever the kyat equivalent was in the coming week which I did. Our visitors got an instant introduction to Burma.

Following this whole brutal demonetization process, anti-government ferment was bubbling below the surface. However, it got promptly overlaid in my life by something entirely different, my biggest American services case. Early every morning, seven days a week, a twin engine 44 passenger Fokker-27 turboprop would take off from Rangoon and make a circular flight to Pagan to Mandalay to Taunggyi, then back to Rangoon. It would repeat the circuit in the afternoon. On the Sunday of Columbus Day weekend 1987, that morning flight hit a ridge near Pagan, in fact, the only elevation anywhere near Pagan, which was on the broad Irrawaddy plain. The plane flipped over and went down the ridge killing all 49 people on board including 14 Americans.

This started something that carried me through the remaining nine months of my time in Rangoon. Under normal circumstances a plane crash, even a relatively small one like this, would be a tragedy. It was an extremely complicated major tragedy in the case of Burma. None of the Americans had any relatives or contacts in Burma. In fact, most of them were travel agents or tour guides mostly from California who were being invited by one of the big tourist agencies in Bangkok to look at Burma as another tourist destination. In addition to the Burmese crew and Burmese passengers including a baby which was the 49th person killed, there were 14 Americans. There was also one Thai and there were Australians, Swiss, Germans, French and Brits, 36 foreigners in all.

Unfortunately there was one local connection. Heather Harvey, the Australian vice consul, lost her father and stepmother in that crash. She had seen them off that morning at the airport. Heather was devastated and had to be flown back to Australia right away. From Ambassador Burton Levin to Chris Szymanski the DCM, to the defense attachï¿½'s office, everybody was extremely helpful to me. Eldon Bell, the doctor and the GSO people-General Services Office people who dealt with logistics matters - were tremendously helpful to me in sorting out what was a real mess. Because we had the largest number of foreigners involved and could call on outside resources, we were the ones that had the lead for all the embassies.

The bodies and everything else, the plane, personal effects, etc., were in central Burma outside Pagan in an inaccessible place. The people who did get to it first were the local villagers, followed by the police. The police got the bodies over to Pagan airport from which Burma Airways flew the bodies down to Rangoon on the afternoon of the next day. We were immediately in contact with the American citizen services office in the Department's bureau of consular affairs to get help. We had no idea who the U.S. victims were, first of all, and we were trying to find that out from immigration records and flight manifests on that Sunday. We learned very quickly that there were numerous errors in the flight manifest both in terms of names and their alleged nationality.

The two planes with the bodies on them came down on Monday, the next day, and when they approached, consular officers from different embassies were on the tarmac with police and army officers and other officials. The smell of the bodies just came wafting over us as the planes pulled up. I don't know how the crews could stand the 45 minute flight down from Pagan, but they did.

About 40 hours elapsed between the time of the crash and the time the very first bodies got refrigerated at all. Of course, the condition of the bodies was very bad. You can imagine: the plane flipped over on its back and then went down a nearly mile-long ridge so the bodies were in extremely bad shape. A lot of them were decapitated. The only good thing was everybody died instantly. They could barely have had any idea that anything was wrong when the left wingtip clipped the ridge. It was a mess, trying to identify all the bodies, the different national views on what constituted identification, starting with the Burmese and going through the Swiss and others, as well as the complications of dealing with the Burmese government. I think there were five ministries involved including Foreign Affairs, Transportation, Health, Home and Religious Affairs (which included police and immigration).

The command from Ne Win to the Burmese officials was that those bodies which they had gotten on Monday would be identified by Tuesday morning at 6 o'clock. Despite a lot of flaws in their procedures, the Burmese did some very useful work, Tourist Burma and the police in particular. Not all the bodies had hands, you realize, but in those cases where they could, they took fingerprints, and that proved to be enormously helpful later.

Under that order from "Number One," the working level officials brought to the morgue at Rangoon General the Tourist Burma ladies who had helped see the plane off at the airport that morning to help identify these bodies which, of course, produced nothing of any use. By six on Tuesday morning they told us the foreigners were all identified. Almost all the so-called identifications that they did under such duress were proved totally erroneous in the following weeks.

Meanwhile, we were working through the State Department to get FBI fingerprint experts out of Washington and also army forensic identification specialists from CILHI, the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii. They normally worked on identification of war remains from World War II, Vietnam, Korea, etc. We were dealing with deep suspicions on the part of the Burmese that these U.S. officials were coming in to investigate them or to investigate the crash itself which they considered their sovereign responsibility.

We were constantly hampered, among other things, by the fact that it was not unusual to take two and a half hours to get a phone call through to the States. Burma had a manual phone system. You had to contact an international operator from your house to start the call. Getting cut off in mid-call was not unusual, which added to the frustration. While there were certain things that we could do by cable, there were things that we really needed to do by phone.

At one point, we lost track of the FBI team of five or six forensic experts and a special agent. They were supposed to arrive on Monday a week after the crash. We didn't know where they were and nobody else knew either. All of a sudden they showed up on the Thai International flight on Tuesday. They had managed somehow to get hold of a Burmese embassy officer in Bangkok after hours which was an extraordinary achievement, get visas, and get into Burma.

They came in, though, with a video camera which was a normal tool of their forensic work. One of Ne Win's decrees was that no video cameras could be brought into the country by anybody for any reason. Right there in the airport, we got into a great discussion with the Burmese officials over what to do. Ultimately, we agreed that the FBI camera had to be impounded at the airport but they would allow a Burmese state television crew to go to the mortuaries to tape their identification work. In other words, bless their little hearts, the Burmese did find a way for the FBI people to do what they normally did in these crash situations, but they just didn't do it the way we originally planned.

The CILHI, the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii sent two experts, one of whom was the Army's only forensic dentist, and a civilian woman who was a forensic anthropologist. They did amazing work and so did the FBI people. We were encountering endless difficulties with the various Burmese bureaucracies over all sorts of things. When the bodies were removed from the crash site, none had any identification on them at all. They had no wallets, they had no passports. I was initially surprised at this when Dr. Eldon Bell and I first met with the police surgeon at Rangoon General Hospital, to start discussing what could be done about identification. By the way, Eldon brought with him a couple of boxes of ordinary surgical latex gloves as a little present for Dr. Bah Choon, the police surgeon (the chief of forensics). He said "This is a precious gift." I'll never forget the words.

We learned later was that the first villagers on the scene had looted all the bodies, so there were passports and wallets and ID cards scattered all over the crash site. Eventually we got all those effects, or at least most of them, but there was no association between body X and a passport and wallet.

Over the next several weeks the identification process went on even after the American experts left. One thing they did which both showed their professionalism, the FBI and Army, and also helped grease the skids a great deal, is that they invited the Burmese counterpart experts involved in every part of the process. Another helpful thing was that most of the American dead were from California, and the Department of Motor Vehicles had taken fingerprints as part of the licensing process. For the Californian victims, once we got those fingerprint records that was a big help.

The foreigners had come from a stay in Thailand and had left a lot of luggage in the famed Oriental Hotel in Bangkok. With the help of our embassy in Bangkok, the FBI got permission to go into their luggage at the Oriental. They were able to bring out things like airline menus and other paper items from specific identified baggage. They lifted fingerprints off those menus, and using the fingerprint records that the Burmese had taken the night that the bodies came down from Pagan, they were able to identify quite a number of American victims. Others were eventually identified by dental records where such existed. Some of the bodies did have intact jaws, fortunately. It was relatively easy to rule out a number of the Burmese simply by dress if nothing else. The air crew's uniforms and bodies in longyis (sarongs) put them in the Burmese category.

Throughout the months we dealt with the crash, we got absolutely crucial support from the embassy in Bangkok, especially the consul general in Bangkok, David Lyon and his ACS - American Citizen Services - staff. David offered Ed Wehrle, one of his ACS officers, to help out for about a week, without my asking.

In any case, we had huge problems on the diplomatic side, because of the wildly different standards of identification among the various embassies involved. Frankly, the Swiss simply wanted ashes in urns, and they didn't care what whose they were or where the ashes had come from. They wanted ashes in urns with the name of each Swiss on it, and that was it. There was no resident Swiss embassy in Rangoon. Initially they sent a vice consul from Bangkok to be on hand for a bit.

As it happened, Phil Henry, my Australian counterpart, and I went out together to Kyandaw Cemetery which is where the main crematory was and also the mortuary where some of the bodies were kept. We happened to run into this young Swiss officer, and I just casually asked him, "How long do you plan on being here?" He said, "As soon as I get all the Swiss cremated, I'm going back to Bangkok." I said, "Nobody is going to be cremating anybody until all the embassies are completely satisfied that the identifications are as certain as possible." Phil said, "You're right, mate." We thought that was clear.

A day or so later I was trying to find this young Swiss officer, and I called an Anglo-Burman named Leo Nichols. He acted as the honorary consul for a number of the Nordic embassies and the Swiss and others who didn't have a resident embassy there. When I asked how I could talk to the Swiss officer Nichols said that he was at Kyandaw cemetery supervising cremations.

You know the expression "speechless with rage?" Well, I was speechless with rage, and as you can tell I'm a very voluble person normally. I ran upstairs, burst in on the ambassador and the DCM, and when I could actually speak, I said what was going on. Ambassador Levin said, "Go to the cemetery." Before I got out the door I could hear the DCM Chris Szymanski yelling at the Burmese chief of protocol at the foreign ministry. I raced out to the cemetery; came jumping out of the car. The Swiss officer was nowhere to be found, fortunately for him. There was a Burmese official from the Rangoon city government who was actually a major in the Burmese army.

I identified myself and demanded that the cremations completely stop. Some of the bodies had been cremated already because of this Swiss intervention, and we later confirmed that some of them were Germans and some Americans. Within that potential horror, there was some good news: in the case of the Americans who were cremated by order of the Swiss and with the acquiescence of the Burmese, all turned out to be people whose families eventually wanted cremation. So we had dodged a gigantic bullet. All the families of the 22 non-Americans wanted cremation. In the end, there were four American families who insisted that the bodies be returned, four out of 14. Fortunately, none of them had been cremated by order of the Swiss.

One of the four was the wife of an Air Force officer who had been a POW in North Vietnam for many years. There were two things in his case: he was a Catholic, and because his wife had stuck by him all those years that he was a POW, he felt a particular need to have her body returned for burial. The identification process lasted longer than the FBI and CILHI people could stay but they were able to do a lot of their identifications from afar. The Swiss were really irritated that this process was taking so long. In fact, they sent a consul, a higher ranking official, from Bangkok to hurry the process along.

I encountered him out at Kyandaw Cemetery when I was there for the cremations of some Americans, and he complained that it was "a scandal" that the identification process was taking so long. My response, which we put in a cable to Bangkok and the State Department, was that the only scandal was the Swiss behavior in the face of the desires of the British, the French and the Germans, not to mention the Australians and Heather Harvey. Heather got her chance at this Swiss consul a bit later. After she returned from her emergency leave following the death of her father, she was at the Foreign Ministry with this same Swiss embassy officer and the rest of us. When he had the gall to repeat his complaints about delayed identification, Heather said, "You wouldn't even care if they cremated a goat or a cow and put the ashes in an urn and sent it back." By that time everybody felt the same about the Swiss.

In the end, we did send back four embalmed bodies, as best we could. We got four international transfer cases from Embassy Bangkok to ship them. They also sent us embalming fluid because there was none in Burma. Poor Eldon Bell, the embassy doctor, one of his nurses and a couple of people from the general services office had the truly grim task of trying to get embalming fluid into what was left of these bodies. Afterwards Eldon told me this wasn't what he went to medical school for, but he and his staff did what was needed in terrible circumstances. Indeed, the families were quite grateful.

Q: I was thinking this would be a good place to stop. I would like to ask you the next time there may be something else you want to talk about but also your impression of the military elite.

Q: This is a continuation of the interview with Al O'Neill. Today is the first of October 2008. Al, let's talk about... You've already talked about the disposition of bodies after the crash. What sort of things does one have to do afterwards? I mean getting the effects together, sorting things out.

O'NEILL: There was a great deal of that. From the very first meetings we had with the Burmese - the afternoon of the crash which was Sunday, October 11, 1987 - we consular officials from the various embassies who were meeting at the Foreign Ministry emphasized first the need to get the remains back to Rangoon, which the Burmese were already working on. The other thing we emphasized and had to go at repeatedly was the question of effects. We eventually got many effects back. They were all brought to the Foreign Ministry in jute sacks, and we were trying to sort out the jumble of belongings. Keep in mind not only was the crash site chaotic because the plane flipped over and went down a ridge for several hundred yards but the villagers who got to the crash site first looted all the bodies and presumably got a number of valuables. The sacks of effects were soaked in hydraulic fluid from the airplane, so they had this strong oily smell. We were trying, of course, among the various embassies there - we, the French, the Australians, the British, the Germans - to see if we could figure what belonged to whom. Oddly enough in the case of the effects there was a surprising amount of foreign currency, marks, dollars, etc. Since the site was looted that surprised me, but it was illegal for Burmese to have foreign currency, so that was perhaps a motivation for people to turn the currency in. I think the embassies collectively agreed to give the money to charity.

As the identification process wore on we were able to confirm the sad news for individual families, Americans and other foreigners, one after another. One American woman, however, was distressed that we were still unable to identify her sister's remains and insisted that she would go to Rangoon herself. I had several phone conversations and also sent her cables through the State Department. I couldn't say, "Do not come," but I was certainly trying to dissuade her from trying to make the trek to Rangoon because she would have been so traumatized by what we were dealing with on a daily basis.

In the back of my mind I was fairly sure which unidentified remains were her sister's, and it turned out I was correct. In this case the FBI had no fingerprints available, no fingers to take fingerprints from, and there was nothing from which to make a dental identification. Providentially, the dead woman had broken her leg at some time, and her sister in California provided an X-ray which the Army forensic anthropologist was able to match with an X-ray of the remains' legs, and sure enough she was the one.

After probably six weeks, the FBI and CILHI forensic experts had done as much as they could with identifying remains. By that time, they had conclusively identified 31 of the 36 foreigners, including all 14 Americans. The other embassies, except the Swiss, were very grateful for the U.S. effort. The British ambassador, Martin Morland, wrote our ambassador that it was typically American that we continued the identification after all the Americans were identified. It was a terribly sad business from beginning to end.

There was also the separate business of cremated remains which stayed in the consular section in urns for a great while, as family members were arranging payment to send the remains back.

The consular paperwork on each of the 14 deaths, the FAA investigation, the International Civil Aviation Organization investigation, claims against Burma Airways Corporation, and attempts to figure out what personal effects belonged to whom and which family members wanted such effects sent back to them, took much of my time for the remainder of my tour in Burma through July of 1988.

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) based in Montreal, a UN specialized agency, did a report on the crash. I couldn't find a copy of the ICAO web site when I was looking recently, but it came down on the judgment of pilot error because there was no apparent mechanical failure with the airplane, and the pilot was just inattentive. He had just flown the mission too often, wasn't really paying attention to what he was doing. I knew from the wife of another Burma Airways Corporation pilot that he and other crewmen had been out partying the night before and this was a flight that left Rangoon at 6:45 in the morning. They just weren't paying attention, and they hit the only ridge in the whole area.

With that report of pilot error, if family members in the U.S. hadn't already been insisting on compensation from BAC, they began either directly or through lawyers to do so. As I recall, most of the 14 families did. There were these little ancillary tragedies, too. One of the American victims was, I think, probably in her 60s. Her husband died within months after the crash, and the daughter wrote me that it was the loss of his wife that put him over the edge. That whole question of compensation was still going on when I left Burma in July of 1988, eight, nine months after the crash. As far as I can recall, we had wrapped up everything else to the extent we could.

There were lots of other things going on in Burma. I spoke about the demonetization of what amounted to 80% of the currency on the first Saturday of September of 1987, a month before the crash. That produced a rising tide of unrest which resulted in the closing of the universities in the days immediately after demonetization. There were larger demonstrations, including one in mid-March that resulted in quite violent rioting throughout Rangoon. That started in a large park called Maha Bandoola Park right across the street from the chancery and it rapidly spread out throughout downtown Rangoon.

The ambassador and others of us got up on the roof of the chancery which, incidentally, was a building that had been built by an Armenian banking firm called Balthazar Brothers in either the late 19th or early 20th century. It was directly on Merchant Street. There was absolutely no set-back from the crumbling sidewalk at all. We were up top watching as rioters and riot police and everybody else were running in all different directions. Among other things, we could see that the main department store in downtown Rangoon - People's Department Store Number One - was set on fire which destroyed the only escalator in the entire country.

We had quite a time getting everybody home as the riot subsided. We were helping to drive our Burmese FSNs back to their houses in a situation where public transportation had totally broken down. The phone system was destroyed partly by the rioters but also as usual the government put it out of commission as a means of stopping people from communicating with each other.

That March riot in Rangoon prompted the State Department to send out an emergency action team to do some emergency action drills with us over a three or four day period. The drills were actually very helpful, partly in pointing out equipment that we did not have and needed to insist on getting. We had very poor radios; they were not very portable, and they were not very numerous. They were mostly kept in our houses which you would want to do in any case because you had family members scattered all over Rangoon, so there was a clear need for radios at home. We did not have nearly enough radios for embassy vehicles or our own cars.

Another thing the exercise brought home was essentially incurable but very important in any emergency evacuation scenario from Rangoon. This is that if you drew a line from the chancery building on Merchant Street almost at the southern tip of Rangoon straight north to Rangoon Airport, that line would either go through or very closely approach every one of the embassy housing areas, the ministry of national defense, Ne Win's house, and many other military installations and also the International School ofRangoon. A month after I left, this situation did produce significant problems. It was more or less incurable. You couldn't change where the defense ministry and all these military installations were.

Q: How would this cause a problem?

O'NEILL: Well, because the military installations were going to be centers not only of demonstrations but also places from which, as it turned out, the military was dispatched to shoot down demonstrators in the street. They were peaceful demonstrators in the case of the August '88 events, an uproar that really got Western media attention. Also, it was just going to make it much more difficult to assemble convoys because, and I knew from my experience in March and later in June, that the Burmese army units when they would deploy would not be very communicative and would be operating on orders that you didn't understand. They were units of uneducated peasant soldiers with G-3 automatic rifles and in some cases little armored cars with .50 caliber machine guns on them. They were focusing on their fellow Burmese and you didn't know what exactly they were going to do. It was a pretty touchy situation. The soldiers, including their commanders, were not terribly educated people. It just added to the uncertainties and the complications.

These riots and demonstrations got increasingly violent. In March, there was one incident where male high school students were peacefully marching on Prome Road which is the main north-south road. They were near the national assembly building and across from the great Shwe Dagon Pagoda, one of the big symbols of Burma, that huge golden domed pagoda. When the police broke up the demonstration by driving trucks into those peaceful students, they killed and injured quite a number. I don't know how many. Later that day in different parts of Rangoon, five policemen were attacked at random and killed on the street by Burmese citizens retaliating against this atrocity. Those policemen's bodies were collected in a police van and taken to Rangoon General Hospital. That van was also attacked and set on fire with the policemen's bodies inside, killing the driver as well. There was a tremendous sense of public outrage at the way the Burmese government was dealing with these demonstrations, particularly the riot police.

Interestingly, and in contrast with the way things later panned out, in March the Army got great credit for restraining the riot police and rescuing students because the riot police were just going around the streets of Rangoon beating anybody who looked to be of student age. In one case they beat to death the daughter of a famous Burmese actor. She was a university student, and the riot police set upon her and beat her to death on the street. It got worse in June; so the pattern from September-March-June was instances of widespread increasing violence at decreasing time intervals. The June 1988 unrest resulted in a curfew in Rangoon and the other major cities from dusk to dawn which was still in effect when my family and I left in July to go to my next assignment in Seoul.

Another affair that I was involved was somewhat peculiar to Burma. There was a group of 23 Vietnamese who were actually Sino-Vietnamese; in other words, Vietnamese who were ethnic Chinese from North Vietnam or what had been North Vietnam. They at some point had been resettled by the UN as refugees in southern China. These men decided that they didn't want to stay in China. They wanted to go to the West. Knowing Laos was communist they went northwest out of southwestern China over Laos and into northern Burma where they were immediately apprehended by Burmese immigration and imprisoned. That meant essentially a life sentence for being an illegal immigrant. There was one who had relatives in the U.S., a fellow named Trieu Vy Sinh. Sinh's family in San Francisco began lobbying to get him humanitarian parole into the United States.

Even before this, the French ambassador, a humane man named Yves Rodrigues was lobbying the Burmese government, saying that France would take all 23 of them temporarily and then figure out places for them to go. The Burmese didn't agree because as best we could figure out, they didn't want Burma to become a magnet for Vietnamese refugees in transit. Ambassador Rodrigues was dealing with the minister of Home and Religious Affairs who was in charge of the police, the immigration service and the prisons as well as being the overseer of the state religion, Theravada Buddhism.

Ambassador Rodrigues kept working and working. In the meantime, we got word from the NSC staff in Washington that became the catalyst for a grant of humanitarian parole to bring to Trieu Vy Sinh into the States. We were trying to get the Burmese government to let him out and assured them that we would take all responsibility for his transportation to the U.S. and that he would never darken Burma's door again.

This led us down a very Byzantine path. Sinh was in Insein Prison, Insein being a district in northern Rangoon. This was perhaps the most notorious prison in Burma, the Abu Ghraib of Burma if you will. He wasn't there for a political reason, so he was not being tortured or mistreated other than just being in a Burmese prison system for life. He had come into Burma at age 18. He was now 25 years old; so he had spent his entire adult life in the Burmese prison system.

While Ambassador Rodrigues was trying to get the whole bunch of 23 out, we stayed in close touch with him. Ambassador Levin, DCM Chris Szymanski, and I were trying to pull our various levers to try to get Sinh out to the U.S. Ambassador Rodrigues left Burma at the end of his assignment before that happened. I was at a farewell party for him, and he told me that the minister of Home and Religious Affairs had phoned him that very day and said, "I know that you're really interested in these Vietnamese. Don't worry. We'll take care of this," which he thought was a very nice thing for the minister to do. Well, when I left Burma several months after Ambassador Rodrigues departed, 22 of the Vietnamese were still in prison. I don't know if they ever got out.

We were working all the different levers of the government that we could, Foreign Affairs, Home and Religious Affairs, Immigration, etc. I had pretty good contacts at my level with immigration people. You never knew what the Burmese were going to do in any given situation. I had a fair amount of experience in Southeast Asia and North Asia, over eight years, by that time. I always felt that I had some idea of what the host government was going to do even when it was doing what you might call un-American things, but with the Burmese even when they were doing something that you wanted them to do, you were never sure why. This was a good example in lots of different ways.

Eventually our lobbying paid off, and we got Sinh a clean bill of health at Insein General Hospital. For parole, we had to have the same contagious disease checks as for an immigrant visa. Miraculously for somebody who had been in Burmese prisons from age 18 to 25, he had no communicable diseases that showed up in the exam.

As things panned out, on Monday, Columbus Day 1987, the day after the BAC crash, I was out at Rangoon International Airport at 6:00 in the morning. This was the morning before the bodies had been flown down from Pagan. I was to take charge of Sinh from the immigration police, put him on the plane to Bangkok where he would transfer to a Northwest flight to San Francisco. That all worked fine. I brought a bag of clothes, some of mine, some of my wife's, because I knew he was going to show up in a longyi and shower shoes for this flight to San Francisco. We got him to change into some old jeans of my wife's, a pair of tennis shoes of mine, and off he went. That was that.

Let me mention one other thing, a movie. I don't know if you ever heard of a movie called "Beyond Rangoon." It starred Patricia Arquette. There's a consular connection, which is why I'm bringing it up. It came out some years after I was in Rangoon. The story centered on the August 1988 repression of the democracy movement which was truly horrendous and probably on a per capita basis had a death toll greater than Tiananmen Square less than a year later in June 1989. In the movie, the protagonist went to Burma with other American tourists to find herself after her husband and her child were murdered in the U.S. She loses her passport, she goes to the American consul in Rangoon, who would have been my successor, and arranges to get a replacement passport through a much more difficult process than would have been the reality. The American consul in the movie was a tall, blue-eyed guy with a button down shirt, etc.

In reality my successor as the consular section chief was an African American woman. Obviously, she didn't fit the Hollywood stereotype of the American consul who was also among other things coming on to the protagonist. The movie consul was trying to invite her out to dinner in a Burmese restaurant which nobody in his right mind would do, for health reasons. That was among many inadvertently comic touches in that movie.

Q: Al, did you get any feel, you or the country team, about the military leadership there? You say they're hard to figure out. Was there any connection to "the people?" Compare and contrast Park Chung Hee's regime to this one.

O'NEILL: Compared to the Korean armed forces under Park Chung Hee, the Burmese forces overwhelmingly meant the Burma Army. There was a tiny air force and a tiny navy, a coastal defense navy. It's hard to compare. For one thing, the Korean army was far better rounded. It had all the normal units that you would expect, including the full range of logistics units to support a combat force. It had armored units, artillery units, and of course had the infantry force. It was professionally schooled in real military schools in Korea. Also many of the more senior officers, of course, go on to various command and general staff level schools and war colleges in the U.S. In those days, of course, the Korean army had quite a large number of people particularly in the middle to upper officer ranks who had served in Vietnam. Korea, you remember, had two infantry divisions and a marine brigade who were very much in the thick of fighting in central and northern South Vietnam.

So you had a real battle hardened force that was quite professional. The Burmese army had a great deal of counter-insurgency combat experience fighting the Chins, the Kachins, the Burma communist party, the Shans, and the various ethnic drug trafficking organizations, but they had never fought an external enemy in modern times; so it was overwhelmingly a light infantry force that was big on counter-insurgency.

In those days, Burmese military people of the various services went to the United States and other places for schooling. However, it seemed to me that the way to rise into the general officer ranks was to combine xenophobia and a lack of education with ruthlessness. There were area commanders who were major generals who as far as we knew had little more than a grade school education. But they knew that everybody outside of Burma was the enemy and they as the army were the protectors of the nation, even from the Burmese people. They also knew that democracy was messy and unmilitary.

Now to get back to the Korea comparison, the Korean army saw itself as the protectors of the Korean nation, too, particularly against the possible reinvasion of North Korea, quite rightly. But they were a far more internationally minded force than the Burmese were and even under Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-Hwan were less ruthless domestically than the Burmese Army, with the glaring exception of the bloody events in Kwangju in 1980. In Burma, the combination of xenophobia and limited education and belief that they were the saviors of the nation made it that much easier for the army to be allied under Ne Win with the Burma Socialist Program Party. In turn, that made them able to crush dissent as they did very ruthlessly in 1988, and have done under various guises ever since.

Burma was potentially a very wealthy country. They had huge timber resources. They had the potential for cultivation of agriculture, shrimp farming, fish farming and also gems and minerals. If they did not have that socialist agriculture policy, they would have been the great rice basket that they had been before the 1960's. In the British era and the early independence era under Prime Minister U Nu, Burma was if not the biggest rice exporting country in the world then one of them. Even 20-something years of Ne Win's agricultural policies did not change the fact that Burma's soil was quite fertile. No matter how stupid the government was, you didn't have starvation.

Q: Had we or somebody introduced the miracle rice?

O'NEILL: There was still in those days up until months after I left, a fairly large AID presence. I don't know how widespread these miracle rices were or how necessary they were in the case of Burma because the soil was so fertile. You could stick a broom handle in the ground and it would sprout. The big AID projects that I remember were production of pulses and edible oils, rape seed, soy bean, developing foodstuffs largely for local consumption, at least at first. There was quite an active AID presence.

There were other aid projects, too, from Asian Development Bank and UN Development Program. Some of these were simple infrastructure projects like road building. There was an American who was the head of the Louis Berger construction project that was widening and repaving the road between Rangoon and Ne Win's hometown of Prome up to the north. He told me that after his first year he had figured out that it would probably take 250 years to finish the project. After the second year there he revised it downward, and it said it would only take 195 years. This gives you an idea of the time span of Burmese thinking and their level of diligence.

Q: Did you get the feeling that the Burmese... Was the analysis that the Burmese officer corps was a very distinct group removed from everybody else? Also, where did the peasant soldiers fit into this?

O'NEILL: That comes up in one's look at Burma and also at a place like North Korea which, of course, has a gigantic armed force. Obviously the military people in both cases are not a separate species; they don't descend from heaven. They're born in the country, they come out of families and they're recruited or decide to join the armed forces, etc. There was no conscription in Burma at the time. People enlisted in the army for three square meals and clothing and a basic living. My impression was that the great source of the Burmese soldiery was the countryside. They tended to be ethnic Burmans although I suspect they still did recruit and accept people from some of the ethnic groups. I never got the impression that you would see Karens or Kachins, for example, those being among the main ethnic groups that were fighting against the Burmese government.

Q: I want to ask you one more question back about the Burmese officer class because this thing keeps cropping up. We just had a horrendous typhoon. Over 100,000 people were killed and the Burmese rulers almost ignored the whole thing although we had ships standing off the rest of the world had ships standing off to give aid, and very little got in. It seems like a tremendous disconnect between the officer class and the people per se.

O'NEILL: I knew people who were related to army people. I think what happened, and I think you can see this in the case of the Philippines, another country in which I gained a fair amount of experience, is that young people might come into the officer corps with a sense of idealism and a belief. Again, you had this third world mindset that we, the army, are the only organization that can save the country. When you have democracy, democracy is messy and you have foreign influences, but when we take charge, we can ensure the foreign influences stay out and that things are not messy.

If you can buy into the idea that the army is the savior of the country, you have at least in terms of a slogan an idealistic reason to join the armed forces. I think what happened was that extrapolating from the Philippine situation which has also been dealing with various insurgencies for decades that the real soldiers are the ones who stay in the combat units and slog away at company, battalion, and perhaps regiment level for their careers and really believe that they're doing something that's necessary for the safety of the country.

The others, who get attracted to the golf courses and the fat cat life that was open to the upper reaches of the armed forces in a very poor country, the special benefits, special exchange rates, special hospitals, all that kind of thing, tend to deviate from that idealistic path of the combat soldier.

Q: Basically the professional staff officer.

O'NEILL: Yes, of a very venal sort of the kind that you've seen replicated throughout newly decolonized countries throughout the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, people who pulled coups in Africa and in Indonesia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia and so on. Indeed, people who took that path could live quite well in a terribly poor country. In fact, one of the things that Burma achieved during my time was the official UN status of a "least developed country."

Q: [laughter] Is there such a thing as a least developed country?

O'NEILL: There was certainly at that time. The Burmese worked very hard to achieve that rather dismal distinction. We helped that to the point where we got a diplomatic note thanking the embassy of the United States of America, which I've brought with me...

Q: I'm going to read this. This is dated February 26, 1987: "The ministry of foreign affairs presents its compliments to the Embassy of the United States of America and acknowledges being in receipt of matters numbers so-and-so and dated 18 February and has the honor of expressing its gratitude and appreciation to the United States' valuable support in Burma's Least Developed Country status and readiness to co-sponsor the final UN decision approving Burma's inclusion in the list of least developed countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs avails itself in this opportunity to renew to the United States of America the assurance of its highest consideration."

O'NEILL: There were, as I recall, three criteria for least developed country status. One of them was dismal health conditions in which Burma was in the forefront. So the health situation was one criterion. GNP was another and, again, Burma about this time had maybe $13 million in foreign exchange reserves for the entire country.

The last one was literacy ranking. Unfortunately, Burma was over the line on literacy rate, at least from its own official statistics. I forget what the cutoff was for the literacy rate for a "least developed country." In other words, you had to be below a certain literacy rate according to the UN statistics in order to qualify. Burma, unfortunately, was over line on this one key criterion. They got around this by saying, "Oh, well, we arrived at this excessively high literacy rate by counting everybody who finished Buddhist monastery schools, not just graduates of our own wonderful school system," schools which by the way were often closed for political reasons. "If you take away the ones who graduated from monastery schools even at an elementary level, then we're below the line." To our shame we helped push this idea under Ambassador O'Donohue, and that saved the day, so to speak for Burma. Burma became officially a least developed country.

Burma's a fascinating place, and it's a sad place, a country of great potential wealth, certainly with a people who were able to be educated well, as the British proved, and which continued under U Nu, the first prime minister of an independent Burma. They had good schools up to the university level in the past. They were perfectly capable of taking their place in the world, but Ne Win and his cronies destroyed that.

Q: You left there in...

O'NEILL: July of '88.

Q: July of '88. Okay, now we're going to be talking about Korea.

O'NEILL: It was almost five weeks to the day between leaving Rangoon and arriving in Seoul. In between that we had a short home leave. We also stopped in Tokyo to see my predecessor in the Seoul job, John Miller who had been in his new job for quite a while. There was a gap of at least a month between his departure from Seoul and my arrival, a month gap being unfortunately typical.

I was going to one of the best jobs in Embassy Seoul. In the political section I was going to be the chief of the external branch, which covered Korean foreign relations and North Korea-South Korea affairs. The other two branches were political military which, of course, dealt with the U.S. forces and the ROK officials who worked on the U.S.-Korea alliance and the treaty and the SOFA - Status of Force Agreement - etc. The third branch was the internal political branch which at that time was quite lively because of all the domestic unrest that still continued even though they had a democratically elected government by that time. Roh Tae-Woo was the president, a former general to be sure, but he had been elected in a free and fair election in 1987.

Upon arrival at Kimpo Airport, we immediately went into the embassy to get our ID cards. In Korea you don't exist if you don't have an ID card, particularly living on the Yongsan Army Garrison as we were. My family then went to our little cottage on Yongsan, and I stayed in the embassy and worked the rest of the day.

As you may remember the summer of '88, 20 years ago, the Seoul Olympics were looming. The 1988 Olympics were seen by all Koreans as a big national coming- out ceremony, as 1964 had been for Tokyo and all of Japan. This was going to be Korea presenting itself to the outside world in a very spectacular fashion. One of my additional duties, which was pretty much all-consuming for the next month, was as the embassy's Olympic coordinator.

My predecessor, John Miller, had been for at least the previous two years the Olympic coordinator dealing with the ROK government entities and the Seoul Olympic organizing committee, and the U.S. government, all the various entities that were concerned about VIP visits, security and all the rest of it. Regrettably, the embassy did not designate an understudy for John who could take over that job when he left. The idea was that when I came in four weeks before the opening ceremonies, I would become the Olympic coordinator, which was not a great idea. It consumed a huge amount of my time when in terms of my regular work, Hungary was opening official relations at the chargï¿½ level - the first communist country to do so. That was the first fruit of President Roh Tae-Woo's very wise Nordpolitik or northern policy in which he was trying to open avenues to North Korea and also vigorously courting North Korea's communist allies to open relations with a very successful South Korea. So that was all going on at the time that I was immersing myself in all sorts of horrendous protocol details having to do with preparing for an impending presidential delegation to the Seoul Olympics.

Q: I'm really surprised that they didn't keep John Miller on for a month or two more.

O'NEILL: He was headed to Tokyo and to the political section. As you know with the Department's alleged personnel system, when your clock runs out you disappear and you reappear someplace else. Bizarre, but anyway, that added to my trials. The Olympics was on the macro level a huge triumph for South Korea. It did exactly what it was supposed to do. The Koreans worked in their usual industrious fashion and built the right kinds of stadiums and other venues, organized themselves, and put on a spectacular show.

There was a U.S. presidential delegation, but that sounds much more unified than this group was. The head of the delegation was the estimable and fabled Vernon Walters who at the time was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Walters was separately being invited by the Koreans anyway because of his long association with Korea and was coming on his own USAF airplane for the opening ceremonies. He and his group were totally professional and easy to deal with.

The real problem was the rest of the presidential delegation which was coming mostly on one VC-135 VIP airplane from Andrews, but there were others coming separately as well: one was the counselor of the State Department, Edward Derwinski, a former Republican congressman from Chicago. His wife was coming even separately from him. The group was a varied collection of people including some who had Olympic connections. One was a Korean-American who had won a gold medal in Los Angeles in 1948 as a diver.

Q: Yes, I remember him.

O'NEILL: Dr. Sammy Lee. He had been among other things Greg Louganis's diving coach. Louganis was going to be a big star in Seoul. There was a woman who won a swimming gold medal in the '64 Tokyo Olympics. Others were political figures who didn't want or didn't get political jobs in the Republican administration at the time, including one who was the CEO of a big headhunting firm. These people all were coming in one flight but soon wanted to scatter to the winds.

Each one of them thought they were important enough to have their own schedules. Trying to keep track of all of these characters was really a major problem. Ambassador Jim Lilley had to get involved in corralling them at one point and listening to all their complaints about the way the embassy wasn't catering to their every single whim every second of the day. He had a breakfast for the group of them at the Residence. At the breakfast, Ed Derwinski, counselor of the Department, was accusing the Ambassador and the embassy of being against the Seoul Olympics from the start. As best Ambassador Lilley and I could figure out, he meant that the embassy had been accurately reporting the repression of the Chun Doo- Hwan government over the years before it was replaced by the more democratic government of Roh Tae-Woo. Derwinski, who was of a conservative persuasion, was incensed at this, in effect angry that the Embassy had been doing its job on the political front.

The Olympic Games, aside from being a great triumph for Korea both in terms of organization and of the face that Korea put to the world was, as far as I was concerned, also a festival of anti-Americanism. That's my most lasting memory of the Seoul Olympics. The Koreans were so on edge and so intent to ensure that everything went perfectly that anything involving Americans that didn't go perfectly really set them off. This included the opening ceremony. The American team was waving to the crowds and cheering, and some of them were wearing Mickey Mouse ears and things like this as young, happy, naive Americans traveling abroad probably for the first time would normally do. This greatly offended the Korean news media who decided that this was not decorous enough and respectful enough of Korea for their sensibilities, and they began blasting the American team for that breach of decorum.

We had another incident... I don't want to belabor this too much....

Q: No, I think it's well to capture the flavor.

O'NEILL: It was really flavorful! One of the first American gold medals was won by a men's swimming relay team, and those young guys went that evening to the Hyatt Hotel and had a number of drinks, I'm sure, in the bar. They walked out of the bar with a plaster lion's head that had been hanging on the wall. They just picked it up. It wasn't something, as far as I know, that you could stick in your pocket, so it was pretty obvious that they were doing it. Rather than just approaching these tipsy or drunken young men who had just won a gold medal and said, "Give us our lion head back," the Korean staff of the Hyatt went to the police about this "theft." The police lost no time in going to their eager media contacts about this gigantic crime. From the media outcry, you would have thought that these swimmers had burned down the presidential mansion, the Blue House.

The outrage was unbelievable. I was, as I often was, in the embassy that Saturday afternoon. The incident was on a Friday night, and I was in the embassy all day Saturday, and the phones were almost literally ringing off the hook, with outraged Koreans calling. The poor embassy operators were just beside themselves trying to field the calls. I remember talking to one man who was just furious. "How could they do this??? How could they possibly steal something?" I said, "They were drunk." He said, "What???" I said, "They were drunk. He said, "Oh." And he hung up. It's safe to say that Koreans understood the concept of doing outrageous things while drunk.

This whole thing, this hysteria, was fanned by the Korean news media. NBC Sports had the broadcast rights for the Olympics. They did a masterful job of broadcasting. Also as part of their programming they had prepared a number of really good...what would you call them?...spots or vignettes showcasing different things about Korea's industrial might and the economic progress of the country, the palaces of Seoul, the history of Korea, things on the Korean War. Some of my relatives wrote me how much they learned about Korea from this fantastic coverage that NBC Sports was giving the country.

However, there was at least one spot about black marketing and prostitution particularly around the U.S. military bases, a not unknown phenomenon, shall we say. Again, the Koreans were not in the mood for any kind of accuracy or balance. What they wanted was laudatory treatment. If you gave 90% praise and 10% pointing out some warts, all they could think about was, "You were focusing on warts, and that's rude." Again, this set them off. There was a case where a Korean boxer had a match called against him. I believe the other boxer was an American, but the New Zealand referee called the match against the Korean. In response, that sportsman sat down in the ring and would not move. Every so often as NBC Sports was reporting on other events here and there, track and field and whatever else happened to be going on, they would occasionally go back and show this boxer still sitting there in the ring.

Q: I recall that!

O'NEILL: Again, Koreans were outraged that the Americans news media were humiliating Korea by showing this jerk sitting on his backside in the ring. No mention of the poor sportsmanship of the Korean boxer who had legitimately had a call against him. In fact, either in this match or in another boxing match that went against a Korean, his ringside staff and the Korean security people assaulted the referee.

Throughout, you had cheers for Soviet athletes and boos for American athletes with few exceptions. When Flo-Jo won everybody cheered. I happened to have been there at the track and field semi-finals, where she starred. Otherwise, it was a very grim period for Americans in Korea and the grimness lasted after the games, too. It really ground down a lot of people in the embassy.

Q: You're pointing out things we faced together, the Korean attitude that if you're at the mid-level and you're told by your boss to go out and get something done, maybe getting a visa or something like that. They couldn't take no for an answer. The pressure on Korean people was huge. I assume it probably felt that way to the boxing staff as well.

O'NEILL: That's very true. It may have been that idea that orders are orders, and the boss told me to do this, so no matter what, I've got to do it. Maybe that eroded somewhat over time. I think it has, but certainly it was very intense during the time that you and I were in Korea. It was very much a product of the strong Confucian ethic in which every Korean is inculcated from birth in that very hierarchical society. Democratization certainly at that point had not changed that a bit. Your boss tells you to do something, and you've got to do it no matter what. If you keep pounding at somebody long enough, that person will do what you want.

Q: Could you tell me something about the care and feeding of that presidential delegation? Did you have any particular cases that stick in mind?

O'NEILL: Oh, the whole thing. All of them felt that they were a key part of this presidential delegation, therefore for each of them, whatever their whim was, we were supposed to catered to them. We worked very hard to achieve that but there was little recognition from the group. I repeat, though, that Ambassador Walters and his group were completely differentotal professionals.

One example was related to me by Ambassador Lilley who was a great leader during the whole thing. He knew I was doing my job, and he was supporting me 100%, which was a great relief. He told me, and I won't name the swimmer who got the gold medal in Tokyo '64, but there was a dinner at the Blue Palace, the presidential mansion, hosted by President Roh for people related to the Olympics. She was incensed to find out that she was not invited. She complained to Ambassador Lilley, and he said to me more or less these words: "What am I supposed to tell her? The Soviet minister of sports was not invited either." This gives you an idea of the towering egos that were packed on that one airplane. Anyway, it was a difficult juggling match because we were trying to cater to them to the extent that we possibly could.

There were security concerns. Nobody knew what the North Koreans were going to do. The North Koreans had tried mightily to get the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to split events between before awarding the Olympics to Seoul. Thereafter, the North Koreans were trying to get the IOC to award certain events to Pyongyang which the IOC was just not going to do. Remember that the North Koreans in November of 1987, while I was still in Rangoon, blew up a South Korean airliner, KAL 858, south of Rangoon in the Andaman Sea. Almost certainly this was on orders of Kim Jong-Il, apparently with the idea that this was going to be one of a series of attacks aimed at discouraging countries from going to the Olympics and otherwise putting a blight on South Korea's success. A small bomb exploded in the Taegu Airport at one point which forensic investigation indicated was a type used by North Koreans. So there was a very strong concern about security not so much about Islamic radicals although this was not too many years after the 1972 Palestinian outrage in Munich. So we had a lot of security related people there in Seoul working with the Koreans on a very broad basis.

The Olympics aside from being an enormously successful sporting event, was indeed a showcase for Korea. The Koreans did a masterly job of building the venues that they needed, bringing athletes and visitors in, organizing everything, making sure that every event went smoothly, and that the opening and closing ceremonies were spectacular. The whole thing was fantastic and a great triumph for the Korean people.

But it was also tremendous on a political level. The North Koreans were just left in the dust. They were just about the only country that didn't send a team. I think maybe Cuba boycotted, but nobody else that I know of did. The Mongolians were there, the Soviets were there in a big way, the Chinese, the Vietnamese, everybody else that you could think of was all there. This really became the coming-out ceremony that the Koreans wanted and deserved. They worked hard on a lot of levels including the political.

So with the Olympics out of the way after maybe the first month and a half, I was able to revert full time to my real work which was looking at the development of Korean foreign policy, particularly toward the Communist countries that were long-time allies of North Korea and the beginning of an opening of a parade of missions from the North's allies. The first, as I mentioned, was Hungary. There was also a lot of North-South activity.

Q: Before we get to that, could you tell me a bit about where stood Korea politically at the time you came?

O'NEILL: By this time Korea had held what was really the first democratic election in the Republic of Korea's history in December1987 because nothing had happened under Syngman Rhee or anybody else to that point that could be called democratic. What had happened was historic and by chance we were in Seoul in June 1987 on leave from Rangoon. There had been waves of demonstrations, very widespread and not only the students and laborers who were the usual manpower for demonstrations for decades but the middle class was beginning to get drawn in, which was a really important signal.

There was an incident in June in which a Korean student was accidentally killed by getting hit in the head by a tear gas canister fired by riot police. The Korean riot police were not armed but they were also pretty tough. Their main weapon was what was called tear gas which was actually a powder, what the U.S. Army calls a riot control agent. It was like U.S. Army CS powder but it was also vastly more powerful than CS. There was a huge funeral procession for the student. The government tried to restrict it to a route along the Han River south of the main part of the city to the cemetery where he was going to be buried. The demonstration organizers insisted that the cortege be allowed to go through City Hall Plaza right downtown Seoul, a few blocks from the Blue House, the foreign ministry and the U.S. Embassy, right in the old heart of Seoul. Eventually government relented and showed a great deal of restraint.

My wife and son and I happened to have gotten caught up in this because we were trying to walk from we were staying to the Myong-Dong area south City Hall Plaza. We wound up caught in this gigantic crowd which was totally peaceful. There were a few radical students who were spoiling for a fight which they later got. You could see them and identify them because of the way they were dressed. In general though, tens upon tens of thousands of people were in the City Hall Plaza area and in all the main streets around it, people standing on top of the office buildings, in every one of the office windows. The middle class, the office workers were out looking at all this. It was pretty spectacular.

Right after that demonstration, Roh Tae-Woo announced that the ruling party had decided essentially to adopt all of the major demands of the opposition for a direct presidential election, as opposed to the planned indirect one. On live TV, Roh read right down about 10 points that the opposition led by Kim Dae-jung and Kim Yong-Sam were promoting. Roh was the government party's candidate to replace the dictator Chun Doo-Hwan.

This was a spectacular turning point in Korean history, and we happened to be there on the spot. All the major newspapers had one page extras out on the street immediately, reporting Roh's complete about-face which set Korea on the path to a true democracy. He was running initially against Kim Yong-Sam, the long-time democracy activist who was leading the opposition party. Kim Dae-jung, who was not only a long-time dissident but also a bitter rival of Kim Yong-Sam, had promised Stephen Cardinal Kim, the archbishop of Seoul, that he would not run and split the progressive vote.

Well, he didn't mean it, and Kim Dae-jung just couldn't resist running, which split the opposition and put Roh Tae-woo into the Blue House as president of the Republic of Korea. Later in the spring of '88, there was a National Assembly election in which opposition candidates won the majority for the first time. So this was the Korea that I went to in August of 1988, an extraordinary situation and as far as the U.S. was concerned, was great, particularly for Americans who had been working in Korea in times past.

One of the reasons for the outburst of anti-Americanism in the Olympics and afterward was because Koreans who felt this way were freer to do so than they had been in the past. They were able to express their bottled up emotions at the way they saw America as being the friend of the dictators of Korea over the decades before this election. They tended to forget or did not know that we had been pushing behind the scenes all these decades to get the kind of electoral situation that they had now arrived at.

Anyway, there were happy and unhappy notes in all this Olympic business, but basically it was a tremendous move forward for Korea. At that time the Korean economy was largely booming. It was a really exhilarating and interesting time. As President Roh was reaching out to North Korea's allies, he was also reaching out to North Korea itself. There was a lot of activity including prime ministerial level talks, a whole series of them starting that fall as well. Delegations of senior South Koreans were going to Pyongyang and then senior North Koreans were coming south, in both cases headed by the prime ministers. This was a fascinating development all its own, at least in terms of atmosphere. It was also a development that contributed to a more realistic appraisal of North Korea, especially on the part of South Koreans who were somewhat left of the political center.

Obviously everything in North-South Korea affairs is incremental, and to say that you had two steps backward for every one step forward is probably an overstatement, and it usually was about four or five steps back for every one step forward. Nonetheless, there were some promising developments which continued to play out. Of course, while all this North-South business was going on, more and more of North Korea's allies followed Hungary's lead and opened missions at one level or another.

Q: When you say allies, I can't imagine anybody in Eastern Europe really having much to do with North Korea. It was sort of like the Albanians.

O'NEILL: Yes. It's sort of yes, but... These countries were not military allies. The Warsaw Pact was not an ally of the North Koreans, but those countries had been very supportive of North Korea during and after the war. Countries like Hungary, Bulgaria, and others had for reasons of communist solidarity plus a reasonable amount of humanitarianism brought North Korean war orphans to their country to be schooled. The Poles and Hungarians ran hospitals in North Korea for quite a number of years in the immediate aftermath of the war. They did what they could to help reconstruct even though these countries weren't necessarily economic powerhouses either.

One of the fascinating things about this period in Seoul is that with the exception of the Polish embassy when it opened, almost all these embassies were staffed by diplomats who had long experience in North Korea. The first Hungarian diplomat in Seoul was Istvan Torsza. I spent a lot of time with all these diplomats over the next four years, and most of them were happy and relieved that their countries were back in the West, so to speak. That was a year before things really began to unravel in Eastern Europe with the unification of Germany, but they knew that the trend was going in the right way for them.

Istvan Torsza, who was relatively young, had spent six years in their embassy in Pyongyang. He told me a lot of interesting stories about life in Pyongyang. He said he and his wife had decided not to have children while they were in North Korea, but while they were in Seoul they had twins. I asked if that because of the poor health conditions in North Korea. He said that was a big part of it, but the other thing was that growing up in Hungary, they were being told that they were building socialism. He said, "When we got to North Korea, we said, 'This is not socialism.'" That was the big reason for not wanting to bring children into the North Korean environment.

Hungary's diplomatic opening produced a screaming outburst from North Korea as you can imagine, because I'm sure the North Koreans realized that this was just the tip of the iceberg. Hungary's move meant that essentially the game was over and everybody else in the Warsaw Pact and probably most of the Asian communist countries were going to follow suit at some point. It was made even more painful for the North Koreans in that Kim Pyong-Il, the half brother of the Kim Jong-Il, then still the crown prince of North Korea, had arrived that summer as the North Korean ambassador in Budapest.

There was no change in the threat level but the North Korean press directed their vituperation toward the Hungarians, such things as "taking blood soaked dollars from the hands of the traitor Roh Tae-Woo." Kim Pyong-Il was immediately pulled out of Budapest and was sent to Bulgaria next. When Bulgaria opened a mission in Seoul soon thereafter, the half-brother ultimately went to Poland as ambassador. He's still there. He's spent a lot of time out of North Korea.

Q: To keep him out of the Dear Leader's hair.

O'NEILL: Exactly; keeping down any potential rivalry. They were sons of Kim Il-Sung by different mothers. Anyhow, that really started an amazing opening in South Korean diplomatic history, South Korea's history with the entire world for that matter. It was fascinating to be with them and to hear what it was really like for them as communist diplomats to deal with the North Koreans. It was not fun. It was very difficult for them. Some of the stories were almost comical, but others showed that the North Koreans didn't like anyone all that much including their great allies like the Chinese and the Russians. That was one of the great parts of my job.

For some reason or other, the Polish embassy was staffed by people who had not served in North Korea. The Polish ambassador, the first one, had been in exile in Australia in the aftermath of the crackdown on the Solidarity movement. Almost everybody else did have Pyongyang experience: the Bulgarian chargï¿½, the Romanian and Hungarian ambassadors, most of the Soviet diplomats.

As part of that same vast tectonic shift in foreign relations in Asia, the South Koreans were opening embassies in all these places. I had the great fun of working with the South Korean foreign ministry as they were dispatching people to Moscow, Prague, Warsaw, etc., to begin the process of finding space for a chancery, places to live, etc. I was the person who was sending out cables to the various U.S. embassies, saying that such and such South Korean diplomats would be arriving, to prepare to open a mission.

Our embassies in all these places were universally and instantly helpful, and we would get immediate cables back saying, "Tell them to come see so-and-so in our embassy. And we'll help in every way we can." This sounds natural and to be expected as something that we would do for our South Korean allies. The weird thing was that all too many South Koreans believed that the United States was opposed to Roh's Nordpolitik, that we were opposed to their idea of opening to the North's allies.

No matter what we said or did to welcome these tremendous developments which were helpful to us, for that matter, and clearly aimed at reducing tension in Northeast Asia, the general belief among Koreans was because the Republic of Korea was moving closer to the Soviet Union, the United States must believe that we are moving farther away from the U.S. and, therefore, they do not like Nordpolitik. We tried, and tried, and kept saying every way we could that this was a great thing and proving it by the support we were giving. Eventually that feeling died out, but it died hard, which said more about South Korean thought processes than it did about the reality of U.S. policy.

One of the strangest examples of this occurred when a retired senior FSO who was with a think tank working on Asian affairs, was visiting to meet with the Korean national security advisor Kim Jong-Whi and many other officials. I was his control officer and had known him when he was still an FSO. This was Alan Romberg, at the Stimson Center now. Alan and I were going to lunch with a senior Korean diplomat who was well known as one of the top Americanists in the foreign ministry, who had been repeatedly in U.S. assignments, who had been director general for North American Affairs. We all knew him as a great friend of the United States and a very able diplomat.

Beforehand, as I was briefing Alan, I mentioned to him just in passing that many Koreans, including some who should know better, believe that we oppose Nordpolitik. I had no thought that at this very lunch, this very same friend of the U.S. was going to raise this with Alan. But this ambassador, who I will not name, said he believed the U.S. opposed the policy. Alan and I were pretty much taken aback.

Q: Do you have any idea of the Korean thought process?

O'NEILL: Basically that life is a zero-sum game. We were against the Soviet Union and the PRC and were against communism. Korea had been our great friend all these years, and for them - Korea - to move away, they just saw it as linear. If you're moving towards somebody, you're moving away from somebody else. They assumed that we had to believe that no matter how much practical help we were giving to them in setting up their new embassies and how much encouragement we were giving to the Korean government in all this, it was just taken as an article of faith.

Q: This was the time of the end of the Reagan administration, and Reagan and Gorbachev were getting very close together and were going through this real opening to at that time the Soviet Union. Was there a feeling that maybe South Korea wasn't as important to us anymore or not?

O'NEILL: I don't think it was so much that as it was because the South Korea trade with the United States was growing. We had a huge military presence still. It was very important to us. A lot of exercises going on; a tremendous amount of interaction of all kinds. It was just the idea of the zero-sum game, and I think they had to be ignoring what they saw between Reagan and Gorbachev in order to keep this belief alive.

Q: Okay, we'll stop at this point. And we'll pick this up. We just started talking about your time when you arrived to deal with foreign affairs, Korean external affairs. We were talking about the opening to various countries and the South Korean feeling that perhaps we were opposed to what was called the Nordpolitik.

O'NEILL: Yes, Nordpolitik. It was a takeoff on West German chancellor Willy Brandt's earlier Ostpolitik or Eastern Policy, the opening towards East Germany.

Q: We talked about this, but let's talk about the opening. First place, if you would when we start the next time, how did we view the press from the north? Was this diminished compared to what it was before? How did we feel about it and also talk about the various things because all hell was breaking loose on international relations during the time you were there or the next year in '89. Also, developments in Pyongyang and all that.

O'NEILL: It was a fascinating tour. I couldn't have asked for anything better.

Q: Okay. Today is 17th of October 2008, and this is interview number seven with AlO'Neill. Al, we just listened to the last thing, so we want to talk about... First, let's talk about the threat from the North as was seen when you got there, and then it changed. Then we'll start talking about the events of 1989 that revolutionary year the situation as Korea viewed it and how we felt about Korea's external relations.

O'NEILL: As I mentioned before, I arrived in August of 1988 exactly a month before the opening ceremony of the Olympics which also coincided with a couple of the developments that you're discussing. As Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, etc., and ultimately the Soviet Union itself were opening diplomatic relations with the South, there was no concomitant rush on the part of the South's long-time partners to open the relations with the North. There was nothing that matched what the South Koreans were doing. As you know, there was a decades-long, diplomatic competition between the North and the South for recognition by newly independent countries.

The South Koreans were clearly in the lead, partly because of the record of diplomatic and international responsibility that they had established over the decades but also because they enormously increased economic prowess. All these things that had developed through the 1970s and into the '80s raised the ROK's diplomatic stature to levels that to all of us who had worked on Korea were hoping and working for. But it was just wonderful to be able to see.

In terms of the North Korean threat during this period, I'm trying to think if there was any major incident from 1988 to '92 that matched some earlier North Korean outrages including in November1987 when they blew up a South Korean airliner just south of the Burma or things like the submarine incidents that occurred later in the '90s. There were always minor infiltrations of military intelligence people either by small boat or submarine. But I can't think of any major incident that ratcheted up the military tension.

Q: Okay, just quickly what was the southern position during this time? Obviously North Korea's a very difficult place to penetrate, but we have planes flying over, satellites. Was there anything that during this time we were looking at to see whether the North Korean military machine was getting geared up or getting geared down?

O'NEILL: To my recollection, no. From 1978, U.S. and Korean forces were together under the Combined Forces Command which had a U.S. four star commander and a Korean four star as the deputy. Those organizations were always looking at North Korea and there were, as they say, national technical means, of trying to look at certain things.

There was during this period a significant reassessment by U.S. military intelligence and DIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, of the order of battle of North Korean forces, meaning the actual array of units. They began to look more closely at North Korea. Remember from 1980 to '88 in the Middle East there was the big Iran-Iraq War and I think a large number of U.S. intelligence assets of the national technical level were devoted to looking at that mess over those eight years.

As that war wound down, there were more intelligence assets available to look at the Korea situation. The consensus was the North Koreans were forming more units. Some of it may have been done by breaking up other units and adding in people, a cadre-type arrangement where you subdivide units amoeba-like, then build those new units up to strength with additional personnel. The DIA tended to do two things in this kind of analysis. One is to look at worst case scenarios as a matter of theology, I suppose you could say. The other is that they tend to emphasize capability far more than intentions, and especially in the case of North Korea, since nobody has any idea from one day to the next what their intentions are. This gave the "capability vs. intentions" school of analysis free rein to say, "Well, if they've got this many people and this many artillery pieces and this many tanks, then they could get to Japan within 20 minutes." So you could always count on the military intelligence side for the direst sort of predictions, but with no information to speak of regarding North Korean intentions.

There was also a tendency on the part of some people in U.S. Forces Korea that I met with to say, "Our South Korean forces are numerous and large, and they've got good equipment, but they're not very well organized. They don't train as hard as they should, and the training doesn't produce the results that we think that it should." On the other hand, many in USFK said the North Koreans had all this equipment and all these people, and all they have to do is lean forward and they're down among us. Certainly during this time there was a great consciousness of North Korean Special Operations Forces total of an alleged 100,000 men who would presumably infiltrate...

Q: Shock troops...

O'NEILL: ...shock troops or whatever you want to call them who would infiltrate in a war scenario partly by sea in small submersible or semi-submersible boats and in a vast array of these rather ancient-looking but still useful Antonov-2 biplanes which had a capacity maybe of 12, 14 soldiers each. The idea was that Antonov-2s could get under the radar and saturate northern South Korea with highly trained, highly motivated special operations troops. That was in rough sketch the military balance analysis.

Against this was a South Korea that was vastly more powerful economically than the North and which was opening relations right and left with all the North's longtime friends... Friend's too strong a word. Nominal allies were all the North Koreans had. One of the things that I learned from talking to so many of those diplomats from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union who had long experience with the North Koreans is that they were never friends. The North Koreans were obnoxious all the time, constantly causing these folks trouble, and there was no love lost at all between them.

In terms of a real military threat of an imminent attack during that period, I saw none. There was nothing there.

Q: Was there almost a tipping point or something, or had there been in terms of equipment? The North Koreans had a lot of equipment but it was of a certain Soviet era. It has not held up well against Western weaponry.

O'NEILL: No, it has not. Even in the late 1980s, the period that we're talking about the North Korean array of equipment was Soviet materiel of the early to mid 1950s: T-54, T-55 tanks, similar vintage armored personnel carriers, etc. Their aircraft with very few exceptions were of a similar era, MIG-21's, MIG- 17's, and MIG-15's, some stuff going back to the Korean War. Their pilots couldn't train nearly as much as the South Korean and American pilots would train. I don't think an American fighter pilot could even retain flight status if he flew as little as the North Koreans did at that time.

Q: Is this because of fuel or because of space?

O'NEILL: I think it was a combination of fuel, repair parts, etc., just all the problems that would normally plague a poor country's military forces. They did put on big exercises from time to time and all that. It was not a first-line military force. There were just a lot of them, and they could have caused a tremendous amount of disruption, loss of life, loss of economic power if those people just all of a sudden marched south one day, as badly equipped and loosely trained as they were. Remember that the huge city of Seoul has 25% of the entire population of the ROK in and around it. The comparison that was always used was that the distance between the capitol building in Washington and Dulles Airport was about the distance from northern Seoul to the DMZ.

We had every reason to believe the North Korean forces were ideologically motivated; at least they would have been at first. The combat power that the U.S. and the ROK could have brought against them would have produced really horrendous battles, if anything surpassing the worst of the Korean War. But the South Korean public didn't go around thinking, "Are they going to attack today? Or next week?" They have almost never had much perception of a North Korean threat unless there's been some specific, nasty incident. It's like the elephant in the living room. Eventually you don't see it anymore.

Obviously, the South Korean and the U.S. armed forces trained very hard first of all to deter the North Koreans, and second, in the case of an attack to defeat it as quickly as possible. There were these major training exercises, so-called "Team Spirit" exercises every year. The South Koreans were in really good shape in every way, economically, in terms of international stature, and basically in good shape domestically, too, because in the previous year's presidential election 1987, Roh Tae-Woo had won a truly democratic election. He was a former general and a close compatriot of the despised Chun Doo-Hwan, but Roh was a different character. He had democratic instincts despite his background. He had defeated two long-time dissident rivals, Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-Sam, in no small part because Kim Dae-jung split the opposition vote.

Q: They sort of knocked each other out, didn't they?

O'NEILL: They did. In fact, the idea originally was that Kim Young-Sam was to run against Roh Tae-woo. Kim Dae-jung who has many virtues and has certainly suffered for his democracy struggle, but he also had certain messianic aspects to his character. He promised Cardinal Stephen Kim, the cardinal archbishop of Seoul, that he would not run as an additional candidate against Roh, the obvious thing being that that would split the opposition vote and perhaps put Roh in the presidential mansion, the Blue House.

Well, that was just too much for DJ to handle and he did run and he did split the opposition vote, and he did help put General Roh Tae-Woo in the Blue House to the fury of Kim Young-Sam and lots of other people. But again, for the first time in the 40 years of Korea's existence they actually had a democratic election that was recognizable as such by anybody.

As I mentioned earlier, by the time I got to Seoul in '88, the opposition parties had already won a majority in the National Assembly. This was in the assembly elections in the spring of 1988. So you had this remarkable situation where the National Assembly for the first time in Korean history actually meant something, and the various responsible committees of the national assembly were conducting audits of the various ministries.

There was a female legislator, a very bright woman named Do Yong-shim. One day, Mrs. Do called one of my colleagues in the political section: "Gerry! Guess where I am? I'm at the foreign ministry. We're conducting an audit of the foreign ministry!" This was so fantastic that the first thing she could think of was to call one of her best contacts at the American Embassy and say, "Look what we're doing!"

Q: In a way was this the fruit of our showing how we do this democracy business?

O'NEILL: I think it was the fruit of a lot of things. We still did not get enough credit in public in the South for our constant and consistent support of democracy, of opposition figures, etc. That's partly because we were trying to do it as much as possible behind the scenes. It's also because in no small part the dictatorial governments that preceded Roh Tae-Woo were able through press censorship and repression to keep information of that sort out of the public domain.

Also, among Korean opposition figures, particularly the rank and file Korean opposition figures, there was always the belief that of course America supported these dictators because we were in Korea "for our own purposes," and of course we wanted dictators who would help keep South Korea under America's thumb. But there were constant attempts at democratization over the years by the Korean opposition parties, which really came to fruition when Korea's economic might got to the point where there was a very knowledgeable middle class, a middle class that helped produce this economic might. That same middle class said, "Well, if we're so good at running an economy, why can't we also run our own government?"

Certainly by 1987 they began to become much more politically active and much more overtly sympathetic with the student anti-government pro-democracy movement, etc. There were all these things coming together, but we can take pride in what we were trying to do and the fact that it did come to pass. There were American diplomatic successes elsewhere in the world but this is one that's very real.

Q: Back when we were both together a decade before, in the mid '70s, it was still conventional wisdom in the embassy. Maybe this isn't correct, but my feeling was, and the phrase was South Koreans were the Irish of Asia. This was pejorative to a certain extent. They're so divided that you need a firm hand, but maybe someday they'll get better. I think was the feeling.

O'NEILL: There certainly was that kind of feeling. There was that feeling even among a lot of Koreans themselves, even Koreans who didn't want to have a military- directed dictatorship as there was at that time under Park Chung-Hee. The Koreans are disputatious. That's fine. That's part of their character. It's one of the things that particularly distinguishes the Koreans. But the other side of the coin, I think, was that Koreans certainly deserved to be trusted with governing themselves. The Korean opposition figures like Kim Dae-jung did indeed put themselves in danger for their cause.

Q: He was at Harvard for a while.

O'NEILL: He was at Harvard for a while in exile, after the second time that we saved his life. The U.S. government saved his life twice. That's something that seems to be either still unknown in Korea or deliberately ignored in Korea by a lot of people. I still see Koreans complaining that Ronald Reagan's first state guest was the dictator Chun Doo-Hwan. It's true, but the same writers ignore the reason he was invited, and it's known everywhere else except perhaps in Korea, the reason that Chun was invited as the first state guest of Ronald Reagan was specifically in return for Chun's promise not to execute Kim Dae-jung. Kim was then under a sentence of death because of trumped up charges having to do with the May 1980 Kwangju uprising.

In this period, the draconian National Security Law was being scrutinized by the Assembly and tested by Korean dissidents. There were also cases where that law was clearly violated by student activists and sometimes ministers of religion going to North Korea deliberately to provoke some kind of prosecution. There was a Quaker pastor, Moon Ik-Hwan, a long-time dissident and democracy activist, who went to North Korea for that reason. Also, a young woman Lim Su-Kyong went to North Korea and she became a real darling of the North Koreans, who called her the "flower of unification." She came back through Panmunjom in a staged return that was deliberately aimed at generating opposition to the National Security Law. She was duly arrested, carried off, tried, and convicted. I forget what kind of sentence she got.

During this same time, I was trying to tell people particularly in the ROK Unification Board which was now called the Ministry of Unification, that the best thing the South Korean government could do was to gather up as many of these student activists as possible and send them to North Korea but make sure they stayed up there at least a month. Don't let them go for a weekend and come back.

As far as I was concerned too, the North Korean party newspaper Rodong Sinmun which means Labor Newspaper should be required reading in all South Koreans university classrooms. My feeling was it would be kind of aversion therapy because in my work I had to read Rodong Sinmun in translation. For the ordinary reader, it is the most turgid nonsense that you could ever imagine. It makes the Burmese newspapers look like the New York Times. My feeling was if you rubbed the students' noses in Rodong Sinmun on a daily basis, they would start yelling that they wanted to vote for Roh Tae-Woo.

As more and more Eastern European diplomats arrived, they began making the same pitch. Once there was a big meeting that the Unification Board called to brief the diplomatic corps on a North-South meeting. My Hungarian friend stood up and made my pitch unbidden. I didn't put him up to it. We had discussed this kind of thing, and he certainly agreed with me. He made exactly the same pitch: You ought to gather all these students who want to go to North Korea and send them there and then let them back maybe after a month. And make them read Rodong Sinmun. It was wonderful! The spokesman for the Unification Board couldn't really respond. All he could say was "We've got our own reasons to do this," and so on.

There was another pitch that I was making at the same time. There were still in South Korean prisons some very old men who had been captured by the UN forces during the Korean War. I can't remember any of them who were actually prisoners of war in the sense of being uniformed military people. The most famous of them was a journalist who had been attached if you will, "embedded," with the Korean Peoples' Army when they came South. He got captured during the course of the war and had been in prison ever since. This was the late 1980's, so he had been in prison over 30 years.

He was by South Korean lights an unrepentant communist, and in the Confucian legal system in Japan, North and South Korea, and China, Vietnam, confessing and repentance are key aspects of getting released or getting a reduced sentence by showing that you'd now come over to the right thinking side. Well, this old guy just wouldn't do it. He was a dedicated, believing communist, and it was his bad luck that he had gotten captured, but he wasn't going to step down from his beliefs just to get out of what was undoubtedly far from a Club Fed arrangement in the South Korean prison system.

We used to routinely ask the South Koreans what good it did to keep him. The North Koreans were making this old guy a big propaganda cause cï¿½lï¿½bre, so the South Koreans were handing an international propaganda victory to the North Koreans for absolutely no benefit to the South. If they released him, it wouldn't have diminished South Korea's international standing a whit. In fact, it would have raised it, but they just got so wrapped around the axle about this man.

More understandably, at least some ROK officials would say the North Koreans have many hundreds of our fishermen plus POWs from the Korean War that they have never acknowledged, never released, etc., and they're not going to give those people up. I would say, "I understand that, and that is really bad behavior, but we know that they're a bunch of SOBs. You would not hurt yourself a bit; in fact, you would help yourself a great deal. Just let the guy go!"

There was another level in this, of course, because the North Koreans were making a big noise about this old fellow. That made it much more difficult for the South Koreans to let him go because then they would have been giving in to the North Koreans in return for nothing. Eventually they did release him. It was years later when he was nearly dying, and they didn't want him to die in a South Korean prison. They did let him go north, and he was feted as a great hero. Indeed, even I who am not very fond of communism have to admire somebody who could dig his heels in for that many years in the South Korean prison system on what he saw as a matter of principle. You might think he's an idiot, but you have to take your hat off to him.

Q: Okay. Let's go start looking at Nordpolitik. What was going on that got Hungary to be the first one there?

O'NEILL: I think the Hungarians... This was in 1988 before the big downfall, so Hungary and many of these other countries were still under their communist governments when they opened to Seoul. I think many of them were looking at several different things. One was just reality that the world was moving in a different direction than it had been in the 1950s and that South Korea was emblematic of the way the world was moving; that is, towards democracy, towards a successful capitalist system and economic structure. There was in a lot of these countries in Eastern Europe more and more political ferment. You remember, of course, very vividly that Hungary and Poland and East Germany in the 1950s all had uprisings against the Soviet government, all of which were put down, in the case of Hungary with particular brutality.

Q: In '56.

O'NEILL: 1956, yes. October and November of '56. There were still those kinds of currents in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. You'd had Alexander Dubcek in Czechoslovakia in 1968 in Prague Spring also put down with great brutality by the Russian under the Brezhnev Doctrine. But these people hadn't been executed in the way that they would have been had Stalin still been alive or even under Khrushchev.

Meanwhile, even earlier you had the Solidarity movement in Poland which I think was a beacon to everybody else in Eastern Europe, too. It started in the shipyards at Gdansk under Lech Walesa, and that was quite a beacon. Exactly what caused them the Hungarians to leap first toward Seoul I couldn't really say, but they did.

Q: Did you have the feeling that the Hungarian foreign ministry was fishing around?

O'NEILL: Probably they were. They probably were because there were plenty of places in Europe where they and the ROK were represented, so it was easy to make contact that way if they wanted to. There may have been, though I can't think of any offhand, there may have been particular emissaries sent, but I think it mostly would have been done just through places where they were usually represented in a given capital.

There certainly was an economic incentive, too. The Hungarians and these others were expecting loans and grants and other assistance. Even the mighty Soviet Union was quite happy to accept that from the ROK, too. It was one of the clearest examples of a major diplomatic triumph for a given country that I can think of off the top of my head to have all these long-time supporters, even though they didn't like the North Koreans at all, long-time supporters of your enemy North Korea, coming to you, some in many cases hat in hand looking for your help and being quite willing to open relations with you.

Q: The Hungarians came before the events of '89, the fall of...

O'NEILL: Exactly. In fact, my recollection is not only the Hungarians but the Bulgarians, the Poles, and Czechoslovakia. I think all those came before the event. This was in the fall of 1988, starting in August through the fall of '88.

The Soviets, I'd have to look back and see when exactly the Soviets did open relations. It was certainly by 1990. The Hungarians sent a counselor to open a mission at the official level. He became the chargï¿½. Then they sent an ambassador to open an embassy and full diplomatic relations. Ambassador Etre was a Kim Il-Sung University graduate who had been the Hungarian ambassador in Pyongyang and whose principal second language was Korean. He didn't speak very much English though the other Hungarian diplomats did.

Q: How did he end up graduating from the Kim Il-Sung University?

O'NEILL: He was sent there in the early days. There were others, too. The first Bulgarian chargï¿½ whose name I think was Georgi Dimitrov. He was a very engaging character and a Kim Il-sung University graduate. When Mongolia opened diplomatic relations, their first ambassador, named Urjinhundev, was not only a Kim Il-Sung University graduate but also a former ambassador of Mongolia to Pyongyang.

During the '50s and '60s and even in the '70s all these countries had active relations with North Korea. They would send their diplomatic specialists on Korea affairs to Kim Il-sung University in the same way that the South Korean foreign ministry would send the people to Williams or Swarthmore or Oxford. In their peculiar world, it was a natural thing to do. I don't know whether you're winning or losing if instead of going to Moscow State University you're going to Kim Il-Sung University, but it certainly probably gave you quite a number of stories to tell.

It was great fun to meet with the newcomers. Essentially without exception these folks, the Czechs, the Hungarians, Bulgarians and all were just delighted to be where they were, especially the one who spent long periods of time in Pyongyang. The first Bulgarian charge, Georgi Dimitrov, had been at Kim Il-Sung University while Kim Jong-Il was there. Georgi told me he was quite good at ping pong and Kim Jong-Il would sometimes watch him play with the other students. When he later went back to their embassy in Pyongyang for another tour, Kim Jung-Il was the heir apparent, the designated successor. Georgi figured that he would just put on his old Kim Il-Sung University tie, so to speak, and go meet his fellow alumnus. But he was not allowed anywhere near Kim Jong-Il.

Incidentally, when I left Seoul in 1992, one of the farewell receptions that was held in my honor was hosted by Istvan Torsza, the pioneer Hungarian diplomat. I was very touched by that of course. In my remarks that night, I noted that more than half the diplomats present were from embassies that didn't exist in Seoul when I arrived four years earlier. These included not only ex-Warsaw Pact embassies but also Israel and Tunisia for example. It was an extraordinary time in Korean history.

There were Soviets coming to Seoul a lot even before there was an embassy, including the famous Georgi Arbatov, the long-time head of the Institute of the U.S. and Canada. Arbatov was very highly placed in the Russian political-academic world. He came to Seoul for conferences and of course, everybody was swarming around him.

Interestingly enough, in contrast to many of these Eastern European embassies who were sending people who were deeply steeped in North Korean affairs, the first Soviet ambassador to the ROK was an Americanist. He had done a lot of negotiating, been on their SALT and other arms limitation agreement teams in Geneva and elsewhere. His most immediate posting before Seoul was as Soviet ambassador in Manila. Of course, in those days we still had a huge base array in the Philippines: Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base. I thought it was kind of interesting that the Soviets were sending this Americanist rather than a Korea specialist to Seoul. It indicated that the US-ROK relationship was at least as important to the Soviets as the ROK-Soviet one was.

When the new Soviet ambassador went to make his courtesy call on Ambassador Gregg, I remember watching for his car to go to our chancery gate. I was going to escort him up to Don Gregg's office. This large black Mercedes flying the Soviet flag was nosing its way through all our security barriers. I saw South Koreans just mesmerized by this big red flag on this great Mercedes turning in to the main gate of the American embassy. As I think I may have mentioned before, there was a general feeling among South Koreans including officials who should have known better that we didn't like this idea of Nordpolitik and their opening relations with the North's allies. It was a wonderful scene: the jaw-dropping South Koreans watching that limo with the red flag on it, entering our embassy gate.

During my second tour in Korea we had two splendid ambassadors, great representatives of the U.S. and also great chiefs of mission, real leaders. First was James Lilley, born in China to a business family and a career CIA officer who had worked a good bit for George H. W. Bush including in the liaison office in Beijing. He was followed by Don Gregg, also a career CIA officer who had been for six and a half years the foreign policy advisor to then Vice-President George H. W. Bush. Don was very close to him. When offered an embassy, he chose Seoul where he had been the station chief in years past.

In fact, Don Gregg was the one who was directly instrumental in saving Kim Dae-jung's life when the KCIA goons in 1973 kidnapped him out of the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. I'm sorry, the Imperial Palace Hotel in Tokyo and were going to drop him in the Sea of Japan on the way back to Korea. Ambassador Philip Habib and Don Gregg forcefully interceded with the government of Park Chung-Hee, and lo and behold! Instead of being dropped in the Sea of Japan, Kim Dae-jung got dumped out of his car in front of his house. Kim to his credit never forgot and always was quite willing to speak up about it.

Q: Al, how did the fall of the Berlin wall hit you all? You had already been by this time had significant what we would call Warsaw Pact types already established in Seoul. Did this have a profound effect or not?

O'NEILL: It had more of an effect on the Koreans and Korea at all levels, than it did on our embassy operations. I can remember watching on television, of course, as everybody was, just with rapt attention. Particularly, I remember one scene in Bucharest, Romania. You'd been seeing for days on end these huge crowds in Bucharest demonstrating against the Ceausescu regime which was probably of all the Eastern European regimes with the possible exception of Albania, closest to North Korea both in their way of doing things and also sort of spiritually if you will. Nicolae Ceausescu was a nasty character with a wife who was equally nasty. Their oldest son Nicky was a real terror. He'd run over people in his car and not even slow down, a real nasty analogue to the Kim Jong-Il of the time as he was reputed to be. I remember seeing a Bucharest TV news broadcast where they were talking about what was going on and all of a sudden these military officers burst into the studio saying, they were getting rid of Ceausescu. It was really quite extraordinary.

As I say, all that had a profound effect on Korea, and the Koreans. As these events were unfolding and communist governments were being ousted in Eastern Europe, Korean TV crews and reporters from the newspapers and members of the National Assembly and academics were flocking to all these paces in particular to East Germany to see what was going on. They all came back with their hair standing on end, the reason being that they knew that East Germany was one of the more economically successful of the Eastern European countries, and they saw that East Germany was a wreck. They also knew that the West Germany economy was vastly bigger than the ROK economy. They put that together and realized on top of everything else that the North Koreans had been using the East Germans as a lodestar - an economic lodestar, if you will - in the same way that the South had been using Japan rather than us as their economic path breaker so to speak.

The South Korean visitors came back just stunned thinking about what this could mean for unification of North and South Korea. This whole period marked a huge turning point in South Korea. For the first time it became possible and politically acceptable to speak about unification as a very difficult and expensive process as opposed to something that everybody had to give knee-jerk approbation to. Up until then everybody had to say, "Oh, of course we're for unification! Everybody wants unification. We want unification now! It would be wonderful, it will be glorious, and we'll all be back together again, and Korea will be one." Who could possibly object to such a thing? After that, newspaper columnists, members of the National Assembly and economists, too could say, "This is going to be very difficult. It's going to be very expensive. It's going to be something that is going to have to be worked out. There can't be any rush. A rush could be disaster."

It was a fascinating turning point. It was one reason that my wife and I had lunch with Kim Dae-jung and his wife at their house in Seoul. My wife and her first husband - she was a widow when I married her - had been democracy activists here in the United States, in exile from Park Chung-Hee. They had mutual connections with Kim Dae-jung people. We were invited by Kim probably in 1990.

The particular thing that Kim wanted to talk about was North Korea. I was the one in the embassy political section that followed North Korean affairs day by day. It would be megalomania for me to say that this lunch with Kim Dae-jung was the springboard for his eventual Sunshine Policy toward North Korea. I'm not that naive, but it shows what his thinking was as early as that period, long before he became president. He was then the chairman of his own opposition party.

Under Kim Dae-jung and his successor Roh Moo Hyun from 1997 to early 2008 there was the "sunshine policy" and then Roh's "peace and prosperity policy," the basic idea being that you had to lower barriers to North Korea, increase the economic standing of North Korea and also figure out ways to train the North Korean people so that when unification takes place, it would not be a socio-economic disaster for the South. To all of a sudden have 20-something million North Koreans who basically had no skills, who had no education, who had no nutrition even in those days and try to integrate them into the ROK that was heading into the 21st Century was going to be a disaster. The North Korea policies of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo Hyun originated from that period when Eastern European communist regimes were falling apart. It was a fascinating time to be in Korea.

Q: I think of a German friend. She was actually my interpreter when I was in Germany back in early '50s with a refugee relief program. She was saying that when the unification came in Germany that the story that the Federal Republic was going to give Ulbricht, the head of the communist party in East Germany the Cross of Honor for having kept East Germany away from West Germany for so many years! I don't see how no matter what happens it's going to be easy and it would almost be better to keep the barrier up.

O'NEILL: Again, as part of this more serious and realistic look at North-South affairs on the part of Korean adults if not on the part of university students, you hear people talking about increasingly long periods of time - 15, 20, 30 years - before unification could take place. Of course, they also know and probably shudder at the fact that they have no more idea of how long North Korea's going to last than the Soviets had as to how long they were going to last. The totally unpredictable nature of much of North Korea is going to be a major factor. The intent of South Korean policy is to prolong the period before unification becomes either necessary or possible or both. Now I think even most students in South Korea are not as knee-jerk, pro-North Korea, pro-unification now as they were.

Q: That sounds a little bit Pollyanna-ish.

O'NEILL: It does. Well, it does, but every day that goes by they've got more and more understanding of how difficult this is going to be. For example, I was at a dinner the other night and had a good long talk with Andrei Lankov, a Russian who has a PhD in Asian studies. He was from Leningrad State University in times past, now at Kookmin University in Seoul. Lankov spent a lot of time in North Korea himself and still visits the border areas and writes a good bit. He said that during the period we're speaking of there were maybe 1,500 or so North Korean defectors, refugees, whatever you want to call them, in the South. This was cumulative after the end of the Korean War in 1953. Now, since 2001 or so, there are at least 10,000 North Korean refugees some of whom have come in from China, some of whom have come through Southeast Asian countries.

Their problems of integration into the South are really stark. Because of the way things work in North Korea, the majority of the refugees are uneducated women who originally got into China for economic reasons to find food for their families and that kind of thing. There are very few educated North Koreans in the South and as Lankov says, there's no real education in North Korea anyway, so even being educated in that system doesn't count for much when you try to integrate them into South Korean society.

They suffer a great deal of social discrimination even when they've graduated from the training and orientation programs and financial assistance that the South Korean government gives for a while. I don't know exactly what the period is. Then they're basically on their own. Most South Koreans see them as country bumpkins who don't know anything, and they're looked down upon. Also, the disparity between the North and South Koreans languages has grown vastly over the last half century. The North Koreans have tried to retain pure Korean words and keep out foreign, particularly English, loan words which are now the staple of South Korean youngsters' vocabulary.

The South Korean government is trying to narrow the economic gap between North and South and, in fact, the present president of South Korea, Lee Myung-Bak has a program in which over the next 10 years, the objective is to raise the per capita income of North Korea from the current alleged $1,900 a year to $3,000. In South Korea the figure's probably around $20,000 or $25,000. I suspect the current North Korean figure is wildly inflated to begin with.

Q: When we were there back in the '70s, it was a big moment when the average went up to $1,000.

O'NEILL: In South Korea, yes, exactly. Now it's at least in the $20,000 range even in spite of all the economic buffeting. Anyway, it's a huge disparity, despite South Korea's best efforts at food aid, fertilizer aid, and major projects like the Kaesong Industrial Center complex project to try to educate North Korean laborers as best they can to something like 21st century standards. The gap is actually growing. When I think of the disparity between the "Ossis" of East Germany and the "Wessis" of West Germany, the disparity and the socio-economic prejudices are starker in the case of the Koreas and are going to be greater.

Q: Tell me: When you were watching the overthrow of Ceausescu, were you looking North and saying this could... Were we considering this as perhaps an infection that could spread to North Korea and in a way in joyful but a real disaster?

O'NEILL: I certainly wasn't. In fact, I don't want to sound retrospectively self-serving, but there was a period from '90 through '92 in which the idea took hold in Washington that North Korea could not survive the death of Kim Il-sung. I didn't believe that. You'll just have to take my word for it. I didn't believe it for several different reasons, one of which was that the North Korean security apparatus was pervasive. Too, everybody knew that Kim Jung-Il was the crown prince and he had been designated as such by the revered Great Leader, the founder of the country, to whom everybody bowed in almost a religious sense. It was clear that the son was the designated successor. So despite the absence of any military abilities or background, etc., he had the blessing from the top giver of blessings in North Korea. The other thing is that North Korea is, if anything, more Confucian in its outlook than South Korea, so you've got this reverence for structure, for command, for the leader. Then of course, you had a pervasive security apparatus in which everybody was watching everybody else. The penalties for ideological impurity or attempts to criticize the system were really stark and often final.

Q: And you didn't see any infection from outside.

O'NEILL: I didn't think so. Nothing serious so far. Romania and East Germany were open societies compared to North Korea. In those days there was almost no leakage of information from the outside into North Korea. The North Korean leaders made sure it stayed that way. Particularly in those days, the penalties for possessing radios that could hear outside broadcasts were pretty stark.

There's more bribery and corruption now in North Korea so people can get away with things they couldn't before. Also, there are more technological means for getting information now than there were. People do have cell phones in North Korea. It is very dangerous to have them, but they do. They can get to communicate back and forth with people, particularly along the Chinese border who can piggyback off of Chinese repeaters for cell phones. Videotapes and DVDs of South Korean dramas are often sold on the streets in big cities in the North which seriously undercuts regime propaganda. There's an awful lot more people of various kinds, outsiders coming in and out of North Korea than there were in those days. Even the friendly embassies were pretty segregated from the North Korean people in those days, somewhat less so now.

At that time, many people in Washington were fantasizing about an early collapse, but they had no idea about the realities of North Korea. There certainly were people who in the early '90s who figured that this was going to be the end of North Korea, that Kim Il-Sung's eventual death which took place in July of 1994, aged 82, would be the beginning of the end. Of course, that's 14 years ago. The other thing that I didn't mention was that, but it also ties into this Confucian ethic of listening to the leader and believing the leader. The North Korean regime consistently emphasized and still does the pervasive threat by the United States but we, the Korean people's army, the security apparatus, and the leader whoever he happens to be, are the ones who are going to protect you from that terrible American threat. They're trying to go to war with us at any moment. That big American threat, I think, at least in those days, still resonated with the North Korean public.

I'll give you one example to support this. I used to talk to talk to my Hungarian counterpart about the Team Spirit exercises which in those days were the largest of the U.S.-ROK military exercises. The exercise themselves were actually about two weeks long as I recall, but if you listed to Armed Forces Korean television, you would have gotten the impression that Team Spirit ran for months. The reason was that they started announcing the exercise from the time the very first soldiers began picking up their rifles at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii and continued until the last guy turned in his mess kit back in Schofield Barracks a week or so after he got back from the exercise. My Hungarian friend was saying when he was in North Korea listening to the North Korean reporting , he thought that Team Spirit must have lasted for months.

The North Koreans railed about Team Spirit as they do about all the exercises large and small. But one thing that I learned from him was that the exercises were genuinely disruptive. They were forced by their own propaganda to make Team Spirit tremendously disruptive to the North Korean economy. To create an air of certainty about the threat that Team Spirit posed, the North Koreans had to pull people out of the farms, out of the universities and factories and put them into a state of semi war alert. He said that every year the North Koreans felt compelled to create, as I say, this air of mass fear about Team Spirit. Their circular logic produced a real reason for complaint about our exercises.

As long as we're talking about Team Spirit, let me get to my Polish story. After Poland's government was replaced with a democratic one, one of the first things that the South Korean government did was to invite officers from the Polish general staff to come. The Combined Forces Command routinely invited the Chinese, the North Korea and others to come observe Team Spirit.

Q: The North Koreans, I take it, never did.

O'NEILL: Never did. The Chinese wouldn't, although I'm sure they would really have liked to very much. But the Poles did this time. The Polish general staff sent several colonels; it probably would have been Team Spirit '90. One of our excellent officers in the political section in Seoul was named Jeff Goldstein who spoke not only good Korean but also Polish and Russian. So Jeff was put with this group of Polish colonels for the Team Spirit exercise. The Polish officers, of course, got wined and dined by their South Korean counterparts to a very happy degree. They got to go more or less anywhere they wanted to see the units in the field both U.S. and Korean, how they were equipped, how they were operating, etc. They were flying around the country in helicopters.

They went up to one of the ROK army division headquarters on the DMZ. The division honor guard presented arms and yelled out something in Korean when the Polish officers were approaching. They asked Jeff what they said, which was, "Crush communism!" He said that the Poles burst out laughing, saying, "We've already done that!" They had a fantastic time. We learned in cables from Embassy Warsaw that the waiting list of the Polish general staff of the next Team Spirit was quite long.

If you want, we can talk a little bit about the armistice and what was going on.

Q: Yes. Why don't we do that?

O'NEILL: As you know, the armistice went into effect in 1953, and the Military Armistice Commission was designed to administer the DMZ and the military demarcation line which runs east to west across the peninsula through the center of the DMZ. The centerpiece of the armistice administration was in the Joint Security Area (JSA) at Panmunjom, the scene of many intrigues and some violence from time to time over the years including the infamous 1976 axe murders of the two US officers.

The North Koreans reacted very badly to a couple of things that happened, one of which was the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. One of the armistice structures was the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission or NNSC, which had two elements. On the UN Command side, the Swedes and the Swiss were represented. On the KPA - Korean People's Army - side there were representatives from Poland and Czechoslovakia.

In the aftermath of the Eastern European communist empire, the North Koreans came to the conclusion that the Poles and the Czechoslovaks were no longer neutral because they were now under democratic rule. There was a camp on the UN command side for the Swedes and the Swiss, their offices and their living quarters, and the same thing on the North Korea side for the Czechoslovaks and the Poles. The North Koreans began to put great pressure first on the Poles and then when Czechoslovakia split, used that as a device to cripple their half of the NNSC.

The NNSC's principal function was to investigate incidents that might happen along the DMZ and also to be good faith monitors of the armistice in general. I think in the time that I was familiar with it before they were expelled, the Poles and the Czechs did adhere to their responsibilities quite well. It probably didn't hurt that under certain circumstances the Polish and Czech officers were allowed in the large PX at Yongsan. The Swiss, incidentally, to the best of my knowledge were all Swiss foreign ministry officials in army uniforms. The Swedes I think were actually army people, at least most of them were, although they tended to be assigned to Panmunjom for very long periods.

Q: The Swiss, of course, have total mobilization in which probably you could meld the two together quite easily.

O'NEILL: Let me mention another big blowup. The UN Command decided that as a demonstration of South Korea's stature and to demonstrate that South Korea was a full partner in the armistice, something that the North Koreans always denied, the UN Command commander decided to nominate a South Korean army major general, General Hwang Won-Tak as the UN Command Military Armistice Commission senior member. He would be the highest ranking UNC person who would meet across the table at Panmunjom in the little room with the North Korean counterparts. The North Koreans reacted very badly to that asserting that South Korea had nothing to do with the armistice, that they hadn't signed the armistice. Therefore, there would be no more meetings at the major general level on the military armistice commission. There was this great uproar.

Several levels of meetings traditionally took place in Panmunjom. Normally there were duty officer meetings at the rank of major on a daily basis. There could be colonel level meetings for more serious or complicated issues above the duty officer level. For big things, major violations of the armistice or other major activities, they would meet at the senior member level, the Military Armistice Commission or MAC Senior member level. That got shut down when General Hwang was named. And it still hasn't been fully repaired. It didn't in any way change the threat level, just changed the rhetoric level, and it changed the effectiveness, of the structure of the Military Armistice Commission.

There were two other things that happened of importance to the U.S. side during that period. There were remains returned, and I was involved in both of them. The first of these, I can't remember now the exact timing of this but probably in '89 or early '90, the North Koreans announced that they had "found" remains of American servicemen who had been killed in the Korean War. They'd found them and they were going to return these at Panmunjom. There was negotiation through the Military Armistice Commission mechanism for doing this.

A congressional delegation or CODEL led by the then-chairman of the house veterans' affairs committee Sonny Montgomery of Mississippi and a large number, probably 12 or 13 members of congress, were going to Panmunjom to receive the remains, not coincidentally gaining some publicity for themselves. There was an awful lot of work to do. I was going to be the embassy's control officer for the CODEL. When the ceremony took place, we had representatives of almost all the UN Command countries in Seoul, even including Colombia. The Colombian military attachï¿½ was there, as were his British, Aussie, Canadian, French and Thai counterparts. There were British Gurkha soldiers from the UN Command honor guard at Panmunjom as well as ROK soldiers.

Q: I might point out Colombia took great pride, in fact, during the Korean War as the unit performed very well.

O'NEILL: Yes, they did. The North Koreans brought out the boxes of remains, and these were small lacquer boxes, they weren't coffin size. Of course, everybody on our side except me and the members of the House were all in uniform, so it was quite a fine thing, even the Poles and the Czechs including a Polish major general saluting these UN Command remains as they came across the line at Panmunjom.

By that time, the Poles were already under pressure from the North Koreans because of the fact that they were no longer "neutral," that is, they were now a democracy. It was quite a day, and I was glad to be there. One of the first things that they did was they put UN flags on each of the boxes as they came across. Eventually they were repatriated to the U.S. Army's Central Identification Lab in Hawaii.

To the best of my knowledge, if any of them were ever identified as being specific U.S. service members, it took years of work in Hawaii. The North Koreans turned over some artifacts with the remains. One of them was a dog tag belonging to a particular corporal from in the 2nd Infantry Division. The U.S. military people in meetings with the congressional delegation before the remains returned cautioned all of them very clearly, "Do not make any announcements about these remains or the identity of these remains based on anything the North Koreans say or do." It was as clear as a bell.

This corporal's whose dog tags appeared with these remains happened to be from the congressional district of one of these members of Congress. He later became, I won't name him, but he later became famed in song and story for anybody who dealt with North Korean affairs. He lost no time while they were still in Korea of announcing the return of the corporal's remains. One of the first things that the people at CILHI did was to rule out any identification of that corporal with any bones in any of the little boxes.

Let me jump ahead and speak about the second remains return at Panmunjom, because I was also involved in that. The second one was about a year later in 1991, I think. The American congressman who was coming was Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire, a very conservative Republican. He was a Navy veteran of Vietnam among other things. The remains return aside, Smith came with the preconceived notion that there were still American POWs - Prisoners of War - from the Korean War being kept in North Korea. We in the Embassy, along with U.S. Forces Korea and the UN Command Military Armistice Commission people were giving full support to Smith on the remains return. Nonetheless, he was quite suspicious of our intentions and beliefs because he was sure we didn't share his belief in this idea of live POWs in North Korea.

The remains ceremony at Panmunjom was preceded by a highly contentious negotiation over two days, between Smith and a North Korean, actually a foreign ministry official who was then the head of the North Korean Red Cross. As we pointed out to Senator Smith in the briefings we did for him, this North Korean in a previous incarnation had been the North Korean ambassador in Burma in 1983. He had played a significant role in helping to arrange the entry into Burma of the North Korean assassins who tried to kill President Chun Doo-Hwan by blowing up the Aung San mausoleum in October 1983. This individual's humanitarian instincts were in question as far as I was concerned.

Anyhow, there was a very contentious negotiation which I think was for show. The North Koreans have a tendency early in a negotiation to beat up on their opponents to soften them up even though they know they're ultimately going to give the opponents what they want which in this case was the remains. We'd had a really bad day, and we all went back to Seoul and discussed with Smith what was going to happen.

The North Koreans did return the remains on the second day. I don't know if any of those remains have actually been identified even yet. It's a very slow process, and you can't be sure what the North Koreans are returning. Anyhow, this was a very contentious thing inside the U.S. side, too, behind the scenes because of Smith's view that we in the embassy and U.S. Forces Korea were insufficiently patriotic because we didn't believe that there were live POWs in North Korea. Anyway, those were the only two remains returns I think since 1954.

Q: Representative Smith's comes and asks you...

O'NEILL: Senator Smith.

Q: Senator Smith. Oh, my goodness! Senator Smith comes and asks, "Do you believe that the North Koreans have prisoners of war stuck in camps?" It is conceivable that they are people who were originally prisoners of war who essentially defected and have settled in.

O'NEILL: Yes, there were actually 21 Americans and one British Royal Marine who chose not to go home in the big prisoner return after the armistice. Those 21 Americans all went to China and the Chinese were the ones who were actually running the POW camps in North Korea. They took them over from the North Koreans pretty early in the war. I think part of the Chinese reasoning, and this is way beyond the scope of this interview, I suppose, but I think that the Chinese reasoning in taking over these POW camps was that the North Koreans were simply mistreating the POWs and weren't getting any value out of it.

The Chinese approach was, "We're not going to treat them very well although we'll pretend to for propaganda reasons, but we want to get some use of these people," aside from whatever military information they might get through mistreatment on one hand and cajolery and that on the other hand. They wanted propaganda value to try to get them to say nice things about the People's Republic of China and condemn the barbaric Americans for their war practices. So the Chinese had a more sophisticated view of the uses to which these prisoners could be put. It's not impossible under the circumstances of the war that some American POWs especially Air Force types would have been taken into China and the Soviet Union for interrogation particularly about how the bombing raids were conducted, what their tactics were and that sort of thing. My guess is if that happened, those people would eventually have been killed if they didn't die in camps. It's very hard to believe that there were still live POWs in North Korea in the 1990s.

There were certainly post-Korean War American defectors in the north. I think we knew most of them by name. In fact, one as I recall was a private first class named White who went across the DMZ while I was in Korea in the 1988 to '92 period. Sometime later the North Koreans reported that he had died, supposedly drowned. But there were indeed a handful of American who had gone over the DMZ in the post-war era, and that has gotten more attention recently in the context of these Japanese abductees because one, a Sergeant Jenkins, actually married one of the Japanese abductees in North Korea. He's now in Japan having gotten a very cursory court martial for desertion and given a very light sentence, since the Army presumably recognized that he had punished himself by spending 27 years in North Korea.

Q: I think this is a good place to stop. We've just finished talking about the return of remains. We've also talked about the fall of communism in Europe and also its effect, and also we've talked about North Korea. And the two major things we haven't really talked about: China and relations with China in this period and relations with the Soviets. Well, it's still going to be the Soviet Union by your time. And I don't think we've talked about Japan.

O'NEILL: Not Japan, no.

Q: So we'll talk about those next time. Great!

Q: Today is the 24th of October 2008 with Al O'Neill. We have a number of things to cover. One of the things you mentioned we haven't done is Korea and the Gulf War. This was the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and our response. How was this for the Koreans?

O'NEILL: Well, a couple of things by way of preface. One is that the Koreans by the 1970's were very heavily involved throughout the Middle East in major construction projects, huge infrastructure projects like Jubail Port in Saudi Arabia and projects in Libya, also in Iraq. The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in August of 1990 caused a huge stir in Korea because there were so many Koreans in the Middle East in these various projects. There was a major consular question if you will; what was going to happen and how dangerous would the situation be for the Koreans there. When the Desert Storm campaign started in February 1991 when the U.S. and the coalition began attacking Iraqi forces, the Koreans I think had gotten most of their people out of Iraq. I don't think there was any substantial number of Koreans in Iraq at that time.

Another feature of Korea's relations with the Middle East is that a disproportionate amount of Korea's oil came from the Persian Gulf area. I think it even now has a greater dependence on Middle East for its oil supplies than any other country in the OECD. When Desert Storm, the actual attack, commenced the Korean government had to be showing the people that it was doing something, so they instituted various kinds of energy saving measures. Some were small ones like in government buildings the elevator did not go down below the fifth floor, more symbolic than anything else. But I also recollect that they put in the same kinds of driving restrictions they had as a traffic control measure during the Olympics; that is, odd-even number days for when you had permission to drive based on the last digit of your license plate. I forget exactly how long that lasted, but it was in effect for some while.

The other thing, though, was peculiar to the Korean situation. The U.S.-led coalition chased Saddam's army out of Kuwait in about 100 hours of ground combat after a long bombing campaign. There were a couple of interesting ramifications of this, one of which was - perhaps the principal one - that South Koreans took a fresh look at U.S. Forces Korea and got a new appreciation of how capable these forces actually were. This was, I think, a morale booster in terms of appreciation of the deterrent towards North Korea. It also became pretty clear eventually through intelligence channels and news reports that that Kim Jong-Il had access to CNN's coverage of the Gulf War which you may remember was pervasive 24 hours a day. Kim Jong-Il was watching these same U.S. forces destroy an army that was equipped very much like his, with all those Chinese armored personnel carriers and Russian tanks, etc. Seeing that force being obliterated by U.S. air and ground forces of the kind that we had in the ROK presumably gave Kim Jong-Il some food for thought and also, again, should have boosted the deterrent.

At the same time, from before Desert Storm commenced we were trying to get the Koreans to contribute military forces to the coalition by appealing to what we thought was their self-interest to help secure these very same oil supplies. They just didn't do it. Part of this may have been kind of a policy hangover from the Vietnam War when Korea under Park Chung-Hee had contributed two infantry divisions and a marine brigade and some other forces to the South Vietnamese side. That was still controversial in Korea because, of course, they were taking these forces from the defense of the ROK for the defense of another country which was beleaguered by a communist invasion and insurgency. It was also the feeling among a lot of South Koreans that the ROK forces had been mercenaries in the sense that the U.S. was footing the bill for the Korean forces in Vietnam. There was lingering resentment which I think played in various ways into the Korean antipathy toward contributing forces to the coalition of the Gulf War.

Q: Let's move to relations with China.

O'NEILL: The Republic of Korea's relationship with China had moved tremendously during this period, not fully to the point of full diplomatic relations which only took place a few months after I left. It actually had been on a gradual uphill path for quite a while. China had no remaining enmity towards the Republic of Korea. They had participated in the Olympics which was a real blow to the North Koreans. I'm sure nobody in the top echelons of the Chinese government had had any idea of boycotting the '88 Olympics in favor of North Korea particularly not when the relationship with the North Koreans and the Chinese was so strained by such outrages as that Rangoon bombing in 1983 and also Chinese certainty that it was the North Koreans in 1987 who had blown up KAL-858 near Burma as a terrorist venture to try to discourage people from to the Olympics. So as usual there was no love lost between the North Koreans and the Chinese by that time.

Also, even though Kim Il-Sung was still the great leader, the Chinese, particularly Deng Xiao-ping, were outraged by the idea that Kim Il-sung had by that time established his first-born son Kim Jong-Il as the heir apparent, the crown prince of North Korea. As far as I know, that whole concept drove an orthodox communist like Deng up the wall.

Also, I think there was increasing three-way third country trade through Hong Kong between the ROK and China during this time. I recall reading somewhere that ROK-PRC trade at the time was at least three times the value of PRC-DPRK trade. There were a lot of reasons for the move toward full diplomatic relations during this period, and that's exactly what the Chinese were doing. There was another angle for the Chinese, too, which was by the same token an obstacle for the ROK in moving toward diplomatic relations. This was the question of Taiwan. The South's diplomatic relations were with the Republic of China, the government which that Chiang Kai-shek had established in Taiwan in the aftermath of the Chinese civil war. That was a relationship that was cemented by common enemies and antipathy toward communism and a good bit of trade.

Both places, Taiwan and the ROK, were "Asian tigers." They were moving up the scale of technology, their economies were largely booming, and for the same reasons: they were very smart, hard working populations moving into all sorts of hi-tech industries. There was recognition, obviously, in the ROK that the only way you could have full diplomatic relations with the PRC was by breaking relations with Taiwan. I think most Korean officials who were dealing with this issue believed this was going to be necessary, and no matter how painful still had to be done.

Obviously the people in Taiwan were looking at it from a different perspective and weren't thrilled with the idea at all. That was the trade-off: one would have to go and the other would come in. The PRC followed a step-by-step process. At some point during my tenure, they opened a trade office in Seoul. You could see by that time that the handwriting was on the wall, and the Chinese inched up various visits, etc., to the point where in 1991 there was a final move by the ROK to become a full member of the UN. Both Koreas had long had observer status, and it had always been a very contentious issue in the UN for decades after the war.

It became clear that as a permanent member of the Security Council, the PRC would not veto South Korean entry into the UN which, I'm sure, caused Kim Il-Sung to kick his wastebasket around the office a good bit. There wasn't anything he could do about it and, therefore, the North said they were going to join, too, so the two Koreas did enter. Ultimately, it was either September or October of 1992 when the ROK broke relations with the Republic of China on Taiwan and the PRC opened an embassy and full diplomatic relations with Seoul. That was quite a remarkable event in Asian history.

Q: Were the Koreans asking you how did we the United States handled the Taiwan situation?

O'NEILL: They had representation in Taipei all along. I don't remember any specific discussion about how we did that or any particular question. I don't think they really needed to ask too much because they saw it firsthand. We had more discussion, really, over the question of relations with the Soviet Union; not whether they should do it or not but more the mechanics of it. This was a more unfamiliar situation to them than the China-Taiwan situation. By the time of the move toward diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, South Korea was in the position of being able to extend credits and loans to the Soviets. That was an incentive to the Soviets, an additional incentive, aside from plain common sense for opening relations with Seoul despite North Korea yelling and screaming. The enviable position that Korea had created for itself in the worlds of diplomacy and economics contributed to this movement toward relations with the former enemies of the ROK and great friends and allies of the North Koreans.

As for Japan, you can never tell what's going to happen next in ROK-Japan relations. It's probably the one that South Koreans are most touchy about and most ready to explode about in almost any moment. During that period to the best of my recollection, the relations were probably as good as they could be. I can't remember any real blowup. There were always these things that the South Koreans were watching including territorial disputes over some little rocks in what the Koreans uniquely call the East Sea of Korea and everybody else calls the Sea of Japan. There's also the perennial textbook issue: what kinds of history textbooks the Japanese ministry of education, always one of their most conservative ministries, will approve for possible use in Japanese schools.

Q: Both how they treat the...

O'NEILL: How the Japanese treat the World War II period resonates for the Chinese and the Koreans. Particularly, this means issues like the so-called comfort women, the sex slaves the Japanese armed forces employed as prostitutes during the war and, too, that the Nanjing massacre of 1937 in which hundreds of thousands of Chinese were slaughtered over a span of about six weeks by the Imperial Army once they captured what at the time was Chiang Kai-shek's capital of Nanjing.

Of course, during all that period and even now there's a tremendous series of linkages between the Japanese and Korean economies, with joint ventures between Japanese carmakers and Korean carmakers like Hyundai and Daewoo and other areas of manufacturing. The Koreans were big competitors of the Japanese in specialty steels and also in shipbuilding including supertankers the South Koreans were turning out. So while there was a lot of connection between the two economies, there was always the possibility of some flare-up over historical issues.

Koreans have a very long memory, and I'll illustrate this with a story that I always tell about the first Mongolian ambassador to the ROK. Mongolia became part of the parade of countries opening relations with the ROK during this period. The first Mongolian ambassador to Seoul was named Urjinhundev. He was not only a Kim Il-sung University graduate; he also had been the Mongolian ambassador in Pyongyang at one time like the first Hungarian ambassador, Ambassador Sandor Etre. A colleague, Dick Christenson, and I met with Ambassador Urjinhundev not long after his arrival. This discussion was conducted in Korean, my shaky Korean and Dick Christenson's near perfect Korean.

Urjinhundev told us that as he was going around Seoul meeting government officials and student groups and business people, one of the questions that he was invariably asked by Koreans particularly on college campuses was whether he would apologize for Kublai Khan's invasions of Korea in the 13th Century. I think he responded that he had no instructions on that subject [laughter]. But that was a good illustration of the Korean view of themselves and the world; they are the victims of everybody, and they'd never done anything wrong. They forget that Korean ships helped Kublai Khan invade Japan during that same period. Those were the ships to transport Kublai Khan's Mongol soldiers in the 1200s, in these two invasions that gave rise to the myth of the kamikaze, the "divine wind" that saved Japan.

There was a sequel to this. Soon thereafter there was a visit wither by the Mongolian prime minister at the time or the president. As always I went to the foreign ministry to the China-Mongolia Division director to get a preview, just the routine thing that diplomats do. The director said, "We're doing this, we're doing that, we're trying to arrange these loans and this guarantee." The usual sort of thing. He said that Koreans consider the Mongolians the closest to them ethnically among all Asians. There's only one problem: a lot of Koreans are going to expect an apology from the Mongolians because of Kublai Khan's invasion in the 13th Century. He said the government wasn't going to raise this at all, but it's out there. They hoped it would not become an obstacle to the visit in any way. In fact, it didn't, but the government was worried.

Anyway, it's a good illustration of Korean xenophobia. It plays into the business of anti-Americanism. Nowadays, most Koreans prefer to call it "anti-American sentiment" but it is the most salient manifestation of this Korean feeling of victimization that shows up with respect to the Chinese, obviously regarding the Japanese but even the toward the dear Mongolians whom everybody loves now that they don't go around conquering the rest of the world. It's just part of the Korean psyche. They teach themselves that everybody's out to get them and that they're the victims of great powers which, of course, at the end of the 19th Century they were and the early 20th Century they were. There were indeed three wars fought over the control of Korea between 1894 and 1953. There's this sense, but it just takes on an exaggerated importance.

Q: Having spent five years in Serbia, I can identify with this because it is exactly Serbs' thing. If the elevator didn't work in a hotel, if the elevator isn't working, you get back almost invariably, "You didn't spend 500 years under the Turkish yoke." It's the standard for...

O'NEILL: Well, we're Irish, too, so we know about real victimization! We had the English for 700 years!

Q: With anti-Americanism or what was it...

O'NEILL: Anti-American sentiment.

Q: Anti-American sentiment. Okay. Did you sit around the embassy and look at this, and what could we do, and what are the roots of this and think about this as an issue?

O'NEILL: Oh, yes. Oh, very definitely. Most particularly as I detailed earlier in the interview in the context of the Seoul Olympics. I still unfondly remember that as a gigantic anti-American festival with sporting events thrown in. Ambassador Jim Lilley was there up through the end of December 1988, so he had the full blast of the Olympics. He used the expression, "We're the biggest show in town," meaning that of all the countries represented there, we were the biggest especially with the large military presence and its endless potential for crimes or accidents, which could become an immediate focus of the anti-American student movement and others as well.

There was also, again, the Korean belief that we were in Korea "for our own purposes" as if this meant the exclusion of any interest that benefited Koreans. Lilley was an excellent leader. He has been a career CIA officer with close ties to George H. W. Bush because he was the station chief in Beijing when Bush was the liaison office chief. His father was a businessman in China; so Lilley was China born and had a deep interest in Asia and served most of his CIA career in Asia.

Ambassador Lilley had an understanding of why the Koreans thought this way. It did wear on our morale in the embassy because it came up in every way that you could possibly think of. There was an instance where a shipment of American grapefruit into Korea was found upon inspection to have traces of Alar on it. Alar is a chemical that is normally used in apple orchards to keep apples on the tree long enough to ripen fully before they get picked. There was medical evidence that this could be a carcinogen. I suppose if you ate Alar for breakfast in large quantities for years you could get cancer.

Alar is not used in grapefruit at all. It has no effect on grapefruit because of the consistency of the grapefruit rind, I guess it doesn't penetrate and do what it does for apples. For some reason or other, though, traces of Alar were found on this shipment of grapefruit. This produced a huge uproar, the usual thing: the Americans are poisoning us with this carcinogen. It was all throughout the newspapers and news media, and there were student demonstrations and all that. The Korean media made a huge thing of it. Koreans, led by the news media, totally ignored the fact that Korean apple growers import Alar literally by the ton every year for the purposes for which it is usually used. That didn't show up in the news media at all although our agricultural trade office and our public affairs people were trying to put that information out, but it was just ignored. We don't own a Korean newspaper, so there was no way to get that into the press unless they wanted to put it in. During the uproar, it would have been unpatriotic for the news media to point out the heavy Korean use of Alar, so it just didn't happen.

The point is that Koreans were sort of almost always on edge about to do with the U.S. and ways they can be victimized by the U.S. It does take a toll on you. Meanwhile, of course, Korea was nonetheless probably the second or third largest importer of American agricultural products of all kinds including fruits, beef, and particularly high grade beef.

The Koreans had lots of import restrictions on certain agricultural products normally to protect their own industries. In fact, the man who was the head of the U.S. Embassy's agricultural trade office told me that the easiest way to survey the full scope of Korean agricultural restrictions on imports from the United States was simply to go to the main U.S. army commissary at Yongsan, the largest in the world, and look at the empty shelves. Whatever was supposed to be on those shelves was subject to Korean import restrictions. The main reason those shelves were empty was that Korean wives of American GIs were buying up large quantities and selling on the black market.

We did do a lot to try to counter some of the anti-American feeling. In the fall of 1988, Ambassador Lilley made a big speech on the armed forces. One of the big issues that Koreans really didn't understand was the question of operational control of Korean armed forces. The Korean public view was that the U.S. had "command" of Korean forces and, therefore, Korea was like the North Koreans portrayed it, a puppet of the United States.

In fact, what the U.S. commander of the ROK-US Combined Forces Command actually had was "operational control" of most Korean armed forces but not even all of them. It is a key distinction because if you've got command of a unit, it means that you promote people, that you pay them, that you punish them and reassign them. With command, you are essentially ordering their entire lives, as a company commander would do of his soldiers, as I did when I was a company commander.

From 1953, the U.S. commander never had that level of control over Korean forces. It was only operational control or OPCON. The Korean president put certain units under U.S. operational control; historically most of the Korean forces were in this mode both in peacetime and wartime. Then the American commander could direct a Korean division commander to have his division play in a particular exercise or move to such-and-such a location in combat. But he certainly was not promoting or relieving the regimental commanders. The Korean division commander had command of his unit; the top American commander had operational control.

Ambassador Lilley made a major speech and tried to point this out that this operational control issue was agreed by successive Korean presidents and that no Americans had command of Korean units at all. It actually got pretty good press coverage, amazingly, for some period of time, and it was discussed on TV. There were certain things that you could do, but there were certain things that we were finding very much an uphill battle.

Q: How about pressure? How about with your wife? How did she find it being back there? Al's wife is Korean. Were they getting at her?

O'NEILL: Well, sometimes I think Korea got to her. My wife had been out of Korea as a place of residence since 1970 but, of course, she had visited during the four years we were in Japan and from Rangoon. But this was the first time that she actually resided in Korea in about 18 years. I think she found how Americanized she had become. Of course, we were living in an American village in the U.S. embassy housing compound within a large U.S. Army post called Yongsan Army Garrison in downtown Seoul. Of course, she had family members, friends, schoolmates that she knew.

For much of the four years, she was working in the consular section on immigrant visas. She was in effect deputized as a vice-consul as family members can be, so she was doing the same kind of things that the American officers were doing, not the work that the Korean citizen Foreign Service Nationals were doing in support of the American officers. She got the full blast of fraudulent documents and, let's say, departures from the truth in interviews and all that, as any American officer would. She didn't like that a whole lot.

I think overall she had the best of both worlds in the sense that she was living in Korea as an American diplomat's wife and embassy employee on the one side plus she was a Korean back in her home country. Largely it was good for her. Our son was in high school during those four years at Seoul Foreign School which was the oldest of the international schools in Seoul founded by American missionaries in 1912 during the Japanese occupation. It was an extremely competitive school. She, like all the Korean mothers at this school, were intensely concerned about getting their children into either Harvard, Yale, or Stanford with the idea that if your son couldn't get into one of those schools that he was doomed forever because below that there was just this black void.

Q: My wife taught there.

O'NEILL: I always referred to that school as a Calvinist pressure cooker. It was a really good school. Academic standards were extremely high, but the atmosphere was extremely intense in no small part because of all the Korean mothers who were there overseeing their children's futures.

Q: I have to mention that in Korea when a child is accepted in school, the parents are asked, "How many hours a day can you work with the child on their homework and drill what we teach?" This was expected. Al, you left there in '92?

O'NEILL: June 25, 1992.

Q: June 25th. That's a date I remember.

O'NEILL: The 42nd anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War.

Q: Where did you go?

O'NEILL: I went back to the State Department for two years. My immediate assignment was as deputy director of the Philippine desk. There was still in the East Asia and Pacific bureau a separate Office of Philippine Affairs. I got there at the beginning of August 1992. Most of the American military bases had closed by that time. Only one major installation was left which was Cubi Point Naval Air Station, part of the giant Subic Bay Naval Base. I had never worked on Philippine affairs before.

On the way back we stopped in Hawaii, and I went to the Pacific command for some meetings and briefings about the final close-out of the U.S. military bases in the Philippines. Also, I visited the East-West Center for a day or two for consultations with the people who dealt with Philippine affairs or Southeast Asian affairs in general.

Q: We're talking about the U.S. Pacific Command. Were you picking up an attitude about the Philippines? After decades in the Philippine bases was there a sense of relief or a change or resentment?

O'NEILL: At Pacific Command (PACOM) in Hawaii?

Q: Yes.

O'NEILL: By way of background, we had had quite a number of installations in the Philippines going back to 1898. Our acquisition of the Philippines from Spain was in itself a strange business. We fought the Spanish in a war that lasted about 90 days in 1898, and in a battle in Manila Bay on May 1, 1898 George Dewey's small fleet annihilated the Spanish fleet. At the time that this happened there was a fairly large rebellion going on against Spain led by intellectual Filipinos, Spanish-educated elite. Originally what they wanted was more autonomy within the Spanish empire, including seats in the Spanish parliament. But the Spanish over-reacted, cracked down on the Filipinos, thereby sparking an independence rebellion which was underway at the time the U.S. went to war with Spain. They had already come up with a democratic republican constitution, the first in Asia's history a couple of years before, in 1896. Because Spain lost the war, the U.S. agreed to pay Spain $20 million for the Philippines, ignoring the fact that there were Filipinos for one thing, and also that the U.S. had used these ones who were in an armed insurrection against Spain to further our war aims.

There's a famous story about President William McKinley and the Philippines. McKinley told a group of Methodist missionaries working in Asia that he was struggling with the issue of whether the U.S. should simply control Manila and the Manila Bay area which is a huge harbor, or take the entire island of Luzon, the big island that Manila is on or take control of the entire archipelago. McKinley told the missionaries that God told him to take the entire archipelago which we proceeded to do. When I would brief groups like visiting newly minted American generals and new Peace Corps volunteers I would use a hypothetical analogy from U.S. history to illustrate how Filipinos saw our action. Imagine if after the Revolution, the French, who had given us naval and ground support to beat the British, had said, "Well, these 13 colonies look pretty good. We're staying, and we're taking control." That's basically what we did in the Philippines.

Shortly a war broke out between the Philippine independence forces and the American occupation forces which dragged on a very nasty fashion for several years. We called it the Philippine Insurrection, because they were rebelling against U.S. control of their country. The war resulted in the deaths of a lot of Filipinos but also resulted in the first universal system of education the Philippines ever had, English language education. Spain had deliberately avoided using Spanish as a common language, as a way of keeping the Filipinos divided, since the islands were home to dozens of languages. The war began about 35 or 40 years of slowly receding American control over the Philippines leading to independence in 1946. But the bases that we had throughout the Philippines went back to that early period, including Clark Air Base which was originally a cavalry post called Fort Stotsenburg. Subic Bay was a huge installation for the Navy and Marines; it has one of the best harbors in Asia. The entire Seventh Fleet can anchor in Subic Bay. It's that big.

To bring things closer to the present, in 1991, there was a huge eruption of Mount Pinatubo, which near both those bases. It was one of the biggest volcanic eruptions in recent decades, which essentially destroyed Clark Air Base. There was an evacuation of Americans and Filipinos from the entire area. There were ash flows all over the area and Clark Air Base was rendered inoperable.

During this period, the U.S. was renegotiating the base agreement with the government of Cory Aquino. Aquino's government was conflicted about the base agreement. They wanted it. They knew that it was valuable to the Philippines in a lot of ways, not only economically but also in terms of Philippine stature and ability to defend itself. But there was also this nationalist tugging in the opposite direction, trying to reduce ties with the United States. Some Filipinos talked in terms of "slaying the father figure," which gives you some of an idea about their psychology. The renegotiation was long and contentious. The Aquino government and the U.S. came to an agreement on a new base arrangement that focused, again, on Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base. Under the Philippine constitution which was put into effect after Marcos fell, two-thirds of the Philippine senate had to approve this agreement. For the U.S., it was an executive agreement under the president's authority, so it did not need to go to the U.S. Senate for advice and consent although it would be sent to the Senate after it had been completed.

The Philippine Senate is a strange body. Each senator is elected nationwide. There are only 24 senators and you needed two-thirds or 16 to vote in favor of the new base agreement for it to go into effect. In 1991, twelve senators voted against it; so the agreement was dead. Then the U.S. announcethis was August of 1991 - that we were clearing out of these two bases and that we'd be gone within 15 months, which was a gigantic undertaking because these were huge installations which had been very important for a long time.

Clark was not so much of a problem because it was rendered unusable for the time at least by the Pinatubo eruption, but Subic Bay was not only a great training area for the Navy and Marines with its jungle warfare school and other facilities but it had been a real anchor of the Navy in Asia for a very long time. There were great ship repair facilities. You could bring aircraft carriers in to do work on them as well as smaller ships. These shipyards and other Subic facilities employed thousands of Filipino civilians.

That was a very long way around to your question. There was definitely a feeling of resentment at Pacific Command in general at the Filipinos for this defeat of the base agreement. There was a strong belief that President Aquino did not press hard enough for it, did not stand up and say that the agreement was very important to Filipinos for many reasons as well as it is to the United States. Equally, her defense secretary, Fidel Ramos, West Point 1950, and a Korean War veteran of the Philippine Army, did not step up as far as the U.S. was concerned. So there was considerable anger particularly over the loss of Subic Bay because the Navy had to find places to put these ships, had to figure out what replacement ship repair facilities could be used.

There were tough negotiations with the Filipinos as to what the U.S. would leave behind in addition to the millions and millions of dollars worth of infrastructure: housing and clubs and various kinds of maintenance shops and all that that were part of Subic Bay and Clark. One of the biggest bones of contention was that some of the facilities in Subic were floating dry docks, which are like large boxes into which you move a ship to repair it. You pump the water out, and you have the ship dry and resting dry on a cradle, and you could work on the hull. They weren't permanent as they are in some places, but they were basically part of the U.S. Navy's fleet. The Filipinos said that they needed those dry docks and the Navy said they're going when we go. The Navy did take the dry docks with them which inhibited the development of Subic Bay into civilian pursuits, but it was not surprising. That was part of the atmosphere in which I arrived in the Philippine desk in 1992.

We were still engaged with the Filipinos despite the closeout of the bases which was finished in November 1992. We were still engaged in what was called the Multilateral Assistance Initiative or MAI in which we were trying to get other countries to assist Aquino's government with infrastructure projects of various kinds and longer term aid projects. As a mark of the importance that we put on the MAI, Elliot Richardson, the former attorney general, a very distinguished figure in foreign policy, was the head of it. It was a tough sell to get third countries to sign on, with all the usual turmoil in the Philippines. It was another one of those cases where we weren't doing very much in monetary terms but were trying to get other countries to aid the Philippines in what we said was their interest. But we still had our own aid program under USAID. We were dealing with a huge change in U.S.-Philippine relations, but we worked hard and came out with a pretty good solution to some of the problems.

As a peculiarity of the Philippines' relations with the U.S., the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) was not part of the mutual security treaty that we still had with the Philippines. The mutual security treaty dating from the 1950s was not changed by the end of the bases, but what did change was our ability to exercise with the Philippine forces and have ship visits because the SOFA predated the treaty. The SOFA was part of the bases arrangement and not an annex to the treaty as it is, say, in Japan, Korea, and Thailand.

We had to come up with interim arrangements because we didn't think on either side that the time was right to negotiate a new SOFA. That didn't come until I was serving in the Philippines later, the late 1990s.

Q: Was there a certain sense of relief, say, at these base negotiations? We would no sooner finish negotiating one base negotiation and get it signed then crank up for another one which seemed to be a matter of how much money we would pay.

O'NEILL: I think that was a part of the mix of the American emotions toward the Philippines. In fact, I think you could see that in the speed with which the U.S. closed out these gigantic installations. They were completely gone from Subic and Clark within 15 months. There wasn't much to take out of Clark because of the volcanic eruption, but Subic was still a huge operational base with Navy facilities that were basically second to none. Here's just one illustration about Cubi Point Naval Air Station. Normally, when an aircraft carrier comes into port the planes are flown off first, to an air base so they'll be ready to go if the carrier has to leave quickly. Well, at Cubi Point you didn't have to fly the airplanes off. They just moved the carrier's bow up to a giant ramp, and towed the airplanes onto the runway. As far as I know was unique in the entire world of American bases. Some admiral got the idea of building that off-ramp and lo and behold they did it.

Losing Subic was a real setback for the Navy, but they pulled out within 15 months. In fact, after the failure of the senate vote and the dooming of the base agreement, the Aquino government then got energized to say that 15 months was too fast. They said space things out. The Navy said the agreement was defeated and they were leaving.

Q: Two things: Where did the dry docks, etc., where did they go to, and what about all these skilled laborers?

O'NEILL: The dry docks, as I recall, either went to Guam which is a U.S. territory, or maybe to Yokosuka or Sasebo, our naval bases in Japan. In any case, those skilled laborers were really in a fix because they were Filipinos. They weren't going anywhere, and their livelihood had been a very good one. The Navy had happily paid them for very good work repairing U.S. naval vessels.

I remember a Philippine newspaper editorial lamenting the end of the base agreement and what it meant to the Philippines. It pointed out that at the ceremony to close Cubi Point in November 1992, none of the senators who had voted against the base agreement showed up. The editorial said they were sure the reason was that these base workers - the shipyard workers - would probably have lynched the senators who put them in the situation. That may have been somewhat of an exaggeration, but they all of a sudden went from being employed skilled laborers to people with no employment at all.

What happened was "only in the Philippines." The mayor of Olongapo the Philippine city adjacent to Subic Bay was named Dick Gordon, Richard Gordon. He once told me he was the grandson of a man named Jacob Gordon, an interpreter for the U.S. Army who came from upstate New York at the time of the Philippine Insurrection. Jacob Gordon married into a Philippine family from Olongapo. The Gordon family essentially ran Olongapo and its congressional district thereafter. Somebody in the family's always the mayor of Olongapo. Somebody in the family or who's married into the family like Dick's wife Kate Gordon would have the seat in the House of Representatives from that district.

Dick Gordon was mayor of Olongapo and also chairman of the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority, SBMA. He was a pretty visionary guy. He managed to persuade the workers of Subic Bay to stay as unpaid volunteers until he could come up with a plan that the Philippine government would approve for the conversion of Subic Bay Base into a civilian facility, some kind of free trade zone, etc. Among the things that the workers were doing was preventing the extensive looting that took place at Clark Air Base.

Q: At Clark they just came over the fence and stripped the...

O'NEILL: Not only over the fence but within Clark Air Base because it was a joint Philippine-U.S. facility. There were Philippine Air Force units as well as the Americans. When the Americans closed it out the Philippine Air Force and the happy local population swarmed onto the base and took out everything but the runway because they couldn't move the runway, but everything else was gone. They just looted everything: light fixtures, toilet fixtures, everything. Clark Air Base was essentially destroyed.

Well, Dick Gordon was determined not to have that happened at Subic, so the workers were making sure that nobody did that to Subic Bay. He was charismatic enough to be able to persuade them to work for nothing for however many months or perhaps years it was going to take to convert Subic to civilian use, which is what has happened. They do at least a limited amount of ship repair there now, but they have lots of other companies including American ones operating there. There are call centers, various American firms like Dell have call centers there, and some of the Taiwan computer manufacturers like Acer have factories there. At this point now you also have U.S. Navy ship business there, including ship visits. Ultimately, the Philippines came out of it fairly well, but they still had a sort of somewhat conflicted relationship with the United States.

Another thing happened during this time as a direct result of the closeout of the bases, which historically had generated probably two-thirds of the work of the Office of Philippine Affairs in the State Department. When the Clinton administration came in 1992 and Warren Christopher was Secretary of State, they were looking for ways to consolidate and cut the Department. Among many results, the Office of Philippine Affairs became combined with an office that covered Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore, so it became PIMBS: Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore. Tom Hubbard, the deputy assistant secretary who covered Southeast Asia, decided that I would be the deputy director of the new office, which happened in the fall of 1993. Tim Foster who was the last director of the Office of Philippine Affairs went on to the senior seminar when the consolidation took place. Scott Butcher, who was the DCM in Kuala Lumpur came back to become office director of this new PIMBS.

Q: Okay, let's pick this up the next time when the two combined...

O'NEILL: Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore.

Q: ...some of the issues there and how we viewed the government of Corazon Aquino and developments in the Philippines. This would be...

O'NEILL: This would be 1993 to '94.

Q: Okay, good. We'll pick it up then.

Today is the 29th of October 2008 with Al O'Neill. Al, we're talking about your time. First, you had something you want to talk about when you were in Seoul. What was the year of this?

O'NEILL: This was in 1990, and it was something I forgot in the discussion about Japan and the Koreas. There was a pretty strange visit to North Korea by a very senior Liberal Democratic Party politician named Kanemaru Shin in 1990 which was not coordinated with the Japanese government, particularly the Foreign Ministry. Kanemaru was an extremely powerful character. The tag line for him was the "King Maker" in the LDP. I'm not sure if he ever held any cabinet positions; he certainly didn't at the time that he made this visit. He went off to North Korea with a large LDP delegation, met with Kim Il-sung. This was at the time when the U.S. was beginning to pay more and more attention to the North Korea nuclear weapons program.

To me, it was a mystery that it took the Japanese so long to get spun up about the North Korea nuclear weapons program because, of course, it combined two of Japan's biggest prejudices. One is nuclear weapons, and the other is Koreans, but it took them a while. But Kanemaru went to North Korea in 1990, met with Kim Il-sung, to the great consternation of the Japanese foreign ministry and also to the unhappiness of the South Korean and U.S. governments.

While he was there he was talking about reparations to North Korea which is a keystone of any occasion when the Japanese and North Koreans talk about normalization of relations. He apologized for the Japanese colonial period, but he went further and apologized for the period after 1945 to the present in 1990 of, I think the expression was "abnormal relations," which really drove the South Koreans and us up the wall. As I say, the Japanese Foreign Ministry people were just beside themselves as well.

Kanemaru did go to Seoul which is where I heard the details of the visit. He met with President Roh Tae-woo. I got a read-out from the Korean Foreign Ministry people, which we were reported back to Washington. One of the things my interlocutor in the Northeast Asian division said was that Kanemaru had told Roh Tae-woo he was so overwhelmed by Kim Il-Sung's hospitality he had tears in his eyes. You can imagine how that would sit with the South Koreans. The second thing was that Kanemaru told him that he had received Kim Il-Sung's assurances that of course North Korea was not developing nuclear weapons, and he accepted that lie at face value. This was a very strange visit, and it set people's teeth on edge in several capitals for a while. What saved it was that it was clear that the Japanese government was not going to pursue Kanemaru's initiative.

Q: I was wondering, did you get any from your Japanese contacts or Korean contacts what was behind this? Was this just an idiosyncrasy of some guy out of his depth or something in the international context?

O'NEILL: That's a good question, and I can't remember now what the Korean government's view of that was. I'm sure we talked about this with our Japanese embassy colleagues, too, and I'm sure there was reporting from Tokyo. Because I wanted to remember the year of the visit, I recently looked at Kenneth Pyle's great book called Japan Rising, which came out a couple of years ago. His view was that Kanemaru was hoping for kickbacks from the North Koreans thinking that upon normalization, Japan would provide billions of dollars in reparations and Kanemaru somehow figured that he would get a slice of the pie. This is not too farfetched. Pyle is an expert on Japan. When Kanemaru was finally ousted and his political career came to an end, the police searched a safe in his house and found quite a large quantity of gold. I'm not saying that this came from the North Koreans. It's just that Kanemaru in his King Maker guise certainly had a strong attachment to money. I take Pyle's view as an accurate assessment, bizarre as it is.

Q: On the Philippines. You talked about the bases and all, but I don't think we've gotten into the Philippine government. You were there from when to when?

O'NEILL: I was the last deputy director for Philippine affairs in the East Asian Pacific bureau in 1992-93 and then deputy director for PIMBS for the following year. This was under the presidency of Corazon Aquino, the widow of Benigno Aquino who had been killed under the Marcos regime. Mrs. Aquino of course had led the people power revolution that ultimately ousted Marcos in 1986. Aquino was in many respects a wonderful person. She was essentially the perfect person in the sense of being a living symbol around whom the People Power movement could coalesce to oust Marcos. She came from a wealthy Sino-Filipino land owning family. Her husband Benigno Aquino was from another wealthy land owning family in central Luzon. She had plenty of relatives in political positions. Until her husband's murder, she was non-political, just a very devout Catholic housewife.

She was also not the most decisive person when she became president. Among many examples, this showed up in the base negotiations with the U.S. Last time, we talked about the achievement of a renegotiated base agreement through very, very tough negotiations between the U.S. and Philippine government led on the U.S side by Richard Armitage and on the Philippine side by a man named Alfredo Bengzon. He was a nationalistic character who was basically determined to squeeze the U.S. as much as he possibly could. On the Philippine side that agreement had to go to the senate for approval. A two-thirds majority was necessary which would have been 16 votes. It fell short of that with twelve votes against it.

At the time the last base was closing, some members of the Philippine congress were demanding that the U.S. amend the 1950s-vintage security treaty. There were some in the Philippine congress who were insisting that the U.S. renegotiate the treaty to add a specific security guarantee for the Philippines and any places that it had claimed in the South China Sea. Obviously, we had no intention of doing that at all.

Q: Al, did you have the feeling that in the Philippines the fact that the United States was going to pull out, did it come as a surprise that the United States agreed.

O'NEILL: It probably surprised a lot of Filipinos, especially those who didn't like us very much. From our perspective we had no choice. We could not have maintained the bases in a situation where the Philippine senate had failed to approve the agreement. It would have been a legally and constitutionally untenable.

Q: It could have been another vote or something...

O'NEILL: This is what happened - far too late. Cory Aquino, after the senate vote failed, she tried to... She had been quite silent as had her defense secretary Fidel Ramos, later her successor as president. He was a 1950 graduate of West Point, I might add. They were quite silent. Certainly the U.S. belief at the time was that they could have done more in their position to tell the Philippine people the value of these bases both in financial terms and also in terms of international politics, and they really didn't.

By the time I got to the Philippine desk from Seoul, this was pretty much done. There was no doubt that we were leaving completely. I got there in August 1992, and in November was the final hauling down of the flag at Cubi Point. There was certainly belief on the part of the U.S. military that the Aquino government didn't try hard enough, they could have done more but didn't, so we're getting out as quickly as we could. Aquino did try, I think, to get the U.S. to extend the withdrawal period. She cooked up this idea of some kind of a national referendum which just fizzled.

Let me mention an odd factoid. Later when I was the political counselor in Manila in 1997 to 2000, I met a number of times with the man who ran an organization called Social Weather Stations, which was by far the most respected and independent polling organization in the Philippines. He told me that they did a poll around the time of either the Philippine Senate vote or the closeout of the bases and found that there was an appreciable number of Filipinos who didn't have any idea that there were American bases there in the first place. This was while the bases were still there and had been there since the Spanish American War. I forget what the percentage was, but it was a notable percentage of his polling.

We now had a unique situation where we had a treaty of alliance and no SOFA. Fairly quickly, though, we lashed together some agreements with the consent of key senators that allowed for very tiny groups of American military people, up to 12 or 15 - I think the limit was 20 - to be in the Philippines with SOFA-like protections for training, to allow Special Forces or Navy Seabees to train certain Philippine units for very brief periods.

Anyhow, we did that, and we did not have any intention to abrogate the security treaty for a lot of reasons, one of which was Philippine archipelago didn't move. It was still the geographical keystone physically between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia and also straddling some very important sea routes among others.

Q: I may have asked this before, but did you sense... We'd been fighting this base thing. It's like the Azores. If you happened to be dealing with Portugal. We still had something in Azores. There's such a thing as base negotiation fatigue and all this. Did you find in a way a certain sense of relief or just plain write off? You know, saying, "Okay, we've got other things to do," almost a relieved disinterest in the Philippines.

O'NEILL: There was certainly a high level of irritation about the Filipinos. It was partly the lethargy of the Aquino administration in dealing with the issues. Then the other thing was that I think particularly in the Navy. The Air Force as I mentioned earlier the previous session had been pretty much shut out of Clark Air Base...

Q: Pinatubo.

O'NEILL: Pinatubo's eruption, the effects which lingered for a decade in terms of ash and mud flows every time it rained. It was a horrendous burden on the central Luzon area where these bases were. Pinatubo didn't affect Subic quite as much although Subic was evacuated, but the physical damage was less because of, I guess, prevailing winds at Subic. But the Navy really liked Subic Bay. I first saw the gigantic harbor in March of 1993 as I was there on a TDY as the deputy director of Philippine affairs. It is magnificent! The whole 7th Fleet could fit in that harbor. They had facilities as I mentioned before, the wonderful ship repair facilities that the Navy relied on so much. But finally the Navy just said, "Enough is enough." They made sure that they left as quickly as they possibly could.

Incidentally, this provided a wonderful example for us to use in Korea later on because when Koreans particularly on the left would say, "You're in Korea militarily for your own purposes. You're just dominating us," and all this. We could point to that vote and say, "If your government says go, we will leave. Look at the Philippines. We left because of their democratic processes. If your government says the same thing, we'll go." It was not a terribly effective argument given the stubborn mindset of those Koreans who were so anti-American, but it was a fact and one we could point to, and one we would have followed, too, for that matter.

Part of the closeout of the bases was a subset of negotiations done by Pacific Command as to what facilities would be left behind and what facilities would be taken away. We left, of course, a terrific runway at Cubi Point and the quarters and hospital, all sorts of other things that the Navy had built up over the decades, but they did take the floating dry docks which were actually numbered ships in the U.S. Navy list, too, and even though the Filipinos were crying that they needed the dry docks for civilian ship repair in the future. They were Navy ships, and the Navy was not going to leave them behind.

I remember there was a big argument about the main bowling alley at Cubi Point. I can't remember the details but the Navy, as a way of showing their irritation with the Filipinos, was somehow determined to take all of the equipment out of the bowling alley. That was a measure of the depths to which things had descended. Adjusting the relationship and salvaging the positive parts of the relationship occupied a good bit of our time for the remainder of that year which was 1992 and into 1993, the last year of a separate office of Philippine affairs.

As I mentioned the Department also combined the office of Philippine affairs with another office that handled Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore. This took place in, August or September of 1993, and I became the new deputy director of this combined office covering all five countries. The Philippines were dismayed about losing a separate office, but the fact was that two-thirds or more of the desk's business had had to do with base issues, so when you took that away there was no rationale for a separate desk.

Connected with this move was a huge cut in State Department staffing at Embassy Manila. Embassy Manila was huge, but the hit came to the State Department offices, particularly political, economic, not so much consular or administrative. As you know, in the fall every year it's the bidding season for the following summer. Deputy office directors have the lead on staffing, making sure you get the best possible candidates for the vacancies coming up the following summer not only at the desk itself but also in the various posts that they were responsible for. In this case we had five embassies: Manila, Kuala Lumpur, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, Singapore, and Jakarta. We also had consulates in Medan and Surabaya in Indonesia and in Cebu in the central Philippines.

I found, particularly dealing with upcoming vacancies in the Philippines that fall, it seemed like every day in Embassy Manila we were losing positions. I'd have people calling from Embassy Moscow and other posts asking about this or that job, and I'd be looking at the lists and, "Sorry, that job just disappeared. It's no longer in the embassy." It was a really horrendous cut, though some of them made sense. For example, we didn't need three political-military officers anymore. It was during that period that there was serious consideration being given to closing the consulate general in Sapporo, Japan, and it was only the personal intervention Walter Mondale who was ambassador to Japan at the time that that post was saved from being closed. So we were going through a bad period in the State Department in terms of funding and staffing, etc.

In Manila, there were 23 U.S. government agencies including five or six law enforcement agencies: Secret Service, FAA security, Diplomatic Security, INS, FBI and DEA, and a large Veterans' Affairs office to take care of the large somewhat dwindling number of Philippine veterans of U.S. forces and Philippine scouts, etc. who were owed pension benefits under the U.S. Veterans' Administration.

Q: What was the feeling you were picking up in Washington toward Warren Christopher as secretary of state?

O'NEILL: Nobody looked to him for leadership; I'll put it that way. It was hard to believe that Secretary Christopher felt there was this department under him that he was responsible for. I think the cruelest remark was, when something went bad, whether in the department or elsewhere during his tenure, "Well, this wouldn't have happened if Warren Christopher were still alive." That encapsulates the view of a lot of people including myself about his "leadership" in the department.

Q: Before we turn to some of the other areas like Singapore and Jakarta, and others, what was our feeling? When we pulled out of the bases about the insurgencies that were going on in the Philippines? It had been going on since certainly 1898, mostly with the Moros, at least I recall at one time.

O'NEILL: Moros is what they called themselves, too. They used the Spanish word for Moors. The Moro or Filipino Muslim insurgencies were concentrated in western Mindanao and the islands in Sulu Sea which points toward Borneo.

We dealt with one of the Moro insurgent groups, the Moro National Liberation Front or MNLF which was headed by Nur Misuari, a former University of Philippines professor had pretty much come over to the government's side by then. Misuari was getting the political recognition, the political power that he was seeking. There was another group called the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, MILF, which had broken away from MNLF. It was more radical in the sense of being more Islamic and more determined to - at least as advertised - to set up an autonomous Muslim state somehow in western Mindanao. I don't think they had any clue how they would do this, but nonetheless they were fighting against the Philippine government. I don't recall during that period 1992-94 that the fighting was particularly intense. And it was just not something that we were involved in because the U.S. military had never been involved to the best of my knowledge in combat with the Moros post-independence.

The other insurgency was a little bit nastier in terms of the U.S. That was the so-called New People's Army which was the armed wing of the Philippine Communist Party. By that time though most of the leaders of the Philippine Communist Party's political wing were in exile in the Netherlands eating Gouda cheese and sipping white wine while their armed comrades were living miserably in the jungle. They had pretty much gone into disarray with the fall of the Marcos.... The New People's Army had expanded vastly during the Marcos era. He was a tremendous recruiter for them.

Q: You might explain that you were being sarcastic...

O'NEILL: Yes. Marcos, as dictator of the Philippines for 20 years, looted the country, damaged the country almost beyond repair before he was ousted. His policies drew countless numbers of people, largely very poor people, into the New People's Army. If some poor kid had a choice of spending his life behind a plow and a water buffalo or getting a gun and going off into the jungle fighting against Marcos, a lot of the young people picked the gun and got into the fight even if they didn't know exactly what they were getting into and didn't have any idea about communist ideology or the bloody realities of communism.

That threat tapered off a good bit after Marcos. In fact, some things did come out better in the Aquino years. There was certainly a much more open political system. Nobody was being arrested and tortured for expressing political opinions. A lot of former dissidents came into the government. Still, Aquino was very indecisive. One good example of this had to do with electric power generation. During the entire time that she was president, not a single base load national power plant went on line anywhere in the Philippines while demand for electricity was burgeoning. So you had what the Filipinos called "brown outs," major electricity failures throughout Manila and elsewhere all the time. In fact, by the time I went on temporary duty to the Philippines in March of 1993 for two weeks, the brownouts had extended to Sundays as well. Parts of Manila would be electrified and most of the rest of the city would be dark, on a rotating schedule.

This was a direct result of her inability to push back against the huge array of environmental NGOs who thought that power generation was bad. When she turned over the presidency to her defense secretary Eddie Ramos in the next election, one of his major problems was this power generation disaster. He came up with a lot of innovative ideas including moving huge power generation barges into various ports to alleviate this. Things did get better under him, but this was a real mark against Aquino.

It was a combination of Aquino's indecisiveness and also of her being totally in thrall to various environmental NGOs. The Philippines is the land of NGOs. How half of them were funded I just couldn't imagine, but they're all over the place. Some of them were responsible and took up serious causes in a serious way including environmental causes and opposing illegal logging which was raping the Philippine forests. Some of them took up the cause of various indigenous groups. There are hundreds of ethnic groups in the Philippines some of which are pretty downtrodden. Some of these NGOs were good on those issues, also child labor, etc. There were just so many of them that I suppose in each category there was a range from the irresponsible to the responsible, but they were a force to be reckoned with.

During that March 1993 visit, among the places I went was to Palawan which is the long island that runs northeast to southwest across the Sulu Sea from the main islands of the Philippines. I went with John Miller who was then in the political section. One of the people we met was the mayor of Puerto Princesa, the capital city of Palawan Province. He was named Edward Hagedorn, not a typical Philippine name. His German grandfather had come early in the 20th Century, perhaps as a merchant. Somehow he wound up in Palawan. Mayor Hagedorn invited us to lunch. He was wearing the typical Philippine male garb, a shirt called a barong which is either long or short sleeve, but it is not tucked in. It's a fairly sheer material, and his allowed you to see that he had a Colt .45 automatic stuck in his belt which was not an unusual thing in the Philippines. I asked Mayor Hagedorn why he had the .45 with him. He said was combating illegal logging and was in danger of being killed by the logging interests. He had his own security people with him at all times, too, but he relied on his .45 pistol. Hagedorn indicated that one of the forces that he was fighting against was at the time Speaker of the House of Representatives. Anyhow, it was a good illustration of certain aspects of life in the Philippines that this mayor felt the need to go around armed. But again, the Philippines is a place where you have armed guards in McDonald's and in shopping malls.

Q: We weren't particularly concerned on a scale of one to ten or whatever with a communist insurgency at that time.

O'NEILL: No. In fact, by that time the NPA - the New People's Army - was pretty much an organization that you would have to find in order to get in trouble with as an American. If you went to certain places on the island of Negros for example, or a couple of other places, and went way into the forest, you might find yourself killed or captured by the NPA, but it was not a force in Manila, for example.

This is in marked contrast to what it had been in years past. For example in 1989, Colonel James N. Rowe who was then the chief of the army branch in the Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group was assassinated by the NPA by a so-called Sparrow Squad, one of their assassination squads. He was on his way to work in Manila. This was, of course, a tragedy on a number of levels, not the least of which was that Rowe, when he was a Special Forces officer in Vietnam, had been captured by the Viet Cong and held for more than five and a half years before he could escape.

Q: I would think that it would be a little bit hard to withdraw all the Americans because Filipino officers or cadets had gone to West Point for God knows how long. The president was a graduate of West Point. Also, I'm sure Leavenworth and all the other kind of staff colleges always had Philippine contingents. We had jungle warfare people and all.

O'NEILL: They had been for a long time. The business of sending Philippine cadets to West Point ended with the base agreement. I can't remember the exact details, but the arrangements that allowed Philippine cadets to be sent to West Point and the Naval Academy, actually all three of the academies, was embedded somehow in either the base agreement itself or in annexes to that. So that arrangement also went. I think it's since been revived in recent years under different auspices, but there was a long hiatus in Filipinos going to West Point and the Naval Academy.

There had been people who eventually rose quite high who went to our academies. Those cadets would first go to the Filipino military academy in Baguio which was an all-service academy, to establish a class group for the future. Then they would go to Annapolis or West Point because if they had had no PMA class group, they would just have been like aliens when they returned.

Q: It's like a Korean academy class. This is a tie that lasted for your life.

O'NEILL: Right, and that was certainly true probably for the civilian colleges, too, but it was certainly true for the Philippine Military Academy. Let me add another little thing, just another illustration of the uniqueness of the Philippines. When I was on this same trip I went to JUSMAG, Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group for consultations. The JUSMAG chief told me he had just come down from the academy at Baguio because he had gone to their graduation parade. He said that as part of this parade, you'd have the cadets parading, but the tradition was that older graduates, alumni, would parade with their year groups toward the end of the parade. He said he saw former coup leaders marching in the graduation parade with their alumni group. I'm sure that was a tradition every year, but to see military people who had been in armed insurrections against the government, particularly in the Aquino years, was a bit much.

There were many very bloody coup attempts to overthrow Aquino mostly led by senior military officers including the notorious Gregorio "Gringo" Honasan, an allegedly charismatic but very narcissistic colonel in the Philippine army. He has been a senator several times over, to give you an idea about Philippine politics. As a senator, he was implicated in further coup attempts against the government of the time.

Q: Before we leave the Philippines, what about coups while you were there or attempted coups? Did we get involved in anything during your time?

O'NEILL: Again, I was in Washington. I don't recall that there were any coup attempts during the two years that I was involved in Philippine affairs in Washington. If there were, they were pretty minor. They were nothing like the earlier times when there was a famous one, and I can't remember exactly what year it was, but let's say 1987 or '88 in which the Scout Ranger Regiment or another elite regiment rose up against the Aquino government protesting one, overall fecklessness, and two, corruption. Cory Aquino herself was not corrupt, but lots and lots of her relatives, the Cojuangcos, really were. Some of them were the associates of the Marcoses including a cousin of hers Jose "Danding" Cojuangco who was very wealthy and a real crook but also very shrewd politician and horse breeder, among other talents.

Anyhow, during that coup attempt, we still had U.S. aircraft at Clark Air Base. Defense Secretary Eddie Ramos was pleading for the U.S. to intervene in some fashion which he later vociferously denied doing. In response, a couple of our F-4 Phantom reconnaissance aircraft from Clark flew very low over the coup units' positions to demonstrate that they had better stand down. Ultimately the coup did collapse. It was an unusual American intervention at a particularly key time because we didn't want Cory Aquino to be thrown out of office because she had been duly elected. Some coup attempts were bloody; others were laughable. There was one in which the military people with the backing of a member of the House of Representatives took over a hotel in Manila for several hours until that coup fell apart. That and other events made it difficult in general for Washington to take the country seriously. Cory Aquino's government was shaken a number of times by coups. I don't recall that in the 1992-94 time frame that there were any such things at all. By this time, I was also engaged in the Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore...

Q: I'd like to move to that, but just one further question on the Philippine side. How effective was the Philippine embassy?

O'NEILL: We were in touch with them all the time by phone, and they would often come over and talk to us. We had I would say quite close ties. The folks that we dealt with in the Philippine embassy were mostly career diplomats. They tended to be very competent people, well educated, well disposed toward the U.S. and worked with us quite well. Washington was their most important post and generally this was reflected in the staffing.

We had one real tragedy. Ambassador Suarez died at post. I think it was in late '93, after PIMBS was formed. Ambassador Suarez, who was a senior career diplomat, contracted cancer which he managed to conceal for a long time from his staff before he died at post. I don't think that we knew he was sick, at least not terminally ill. I learned that the U.S. tradition is if a foreign ambassador dies at post, it's the U.S. government's responsibility to return the body to his home country. As soon as his embassy notified us, the first thing we did was call the op center, the state department's 24 hour operations center and also the chief of protocol's office to let them know. The chief of protocol's office is an extraordinary operation. It's usually a combination of political appointees and Civil Service, and in my dealings with them I've always found to be extremely capable.

In this case protocol guided us through this whole process of getting in touch with DOD for an Air Force airplane to return Ambassador Suarez's remains, accompanied by Mrs. Suarez. Somebody from the chief of protocol's office went with them. Mrs. Suarez and the party were met at Manila Airport by Ambassador Richard Solomon. I think we got a lot of credit out of doing this. Whether Filipinos knew this was a tradition or not, it was a very positive thing in Philippine-American terms.

Q: Let's turn over to the other parts, talk about pick them up one at a time?

O'NEILL: Yes. We're talking about Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore in the period 1993-94. As I say, I became the deputy director of the combined desk, and Scott Butcher, a career officer who had a lot of Southeast Asian experience including in Jakarta as political counselor became the director. He had just come from being deputy chief of mission in Kuala Lumpur. Scott was a good person to work for. Most of the PHL staff came with me to the new office. A deputy director is the in-house manager. I found that it was surprisingly difficult to meld a one-country office that had been in operation for a long time with a multi-country office which had also been in operation for a long time. There were more challenges than I would have thought. Parceling out the workloads turned out to be quite interesting. But the main things we were dealing with aside from the Philippines were largely focused on Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Brunei was not very time-consuming. It's very small, fabulously wealthy because of the oil, a self-described Malay Muslim monarchy, an absolute monarchy under Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah.

These other three countries posed various kinds of challenges to us. Indonesia was largely a question of human rights and whether to interact with the Indonesian military because of their bad record of human rights violations. There were certainly a number of U.S. congressional leaders who were dead set against almost any training with or training of the Indonesian military at that time because of their admittedly very bad human rights record. The philosophical issue is whether you can achieve your objectives by shunning somebody or can you achieve them by engaging with them and trying, perhaps, over a long span of time in trying to get them to do what you want them to do.

Needless to say, as a career officer my view was that if you ignored them they would continue to do whatever they did, whereas if you engage them you would have some chance of ameliorating their behavior. I think that was the general State Department view, but it was not a big seller with, for example, Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont. Nor of the people like Human Rights Watch, etc., who were dead set against our engaging the Indonesian military. So this whole business of the Indonesian military under Suharto and human rights was a big issue in U.S.-Indonesia relations. We had a state visit by Suharto in late '93 in connection with the APEC leaders meeting in Seattle. To the best of my recollection, it was the first time there was a leaders meeting of the chiefs of state and heads of government under APEC, Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation.

Q: This was a Clinton initiative...

O'NEILL: Yes, the leaders' meeting idea was. The earlier top level meetings of APEC were at ministerial level. In connection with that Seattle conclave, we also had both Suharto and Ramos coming on state visits. Kim Young-Sam of the Republic of Korea was coming at the same time; so the poor NSC Asia staff was just going out of their minds trying to handle all of these things. I was calling from my house in McLean on a Sunday morning to the NSC Asia staffer I was dealing with on the Suharto and Ramos visits. He sounded obviously exhausted because he was not only dealing with our two but also the Kim Young-Sam visit as well. He said at one point, "Excuse me, but I've been up for 25 hours straight working on all these visits."

Mahathir Mohammad, long-time prime minister of Malaysia, a usually consistent thorn in the U.S. side, refused to go to leaders' meeting because he saw it as a slap at his plan for the EAEC or the East Asian Economic Caucus. That was his idea of an anti-APEC which would gather all the non-Caucasian governments of the Asia-Pacific region under his leadership. This was only one of the examples of Mahathir's prickly relationship with the United States. He was usually looking for ways to criticize the United States for being hegemonic, etc., and he would raise the idea of Asian values - that the U.S. shouldn't be preaching about human rights because we Asians have got our own ways of doing things. But on the other hand, Mahathir cooperated with the U.S. in military training, which was in our mutual interest. They bought U.S. military equipment, too. Indeed, during that period Ambassador John Wolf in Kuala Lumpur was able to clinch a deal for the Malaysian Air Force to buy F/A-18 fighter attack planes from the U.S. I learned later when I was in Okinawa that the Malaysian Air Force squadrons with F/A-18s were much happier than the squadrons that were equipped with MiG-29s. Buying those MiGs was again an example of the way Mahathir operated. He wanted to show he could thumb his nose at us as a source of military equipment and buy from the Russians.

We tended to shrug off a lot of things that Mahathir said and some of the things he did because we knew he was doing them both for domestic political reasons and also to boost his credentials as an independent leader, sort of a non-aligned figure. Malaysia had a reasonably democratic society with a large Malay-Muslim majority, a good sized Chinese minority, and a smaller Indian minority, a mixture descended from the British era.

We sort of shrugged off certain things that Mahathir said, but there were things that we were opposed to, and we did not like the idea of the East Asia Economic Caucus of his. We saw it as aimed at weakening APEC which was broader based on both sides of the Pacific and we thought APEC had a great deal of potential in lowering trade barriers and increasing trade, etc. and also for eventually discussing other things including security relationships as it turned out.

Q: Was Lee Kuan Yew still the chief guy in Singapore?

O'NEILL: He had elevated himself. Lee Kuan Yew had finally relinquished the prime ministership to his designated successor, Goh Chok Tong. Lee invented the title of Senior Minister for himself, and so he was overseeing the whole thing. His ultimate objective, which has since been achieved, was to get his son Lee Hsien Loong into the prime ministership. The son was universally known as BG Lee for Brigadier General Lee. Goh Chok Tong was the prime minister, and Goh as I recall went to that APEC leaders' meeting. Despite the fact that Singapore was basically an autocratic Confucian government with only the veneer of democracy, it was a very prosperous place. Singapore was a good friend of the U.S., an important business center and strategically located at the narrowest point of the Straits of Malacca between the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia.

Lee Kuan Yew was very much dismayed by the disarray in the Philippines leading to the end of the American bases. He went out of his way to do what he could to ensure that there was no gap in the U.S. security presence in Southeast Asia which he valued greatly. He began offering facilities to U.S. forces for ship visits mainly.

I believe it was during that period but certainly not long thereafter, when Singapore began construction of a major naval facility which would allow U.S. aircraft carriers to dock. Until that was completed, aircraft carriers and other large warships had to anchor out in Singapore Harbor. People and supplies were brought back and forth by smaller vessels. This was both a practical thing and also a symbol that Singapore was trying to take up the slack that was produced by the closeout of Philippine bases.

We were largely pleased with Lee Kuan Yew's government. The biggest bone of contention was the human rights issue because he really allowed no interference from the handful of opposition politicians. One of his devices was if an opposition politician in the Parliament would raise objections to the government policy too often or too loudly, Lee would sue the man for libel. This happened very often, and with the Singapore court system being what it was I don't think he ever lost a libel suit. Often he could run an opposition parliamentarian into bankruptcy through this device. It was nasty but legal, at least in their legal system.

The biggest row we had with the Singapore during that year was something called the Michael Fay case. In the spring of 1994, Fay, an American student at an international school, was arrested along with a number of other international students, at least a couple of them Malaysians, for vandalizing cars. What distinguished this particular case was that what we normally refer to as vandalism such as spray painting a car or spraying graffiti on a building, is known as "mischief" in Singapore law. You can be fined for it, you can be imprisoned for it, but you can't be caned for mischief whereas the crime of "vandalism" in Singapore law had a political connotation. Just spray painting your name on somebody's car was mischief in Singapore law. If you spray painted "Down with Lee Kuan Yew," on the other side of the same car that was vandalism because there was a political message. You could be caned if you were convicted of vandalism, and this was being beaten on the bare buttocks with a stout rattan cane.

When those students were arrested, I don't really think there was any doubt that Michael Fay and his fellow students were spray painting cars out of sheer boredom or whatever was motivating them. There was no political message in any of this spray painting, but they were arrested by the cops and probably vigorously interrogated. One of the Malaysian boys had a burst eardrum out of the interrogations. They were charged with vandalism even though as I say there was absolutely no political connotation in anything they had done. The expectation was that they were going to be found guilty which indeed happened. Michael Fay was sentenced to six strokes of the cane. This caused a big uproar and actually got a lot of attention in the American press.

Q: Yes, very much.

O'NEILL: This got to be a real tangle because among other things our fellow Americans in some numbers were calling and writing to the Singapore embassy in Washington threatening all sorts of violence. My Singapore/Brunei desk officer was a crackerjack FSO named Nan Nida, now Nan Fife. Nan got a stream of diplomatic notes from the Singapore embassy with attachments which were the transcripts of all the obscene and threatening phone calls. They were requesting additional diplomatic security around the embassy which we arranged very quickly. One note after another would come in with these filthy, obscene phone call transcripts attached to them with all sorts of blood- curdling threats against the embassy.

Meanwhile, we were getting phone calls, too. One person who was calling during this time was a professor at some college somewhere in the U.S., and I wound up handling his calls. I tried to keep Nan from having to deal with too many of the wacky callers because she had too many other things to do. But this guy kept demanding over and over again that the U.S. government send a Special Forces team to rescue Michael Fay from the Singapore prison where he was awaiting caning. I was gritting my teeth and saying we're not going to do that and trying to get him off the phone as quickly as I could. All the while I thought that I'll just bet that during the Vietnam War, this guy was probably a vociferous critic of the U.S. military and Special Forces as baby killing rapists but by God, he now wanted the Green Berets to rescue Michael Fay.

Obviously the U.S. embassy in Singapore was up to its neck in this whole thing in all sorts of ways and we were in constant touch with them by phone and message. Skip Boyce (Ralph Boyce) was the deputy chief of mission, actually the Chargï¿½ d'Affaires during that time. We were engaged with the Singapore government in a number of ways including the diplomatic notes. The Singapore ambassador at the time was a man who later became the president of Singapore, a largely ceremonial position. But he was also a career intelligence officer service before becoming ambassador. Ambassador Nathan was coming in to the Department at a high level. We commiserated with him about the threats which we were taking seriously, and we did have extra protection of the embassy.

Q: Was this almost racist?

O'NEILL: I don't know. Well, there were several different currents in the United States because there was this backlash (no pun intended). Whether it was racist or not, I don't know, but the idea of corporal punishment, of caning an American student didn't sit well with certain Americans. On the other hand there were others including, at least one member of the Maryland House of Delegates, who wanted to allow for caning in the Maryland school system.

And we got more than a few calls saying "right on, Singapore. That's a good way to stop vandalism." So there were various currents in the U.S. It wasn't all one-sided by any means. The opponents were the ones harassing the Singapore embassy. The weirdest twist was that after Fay had been convicted of the political charge of vandalism and was sentenced to six strokes of the cane; there was a news conference at the White House. It was a Friday, and President Clinton was with a visiting prime minister or president. One of the newsmen asked what about the Michael Fay case and this kid being caned? Clinton said he didn't know anything about it or didn't know the details, but he would get back to the reporter which, of course, sent the NSC staff into a swoon as well as us, because the last thing we needed was presidential involvement in a case like this.

Well, on the following Monday or Tuesday Clinton had another news conference. Nobody asked a question about Fay, but Clinton then said somebody had asked about the Michael Fay case on Friday and he had looked into it. He said it was really bad. We and the NSC went into a swoon again because then what do you do? You've got Bill Clinton vs. Lee Kuan Yew and Lee had the home court advantage, so to speak.

I'm not sure that we ever knew for sure exactly what the Singapore government's thought processes were in prosecuting the boys for vandalism, but our embassy's best analysis was that Lee Kuan Yew was sending a very Chinese message to Singapore's own students. There's a Chinese expression, "Kill the chicken to scare the monkey," and this may have been what he had in mind - that there was sort of unrest of some kind, or at least unrest by Lee Kuan Yew's very narrow definition of it, anyway, among Singapore students. What better way of showing Singapore students that they better stay in line than to whack some Malaysian and American kids for having spray painted some cars and gotten out of line.

Anyway, now the President of the United States had interjected himself into a situation which was from my narrow low-level perspective very non-presidential. But there we were, and in the end what the Singapore government did reduce the sentence from six strokes to four, as a result of presidential intervention but the kid still got caned. There was no way that I can imagine somebody like Lee Kuan Yew backing down and saying, "Well, thank you. We'll just sentence him to a rap on the knuckles." He just wouldn't do that, but he did reduce the sentence which may have given somebody some satisfaction.

This case, as such things always do, brought some real wackos out of the woodwork, not only my friend from academia insisting that Special Forces rescue this guy. We were of course in touch with Michael Fay's father, a long time business representative in Singapore which is how his son got to be there. My recollection is that he and Michael Fay's mother were divorced. Mr. Fay kept calling us, not surprisingly, wanting us to stop the caning. Then one time he told us somebody had sent him a letter or an e-mail detailing in a very sadistic fashion what caning was like. The sender was an American as far as I know who took it upon himself to tell Mr. Fay about just how horrendous and painful and it was going to be for his son. So he was calling us about this, too. It was just a really messy, miserable case. Michael Fay did, indeed, get his four strokes, and that was more or less the end of it. But the case was one of the more unusual things that I dealt with in my Washington days.

By this time I had been paneled to become the U.S. Consul General in Okinawa which would mean a return to Japan after a hiatus of 10 years. I was really looking forward to that and looking forward to getting out of what I called the Tar Pit, going back to the Foreign Service which was what I had joined up for in the first place.

Q: Let's start with Indonesia. Had we reached the point where we were getting to the end of the tether on Suharto or not?

O'NEILL: It was several more years before Suharto fell from power. It was a difficult and complex relationship. Suharto was a former general, the man who had been instrumental in overthrowing Sukarno and in the very bloody repression of the PKI, the communist party of Indonesia, in the context of getting rid of Sukarno in 1965. The death toll in that may have been 500,000 people.

Q: By the way, I have an interview I did some time ago with Bob Martens who was basically a Soviet expert but was the political counselor, I think, in Indonesia at the time and came up with an estimate which was off the top of his head which was 300,000. That number kept being bandied about. He was accused of sending out a death list. It was quite interesting. It's ...

O'NEILL: Is it on your website?

Q: It's on the website. Bob M-A-R-T-E-N-S. Robert Martens.

O'NEILL: Whatever the real death toll was it was very, very bloody and undoubtedly in such things, a number of personal grudges and debts were probably settled in the context. There was a great deal of anti-Chinese animosity in the bloodletting. Even though the chairman, named Aidit, was as far as I know an ethnic Malay Indonesian, the PKI I think was a heavily Chinese organization with some Chinese Communist influence in it, as in the case of Malaysia or Malaya during the insurgency there. I'm sure that more than a few ordinary Chinese shop keepers who were owed money by various Malays wound up getting murdered along with people who were actually in the communist party.

So that was in Suharto's background. But the major contribution that Suharto made during his time in power was as the central figure in ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. ASEAN turned out to be a remarkably important gathering of countries in which you had a real multiplier effect, to use a military term, by a regional group. Indonesia was the centerpiece, and Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines were also charter members. Brunei when it became independent from Britain became the sixth member. Suharto was far-sighted enough to suppress a number of territorial claims that Indonesia had, with a view to the making ASEAN unified and an important regional group. ASEAN came into being in 1967 after several previous unsuccessful attempts at regional groupings that involved the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

ASEAN came to the fore as a regional grouping during the period when Vietnam had occupied Cambodia after ousting the Pol Pot regime. This was a policy springboard for ASEAN to become recognized and important. Eventually the organization attracted other countries to meet with their senior officials. I don't know the history of it well enough to say when, but there began to be ministerial meetings in which the ASEAN foreign ministers would meet, and then there would also be follow-on meetings with the ministers of, say, the United States, Canada, etc.

Becoming an ASEAN dialogue partner became a sought-after goal for quite a number of countries including, for example, South Korea. Whatever bad things he was doing or had done, Suharto was the centerpiece of this internationally important and stabilizing regional organization. He also presided over a great improvement in the Indonesian economy and the lifting of a great number of Indonesians out of quite dire poverty.

For all of his faults the importance and power of ASEAN as a very useful regional grouping was a plus. Somewhat in contrast was an organization in South Asia that involves Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and maybe one or two others. It's the South Asian Regional Conference or something like that, SARC. It was an attempt to follow ASEAN's lead in a different part of Asia. It just never really caught on; at least it never has gained the international attractiveness that ASEAN did and still does to a great degree.

Q: Did East Timor come up come up while you were in PIMBS?

O'NEILL: I don't recall any particular flare-up involving East Timor. It was a long time before East Timor became independent. It was always part of the bill of particulars against Indonesia, because the takeover of East Timor in 1975 was pretty bloody. Pretty bloody in part because East Timorese themselves were at each others' throats. Suharto was afraid that one of the communist factions in East Timor would win out as the Portuguese government was falling apart, undergoing its own leftist revolution and getting rid of East Timor, Angola, and Mozambique. Of course, to the discredit of the Indonesians, aside from the bloodiness of their takeover of East Timor, they did very little to develop the place. As far as I'm concerned during the period that they ruled East Timor, they did no better job than the Portuguese did in 300 years.

Q: Which is extreme neglect.

O'NEILL: Yes, extreme, yes, neglect on sort of an Olympic scale, so East Timor is still in its... Well, I don't want to get into this.

Q: Aceh. Was that an issue?

O'NEILL: Not especially that I can recall. There was an old insurgency. Aceh is the northernmost province on Sumatra. It was always restive, as far as I know. Indonesia is by far a majority Muslim country although there is a Hindu population on Bali, and there are Christians throughout Indonesia. The overwhelming majority of the people are Muslim and Aceh is more Muslim than anyone else. They had a long record of rebelliousness against the Dutch colonials. They were pretty much independent of everybody else in Indonesia before. But even before Indonesia became the Dutch East Indies 300-something years ago, the Acehnese were a pretty feisty and prickly bunch. As part of modern Indonesia they wanted either more autonomy or complete independence or both. In fact, there was a organization called GAM, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, which means Free Aceh Movement, an Acehnese independence movement.

The Indonesian military was pretty heavy-handed as they always have been in dealing with this kind of rebellion. Aceh, East Timor, all were part of the package that human rights activists in the U.S. in Congress, NGOs, were using as evidence that we should not have interaction with the Indonesian military because of all these human rights abuses. As I say, it's a philosophically arguable point but not one that I think makes sense in practice. If you don't deal with people, you have no chance of changing their thinking.

Q: I would that there would be an overriding concern at least from the State Department's perspective as, "You sure don't want Indonesia to break up into nationalities." I mean, if you like Yugoslavia and what happened there, Indonesia could really uncork...

O'NEILL: Indonesia was, in effect, it still is, sort of an empire. Even if you take the Muslim population, you've got many different ethnic groups among the Muslims and they don't always like each other all that much. You also had a Christian population which tended, I think, to be concentrated in certain parts of Indonesia. They were a relic of the Dutch colonial period in which non-Malay peoples were more readily converted into Christianity under the Dutch than may have been the case of the Muslim Malays. You had this vast area of all sorts of places like Irian Jaya, the western half of Papua whose people were Melanesian and not in any way like Malays, and yet Indonesia was ruling that too. There was an insurgency going on there.

So you had a real empire covering several time zones and 14,000 islands which, again, is very strategically located right alongside the Straits of Malacca, a vital maritime choke point. It would have been in absolutely nobody's interest for Indonesia to come apart. The fact that it has managed to hold together after the fall of Suharto and through a number of democratic elections is remarkable indicating that, I'd say some concept of Indonesian nationality has, indeed, taken root. It would be a pluperfect disaster if Indonesia would start breaking apart into its constituent parts. The only part that did break away was East Timor which was the newest acquisition and probably shouldn't have been there in the first place and was of no particular advantage to Indonesia.

Q: Al, I think this is a good place to stop. We'll pick this up the next time. You're off to Okinawa as consul general. When did that happen?

O'NEILL: I got there in August 1994.

Q: Okay. Today is the 7th of November 2008. This is with Al O'Neill. Al, I've had quite a few interviews relating to the battle of Okinawa. I'm not talking about the invasion of Okinawa in '45. I'm talking about the battle of Okinawa over a reversion treaty. Reversion was the term?

O'NEILL: Yes, that was.

Q: There was a very bitter battle between the Department of State and the Pentagon over a reversion agreement. You were there from when to when?

O'NEILL: I got there in August '94 and stayed till July '97.

Q: First place, how did you get the job?

O'NEILL: Charm, I suppose. I had had Japan experience. I was still considered a Japanese language officer although it had been 10 years since I'd used the language very much. I wanted the job, and I knew people who were in a position to recommend me for the job, particularly Tom Hubbard who was our deputy assistant secretary.

I made clear that I wanted it, and the fact that I had Japanese language and previous experience in Tokyo was helpful. That was where I first worked with Tom Hubbard, who was the chief of the internal branch in political when I was Ambassador Mansfield's aide. Plus I'd been working for Tom for two years in the East Asia bureau. I was at the right grade. I wanted it for a lot of reasons, one of which was I wanted to be a principal officer and run my own post for a change. I thought that my military background would be helpful and I figured it would be a very interesting place. It turned out to be even more interesting than I thought.

Q: What was the situation in Okinawa? In the first place, when did the reversion come, and how stood things at this time, and where did Okinawa fit at this period in the Japanese political context?

O'NEILL: Well, reversion had taken place in May of 1972, 22 years before. Okinawa again became a prefecture of Japan as a result of reversion. Japanese was the official language. Many Okinawans, particularly the older ones, still spoke various Okinawan dialects which are quite different from Japanese. Okinawa was also the most visible symbol of the U.S.-Japan security relationship under the Mutual Security Treaty of 1960.

As a prefecture, Okinawa had an elected governor and elected prefectural assembly and elected mayors in the cities and towns and their own city councils, etc., from among the Okinawan populace. There were Okinawan representatives in the Diet in Tokyo. There were also numerous Japanese officials in Okinawa, including from what was then called the Japan Defense Agency or JDA, now the ministry of defense. Bank of Japan had an office there. Many of the organizations of the Tokyo bureaucracy were represented in Okinawa as they would be in other Japanese prefectures.

The U.S. military presence was huge. Okinawa prefecture consists of the main island of Okinawa and a line of much smaller islands stringing out north and south from Kyushu, the southernmost main island all the way to the island of Yonaguni. It is said that on a clear day you can see Taiwan from Yonaguni.

The bulk of the population and the bulk of the U.S. military presence were all on the main island of Okinawa which was only 67 miles long at its longest, the north-south axis, and then at the widest it's just 14 miles wide. Most other places it's a lot narrower than that. About 1.2 million Okinawans live on that island. In my time, there were also 29,000 U.S. military people packed into that island and a similar number of family members and Defense Department civilians including 900 people from the Defense Department school system. There were 13 DoD dependent schools on Okinawa including two four-year high schools; so it was an enormous U.S. presence on a pretty small island.

About 17,000 of the 29,000 military people were Marines from the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force or MEF. The MEF commander was then a major general, a two star who was the senior U.S. military officer on Okinawa. He did not command the heads of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force components on Okinawa, but he was the senior officer and the Okinawa Area Coordinator. Each of them answered to component commanders at Yokota Air Base, Yokosuka for the Navy, and Camp Zama in the case of U.S. Army Japan. Most of the military forces on Okinawa were combat units of various kinds, so they trained constantly and tended to make a lot of noise. There were three F-15 fighter squadrons on Kadena Air Base, for example, and they were flying all the time. The units were always training for contingencies particularly in Korea and elsewhere in Asia as well. So, packed on a very tiny island, you had a U.S. military presence that affected everything because it was so large and noisy. The U.S. military also occupied also a lot of very prime land in central Okinawa.

Let me mention a couple of things about Okinawa's past. Until 1879, Okinawa was a separate kingdom, the Ryukyu Kingdom, a tributary state of China. In conducted its own trading relations with Java and Siam, Korea, etc., as well as China. They had a long history of being an essentially unarmed trading nation. They came under increasing Japanese control in the 1600s from a samurai clan in southern Kyushu, but they still were a tributary state of China. After the Meiji emperor was restored to being head of government in 1867, Japan moved to annex Okinawa as a prefecture. As a result of this there was always tension between the mainland Japanese and the Okinawans. The Okinawans were very much looked down upon by the mainland Japanese as being not really Japanese, as being mixtures of Chinese and Korean and Okinawan, etc., and were very much second class citizens through the war period.

The Battle of Okinawa was horrendous. It was one of the biggest battles of the entire Pacific war, 82 days of pretty much non-stop combat. The invasion took place on April Fool's Day, April 1, 1945. The naval force was larger than the one for the D-Day invasion of Normandy. The fleet was almost unimaginable. One thousand four hundred fifty seven warships took part including 40 aircraft carriers, 18 battleships and 430 troop ships and who knows how many cruisers and destroyers, and 50 submarines. There were 1,500 airplanes including B-29s. So this was a gigantic invasion of a very small place.

The purpose was to establish a base from which the U.S. could conduct the invasion of mainland Japan, starting in November 1945 with Kyushu and then the bigger invasion of the Tokyo plain which was planned for the spring of 1946. The Japanese probably didn't believe, based on the Pacific war to date, that they would be able to defeat the Americans and keep them from controlling Okinawa. Their intention was to cause as much damage to the American forces as possible to delay them and to make them think twice about the cost of invading the mainland which is, indeed, exactly what happened.

We had 14,000 people killed in that battle. The U.S. Navy lost more people in the Battle of Okinawa than in any other battle in its history, a total of 4,500. Kamikaze strikes took a huge toll on the Navy during the battle and sank and damaged a great number of ships. Most of the people who died were Japanese, of course. About 240,000 people were killed all together, more than half of them were Okinawans civilians. The rest were Japanese soldiers and Okinawans who were part of the Japanese forces. Most of the fighting took place in an area about 15 miles by 20 miles at the southern end of Okinawa. The Okinawans refer to this battle as the "typhoon of steel," very aptly.

Japan regained its sovereignty in 1952 with the San Francisco Treaty but we held on to Okinawa for another 20 years. We euphemistically referred to "U.S. administration" but, in fact, the senior U.S. official in Okinawa during that period was an Army lieutenant general, called the high commissioner for the Ryukyu Islands. A State Department officer was his political advisor or POLAD, but there was no doubt that the Army was in charge.

Over the intervening years the U.S. tended to consolidate or close a lot of their military bases on the main islands of Japan as they were no longer needed or as they became too difficult to train on, etc., because of domestic political pressures. There was consolidation in some of the military bases in Okinawa as well but just not on the same scale. In fact, during the '80s when I was in Tokyo there was a great consolidation along the Kanto Plain military bases in the Tokyo area: Yokohama, Yokosuka, etc., but less so on Okinawa. The idea was that by doing more consolidation on the mainland and less on Okinawa, the U.S. and the Japanese governments would be buying time for a continued base presence in Japan and, indeed, they did up until the 1990s when I got to Okinawa.

The situation that I had to deal with was fascinating in a lot of ways. For one thing, when you go to a Foreign Service post you normally figure you're going to be dealing with one foreign culture or one different culture, anyway. In Okinawa, the consul general was dealing with three different cultures because there was the Okinawan culture which was pervasive and very interesting in its own right, but also there were the Japanese culture and the U.S. military culture.

In dealing with base issues, the consul general was a member of what was called the Okinawa Area Coordinating Committee or OACC which had the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine component commanders, and the Marine general who was the real estate commander, who oversaw the 13 Marine bases on Okinawa. The consul general ranked as a brigadier general. The OACC operated relatively informally. It was very valuable for coordinating among ourselves both in good and bad cases and to present a united front to the Okinawan prefectural government. The base issue was always at the top of the agenda on the U.S. side both in terms of dealing with the Japanese government and the Okinawan prefectural government and also the cities and towns that hosted the bases.

To get back to the battle for a second, the battle was always in the minds of Okinawans particularly the great number of Okinawans who had survived the battle. There were interestingly mixed feelings among Okinawans about the relative U.S. and mainland Japanese roles in the battle. We came there as the invaders and the conquerors and blew up the island and killed lots and lots of people. But relatively speaking, the Okinawans that we dealt with in the political world, the academic world, businesses, etc., had a better attitude toward the American role in that battle than they did to the mainland Japanese role because they knew the Japanese strategy.

The governor at the time was named Masahide Ota, an academic turned politician. He was a deep-dyed pacifist. He had fought in the battle as a student soldier, was very badly wounded and hadn't surrendered until November 1945, two months after the Japanese formal surrender. He was illustrative of an Okinawan attitude of greater antipathy toward the central government in Tokyo than toward the Americans, although Ota was quite anti-base and would have been quite happy to have all the U.S. bases out of Okinawa. But he operated as did many Okinawans from this bifurcated look at the relative roles of the Japanese and the U.S. in the battle and then also later on, too. I think - and this is a sort of very broad brush - Okinawans felt that the Americans on the island and in Washington were at least more willing to listen to them and their complaints and maybe try to do something about it than the central government in Tokyo. There were some interesting examples of that that cropped up on my watch.

Q: Where did Okinawa fit in the Japanese political spectrum and society?

O'NEILL: It fluctuated because there were periods in which the prefectural governor, prefectural assembly, and many of the larger city mayors were conservative and were aligned with the LDP, the national ruling party. Ota's predecessor was a two or three term governor named Junji Nishime who was conservative. There were other times when the pendulum swung the other way. Ota himself was very much identified with the Japan Socialist Party. There was the Communist Party and a home-grown leftist party called the Okinawa Socialist Masses Party. So you had divisions among Okinawans as well.

But when I was there, most of the mayors with a couple of exceptions, and most of the city assemblies, the prefectural assembly and the governorship were from the left, anti-base activists. But also, as I kept reminding my military colleagues, mainstream opinion in Okinawa wanted to press the Americans and the Japanese for a reduction in the both the number of military people there and the total land area occupied by these bases. So even very much pro-American, pro-base Okinawans always were in one way or another pressing for what could be done to reduce the base presence.

For reasons having to do with topography and also in some cases where the Japanese themselves had built bases during the war, a lot of the U.S. bases were concentrated in the central part of the island which was quite populated. The farther north you went, the more the population thins out and it's more mountainous. There were mostly fishing villages or excellent resort areas along the periphery, but in the areas where the bases were it was relatively flat and better land in general than you would have farther north.

Among Okinawans, not only were there real party differences but the political pendulum periodically swung. Later on after I left, Ota ran for a third term and was defeated by a businessman whom I knew quite well who had never been in electoral politics before. His wife had taught my wife Chinese character calligraphy. He defeated Ota and heralded a switch back to a more conservative line in the prefectural government and many of the cities. The political pendulum swung back and forth depending on a lot of things, in no small part depending on what various Okinawan administrations were able to get out of the central government in terms of largesse because Tokyo spent a huge amount of money on Okinawa in big infrastructure projects and on noise abatement measures. For example, in the houses around the bases the central government put in double pane windows and air conditioners to help keep down the noise of the KC-135 tankers and the F-15s that were taking off all the time.

Tokyo also paid large amounts for rent for base lands because another peculiarity of Okinawa is that most of the base land was privately owned. By contrast, the bases on the mainland were almost all former Japanese imperial forces bases like Yokota, Yokosuka and Sasebo that had been built before and during World War II. The Americans just took them over. In Okinawa there were a handful of such former Japanese bases like Kadena Air Base but even that base had absorbed much private land as it was greatly expanded during and after the Korean War.

That was also another subplot because a lot of the landowners didn't necessarily want their land to be given up by the U.S. That's one of the reasons why over the years it often became difficult to return or consolidate bases even when we wanted to because the landowners objected. They knew they wouldn't get as much money or believed they would not get as much money from a sale or return of the land for some commercial use.

Q: For years the thorn in our side was the mayor of Naha who was quite left wing, either socialist or communist. Was he completely out of the picture at this time?

O'NEILL: Mayors are elected every four years, and you could have multi-term mayors. During my time, the mayor of Naha was named Oyadomari; he was in the socialist camp. I think you're talking about a famous case, which will give you an idea of American democracy in action in Okinawa during the period of "U.S. administration." In the 1950's a man named Senaga was elected by the people of Naha as their mayor, and the lieutenant general who was the high commissioner for the Ryukyu Islands, essentially the occupation commander, removed him on the grounds that he was a communist even though he had been duly elected. He was, indeed, in the communist party which was a legal party in Japan but didn't seem terribly legal to an U.S. Army lieutenant general.

Okinawans remember that kind of thing. They've got an intense sense of history. They think of things that happened in the 1950s much as they do of things that happened last week.

Q: Did the Japanese on the main islands go to Okinawa? Was this being in exile? Was there much commerce or intercourse between Okinawa and the rest of Japan?

O'NEILL: In tourism there was. By the time I got there Okinawa was a great tourist destination for mainland Japanese. In fact, tourism had long supplanted the bases as the principal direct money earner. One of the peculiarities of Okinawan tourism was it was almost exclusively aimed at mainland Japanese. There was not much in the way of an influx of Americans or Australians, etc., who would be tourists in Hong Kong, Singapore or Thailand, for example.

One of the reasons for this, that I kept reminding Okinawans about when they would talk of trying to compete with Hawaii, for example, was that they had to improve English language education among younger Okinawans. One of the things that surprised me was that even though the U.S. occupation had ended only 22 years before, relatively few Okinawans spoke much English at all.

So when you'd go to beautiful first class hotels on lovely stretches of the beach with sparkling blue water, you would rarely encounter any hotel staff who could speak much English in contrast to the top hotels in Korea. They had boxed themselves into tourism aimed at the Japanese mainland: honeymooners, scuba divers. There was world class scuba diving. That was one thing that did attract people from Australia, U.S. etc., to the coral reefs. In fact, I once met Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh in Okinawa. He was there as the president of the World Wildlife Federation, and he was particularly looking at the state of some coral reefs. He was not somebody you would expect to see there.

Q: Were the Okinawans at all ahead or behind the rest of Japan and in getting foreigners to come in to replenish the stock? Japan is renowned for getting older and older and not really reproducing itself.

O'NEILL: Well, I think the Okinawan birthrate was probably higher than the mainland birthrate. So were the divorce rate, the unemployment rate, and the basic income levels. That was always a constant source of complaint among the Okinawans towards the mainland, and they blamed this on the bases, too, which was not quite accurate at all.

In fact, I thought it was quite the opposite. My view was that it was the existence of these bases that put Okinawa on the map in terms of the central government in Tokyo. Had the bases not been there, I think Okinawa would have got a lot less attention because of the lingering prejudice toward Okinawans. I think some Okinawans understood this, that there was this weird paradox that the bases they were complaining about were the big ticket items as far as their influence in Tokyo was concerned.

Indeed, Okinawan politicians played this angle for everything they could because not only did you have the governor going to Tokyo to lobby for more goodies, like Ota's big idea for a monorail project and lots of other things. Everybody in Okinawa had big ideas that they wanted Tokyo to fund, and the individual mayors would lobby various offices in Tokyo for their projects in addition to whatever they wanted to do in terms of base realignment. There was no single voice in Okinawa. There was a fair amount of overlap in the kinds of things they wanted, but there was not an identity of desires, if you will, in dealing with Tokyo.

When I arrived, there were three main issues, Sanjian in Japanese, which Governor Ota was pushing with the central government and the headquarters of U.S. Forces, Japan. One of these was to relocate Naha Military Port which was run by the U.S. Army, to relocate it slightly up the coast alongside an existing Marine logistics base called Camp Kinser in Urasoe City, the next city north of Naha.

The second thing was to return a little air field called Yomitan Auxiliary Airfield which was no longer used for aircraft, but it was a site of parachute training for the Special Forces and the Marine airborne people. This was right behind the original invasion beaches in 1945. The third thing that Governor Ota wanted was to relocate the remaining artillery training from Okinawa to the mainland. About half of the artillery training that the Marines had done on Okinawa had been moved elsewhere, but there was still a minimal amount, literally firing guns from fixed positions at a mountain inside a gunnery range on Okinawa just to be able to know that the guns and shells actually worked. There was no realistic training in moving the guns into position, doing all the calculations for setting up firing positions and actually firing the way you would want to do at Fort Sill, Oklahoma or another large training area.

The Okinawans made a big deal about the artillery training. It was a very safe thing, in fact, but they made a big deal, and the governor wanted that moved, too. The Marines were quite willing to move the training to Mt. Fuji artillery range on Honshu which is where they did much of their training anyway. The Japanese government up until 1995 was unwilling to expend the political capital that was necessary to do the ground work in the communities around Fuji to allow for this additional influx of Marines and somewhat more noise and a few more firing days per year than the local inhabitants were normally dealing with. Tokyo simply did not want to do it. They eventually did as a result of that horrendous child rape incident in September 1995, which I'll go into in more detail later.

Let me mention one other factor during my first year there. The prime minister of Japan was Tomiichi Murayama, who in many ways was very peculiar in comparison to his predecessors. First, he was from the Japan Socialist Party and had become prime minister in a rather shabby deal that allowed the LDP to keep a measure of power in a coalition. Murayama was in his 70s which was not unusual for Japanese prime ministers, but he had spent his entire political life of 50 years as a pacifist fighting against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and against the existence of the Self Defense Forces which he considered unconstitutional. When he became prime minister, he had visited exactly one foreign country: North Korea. The Japan Socialist Party had links of various kinds, including financial, with North Korea over the decades. His CV boded badly for a lot of things in the coming year.

Nineteen ninety-five was, of course, heading into the 50th anniversary of the last year of World War II. For Japan this meant the appalling battle on the little island of Iwo Jima in February and March of 1945 and then the April through June bloodbath on Okinawa, the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the 50th anniversary on August 15 of the surrender. The intent of all parties - the Okinawans, the central government in Japan and the American military, of course, was to commemorate the 50th anniversary of this huge battle, the last U.S. ground battle against Japan.

The issue of how it would be done caused a lot of nervousness among a lot of Okinawans because they were afraid we would be celebrating our victory which was far from the intent in either of the U.S. forces or, indeed, the American veterans of the battle. So we had a lot of preparatory work both to plan the events and also to reassure the Okinawans about U.S. intentions about the commemorations which were going to be centered in June. The landing was on April 1, but the idea was to do the commemorations over several days marking the very end of the battle in late June 1945.

As one example of the groundwork, I did an interview with NHK, the national TV network, a couple of months before the commemoration. My main point was that we were not going to celebrate a victory. First of all the American veterans' purpose was just to return to Okinawa where they had been through a horrendous experience and to remember their comrades who had been killed. They were not trying to celebrate anything. The overall U.S. idea was to remember the dead from all sides and also to emphasize the 50 years of a very productive relationship between the U.S. and Japan.

I think my NHK TV interview was helpful. I pointed out that NHK itself had done a program on the Battle of Okinawa a few months earlier. They reported that the American invasion force had brought with them food and clothing for about 100,000 Okinawans plus many thousands of civil affairs specialists. The U.S. knew that the Okinawan population had not bombed Pearl Harbor, but had been basically caught up as innocents in the militarist plans of the Japanese government. So I played that back to the NHK interviewer. He found that earlier program and blended it in with my interview when it was broadcast. The intended tenor of the commemorations was the point I was making to NHK and continued to make to the Okinawan news media including the newspapers.

Fortunately by the time Okinawan concerns were rising we had had the commemorations on Iwo Jima in March. Even though Iwo Jima is in Tokyo's consular district rather than Okinawa's, the Marines on Okinawa planned and supported the commemorations on Iwo Jima. With the NHK interviewer, I was able to point to the commemorative nature of the 50th anniversary ceremonies on Iwo Jima as a practical example of our intentions concerning Okinawa. I had seen that first hand. My wife and I had flown to Iwo Jima on General Meyers's airplane. He was at the time a lieutenant general commanding U.S. Forces Japan, later became chairman of the Joint Chiefs and his deputy in Japan, Pete Pace, became his successor as Chairman.

At that time, Generals Pace and Meyers and Ambassador Walter Mondale, the former vice president, and his wife Joan came down to Okinawa the day before the flight to Iwo Jima. The Mondales stayed with us that night. There was a big formal dinner at the main Marine Officers' Club and we all flew to Iwo Jima on Meyers's airplane. Iwo Jima is a tiny place. It's about two miles by four miles, and at least 26,000 people were killed in six weeks, over 20,000 Japanese and 6,000 Americans. It's still an active volcanic island, a very unpleasant place but a real shrine for the Marines.

The Okinawa commemorations in June 1995 were quite an extraordinary series of events. The prime minister came, as well as the speaker of the Diet's lower house and the chief justice of the Supreme Court. There was quite a large turnout from the Japanese government, a lot of ceremonies marking the huge toll of Okinawans who died. There was the dedication of what was called the "Cornerstone of Peace," an elaborate monument or set of monuments at the very southern tip of Okinawa, where the battle ended when there was no more room to fight. These were a series of low granite walls, like Oriental screens, in which were carved the names of all 240,000 people, Okinawan, mainland Japanese, American, Taiwanese, Korean, and British, who had died in battle. It was quite an effort by the Okinawans to collect all these names. It is probably the most complete list of the battle dead that anybody could come up with. That was dedicated by the prime minister in the course of these commemorative events.

Of course, there were lots of things to be done on U.S. military bases for the veterans themselves. As I say, the Mondales were there. They were a big hit. General Mundy who was then commandant of the Marine Corps was there and also the commander in chief, Pacific Command plus lots of other high U.S. military officials. I was glad to be there during that time. As a baby boomer I had grown up in the shadow of WWII. Also, one of my uncles had commanded the Marines' 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion during the entire battle of Okinawa, so there was that additional interest for me.

Q: I was wondering, how did you relate with the American military at this time? Was there any animosity between State and Defense?

O'NEILL: We normally worked quite closely together. I've mentioned the Okinawa Area Coordinating Committee (OACC) which was one of the most frequent means of interaction among the main players on the U.S. side, including me. As the OACC, we interacted quite a lot and, of course, we also talked a good bit on the phone and met each other individually both officially in our offices and at many social functions. So there was a good bit of interaction. There was also a lot of contact between the military people and the towns and cities whose land they were occupying.

Kadena Air Base, for example, was big. The base covers 5,000 acres and adjacent to it is a 6,000 acre ammunition storage area. It's now, I think, the largest air base certainly in the western Pacific and perhaps anywhere outside of the United States. There were two 12,000 foot parallel runways. As I said, they had three F-15 fighter squadrons. They also had the only tanker squadron in the entire western Pacific, 15 KC-135 tankers. Also the Navy operated P-3 Orion anti-submarine patrol planes out of Kadena, and that was a very active thing because they were watching the Chinese all the time.

The bases themselves had pretty well established channels with the towns. For example, Kadena base overlapped two towns and a city: Okinawa City, Kadena Town, and Chatan Town. Their mayors met regularly with senior Air Force officers who were tasked to deal with their complaints about noise, accidents, problems of various kinds, disciplinary problems, etc. Generally these things worked pretty well because, for one thing, the military I think generally understood that they were a very large presence, a noisy presence. They usually recognized that it was some imposition on the Okinawans even if the military people also were quite wrapped up in their missions which were largely directed toward a contingency in Korea. They did a lot of training in Korea; very realistic training. I think at the same time they did an overall good job at trying to manage the base issues as best they could. The mayors understood this, and I think generally the relationships were quite good. There were certainly difficulties and misunderstandings but they were usually manageable.

The commanders were thinking all the time that they may be called to go to war tomorrow, and they had to make sure their people are trained up as much as possible so first, they could do their mission and second, fewer on them would be killed than would be the case if they were poorly trained. So there was this kind of mission tension, if you will, between needing to keep the Okinawans as happy as they possible with a very large and active base presence and also their obligation as commanders to be able to "sound the charge" when they needed to.

To go back to these Sanjian, these three main cases that Governor Ota was pushing; as I said one was relocation of Naha Military Port. It was an old facility, and relatively small. A lot of ships couldn't use it because the ships had outgrown the port. It was also subject to silting that had to be dredged all the time. The U.S. military would have been delighted to give it up if they could have a replacement facility, and where they wanted it was, as I mentioned, Camp Kinser which was just a few miles up the road from Naha City. You had several things at play. Camp Kinser, the ideal site of the relocated military port was in Urasoe City. The Urasoe Chamber of Commerce really wanted the port because they saw all sorts of benefits for what would become a dual use port for civilian use as well as military use. The mayor of Urasoe at the time was a nice man who was not terribly strong, and he was in favor of it, too. He wanted to get a brand new state-of-the-art military/civilian port, but his city council was majority leftist, and they would attack the mayor every time he supported the move to their city.

The Okinawan private citizens who owned the land that comprised the existing military port saw the same disadvantages to the old port that the U.S. military did. They thought, "Well, I'll lose my base rent if this port is actually turned over to Naha City, so where's my future income?" So they lobbied as hard as they could with Tokyo against turning back the port. This was one example of the tangle in Okinawa.

Here's another thing about this Naha Military Port issue that illustrates a lot about relationships on Okinawa. Once, Chairman Uechi of the Urasoe Chamber of Commerce asked me as the U.S. consul general to arrange a meeting for him and his colleagues with the director of the Japanese government's Defense Facilities Administration Bureau (DFAB) so they could him lobby for moving the port.

The irony of this was that the DFAB director was a representative of Chairman Uechi's own central government, his own defense ministry. And in terms of physical proximity, Chairman Uechi's office was much closer to the DFAB office than it was to mine. Nonetheless, he asked me to arrange for him and his fellow Okinawans to meet with this Japanese official to promote an idea that presumably the Japanese government wanted as much as we, Chairman Uechi and the other businessmen did. So this is kind of illustrative of the weirdness which could occur in Okinawa. I was more than happy to arrange that meeting which took place in my office. The director of Naha DFAB and Chairman Uechi had a nice discussion in front of me. This was a little disorienting but an illustration of the distance that a lot of Okinawans still felt from the central government.

Q: Was the closing of our bases in the Philippines on the minds of Okinawans?

O'NEILL: It was on Governor Ota's mind. I used to talk to him a lot and Ota used to talk about Subic Bay in particular. As I mentioned, when I was the deputy director for Philippine affairs a couple of years earlier I had visited Subic and talked with Dick Gordon, the chairman of the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority. He was working to transform that huge former naval base into a free trade zone and a high tech hub.

Ota talked longingly about reproducing that in Okinawa. I kept reminding him of the huge difference between the Subic situation and Okinawa. President Ramos and that Philippine central government saw Subic in the same way the Dick Gordon did, which was that it was going to be a huge economic boon to the entire Philippines. I told the governor, "Nobody in Tokyo sees that as a big boost for the entire Japanese economy; it's a totally different situation." Nonetheless, Ota was in many ways a romantic thinker in his economic theories and he was persistent in all of this.

Q: Did the Okinawans operate like Japanese in not reaching a decision until you got consensus?

O'NEILL: That was more or less true in Okinawa as well. That much the Okinawans had in common with their Japanese brethren on the mainland as a concept anyway. The difficulty a lot of times, though, in Okinawa was there were so many players that there was often no unity of view among Okinawan political entities about what should be done in any given case. Each of the cities, for example, had elaborate drawings and plans for the post-base development of their city. Nobody in Okinawa coordinated all these, so basically each city in Okinawa that had a U.S. military base had a plan for a theme park and a shopping mall, and some other things. A couple of kilometers up the road the next town would have its plan for another theme park and shopping mall. It just wasn't very coordinated at all. The governor for all of his desire to get the bases out of Okinawa didn't really feel the need to do much coordinating of these plans.

Q: Okinawa, when you were there, was basically a dagger pointed at North Korea and China and maybe even Russia. Russia was falling apart at this point. Did events in North Korea or in China play any particular role, or was this too far away?

O'NEILL: China literally was not very far over the horizon. There's a dispute between China and Japan over a group of islands called the Senkakus or Diaoyutai to the Chinese, which are part of Okinawa prefecture, a sprinkling of islands out to the west in the direction of China. Taiwan also claims the Senkakus as the legitimate government of China. There were times when Taiwan patrol boats would come into the waters around the Senkakus and also around Yonaguni, the southwestern-most island in the prefecture. The Japanese government would protest against this invasion of their territorial waters.

Also, you may remember in 1996 there was going to be an election for the president of Taiwan. The Chinese declared they were going to be testing intermediate range missiles and fired missiles in the direction of Taiwan. Nobody missed the message. Some of these missiles actually came down quite close to Yonaguni and other Okinawan islands. They didn't hit land, fortunately. At that point the Clinton administration sent two aircraft carrier battle groups to that area to bolster the people on Taiwan, which was an unusual concentration of aircraft carrier battle groups.

The central government in Tokyo was quite upset about this Chinese missile firing. The major of Yonaguni was quite upset too. But when I talked to Governor Ota about it, he claimed that it wasn't important. It was just something out there in the distance. Okinawans didn't have to worry because the Chinese were friends. Ota, in one of his romantic schemes, was trying to revive an economic link between Fujian Province on the coast of China and Okinawa. When there was a Ryukyu Kingdom, its principal link with China was through Fujian Province. There are a lot of cultural influences in Okinawa that are from Fujian. He thought that it would be a great thing to revive this, and he had arranged to build an Okinawan trade office in Fujian, on which the Fujian authorities overcharged tremendously.

There were a couple of flaws in Governor Ota's ideas. For one thing, he saw this as a way of reviving Okinawa's economy by bringing back these artifacts of the past. But no one in the Okinawan business community thought that it was worth pursuing at all. They thought it was just sort of a pipe dream of an academic who had never done any business, and they were probably right. The biggest thing that nobody could explain was why the people in Fujian would do what Ota wanted. He wanted them to export to Okinawa semi-finished products that Okinawans would finish and then sell for export. Nobody could quite explain why the people of Fujian Province wouldn't take the semi-finished products, finish them, and sell them, which is what they were doing.

Otherwise, on Okinawa the U.S. and Japanese militaries were very interested in China. In addition to the U.S. Navy P-3 Orions from Kadena, at Naha International Airport there were two Maritime Self-Defense Force Orion squadrons which worked very closely with our military, and they were doing the same thing, hunting for Chinese subs. I don't think anybody paid much attention to the Russians.

Q: I remember pictures about that time showing the Pacific Fleet, Soviet Pacific or now Soviet Pacific rusting up in Vladivostok.

O'NEILL: The Navy rear admiral who was the commander of the 7th Fleet's Amphibious Force, Task Force 76, was based with in Okinawa with his battle staff. There were three in succession during my time in Okinawa. Their ships which were located on Sasebo in southern Kyushu were the helicopter carrier and the amphibious landing ships, etc., which would carry the Marines into a Korean contingency, for example. The ships came to White Beach on Okinawa quite a lot to pick up Marines for exercises in Thailand and Korea.

Among the things that started then with the Russians was ship visits to Vladivostok and humanitarian rescue training with the Russian Navy and what the Russians called the Naval Landing Forces, their equivalent of our Marine Corps. The first of the amphibious group commanders I knew, John Sigler, came back from an operation in Vladivostok where they went with the amphibious ships and trained with the naval landing forces, and came back to Okinawa. John said he had had "an out of body experience. I was looking down into the well deck of one of my amphibious ships and here are these Russian amphibious vehicles." He added, "I had spent my entire naval career getting ready to fight these people, and now we're cooperating in these humanitarian rescue operations." One of his successors who eventually went on to become commander of the Pacific Fleet, Walt Doran, had an even more interesting experience with the Russians. He took some ships to Vladivostok, too, for a similar exercise. Walt said they were tied up alongside the Pacific Fleet flagship, Admiral Pantaleyev. Some of his career sailors were scheduled to be reenlisted in the U.S. Navy. They came to Walt and said, "Admiral, can we get reenlisted on board the Russian flagship?" He said he would ask the Russian admiral.

Lo and behold! He and his sailors got permission to go aboard the Russian flagship for the reenlistment. The captain paraded his entire ship's company to watch this American ceremony. Through an interpreter Walt learned that his remarks included, "You see what the U.S. Navy does for its sailors? I want the Russian Navy to be this professional. This is what we need to move towards." That was pretty remarkable.

Q: I'm sure you had incidents. My brother was a naval captain graduate of the Class of '40 and was commanding officer of Navy pilots in the 1960's. He talked how he from time to time had to go, if a Navy plane crashed, had to go offer condolences to family. I assume that you who must have had drunks, rapes, murders, whatever. Did you get involved in any?

O'NEILL: Yes, I did, yes indeed. The main accident that I got involved in was only in the sense of attending a memorial service, but it's just a reminder of the cost to our people of operating with the very intense training tempo that they did. One of the squadrons at Kadena was HH-60s, search and rescue Blackhawk helicopters that would go out looking for downed pilots in combat and that sort of thing. They usually operated around Okinawa. However after dawn one morning in October 1994, I learned from the Air Force at Kadena that one of their rescue helicopters had been practicing night flying with night vision goggles near Osan, Korea. They hit a power line, the chopper crashed, and all five men were killed. That produced five widows and three orphans in an instant.

There was a big memorial service at Kadena. They brought the widows and everybody at Kadena went and obviously, naturally, I went. I remember the Wing deputy commander telling me afterwards "At three o'clock in the morning we got the word that they had been killed," and he said, "I was going around from door to door with the chaplain immediately to tell the wives. They don't pay me enough for that." It was pretty bad. On another occasion, a Marine helicopter crash killed a captain and another Marine. Naturally, I went to their memorial service up at Camp Schwab too.

But yes, there were crimes of varying magnitude on Okinawa. Any time you have 27,000 American military people in such a small area, unfortunately you have some who are pretty bad eggs and others who just get in trouble because they got drunk or something like that.

The general Okinawan reaction to various incidents was usually pretty measured. Okinawans were able to discern the difference between an accident - even a fatal traffic accident, for example - and a real crime. They understood the difference, and they usually reacted accordingly even though there were people who were always trying to take advantage of any incident. Particularly this was true in the Okinawa news media. But in general Okinawans knew the difference between a traffic accident and a rape.

I wound up dealing with the worst such crime probably since reversion. On Labor Day evening 1995 a Navy hospital corpsman and two Marines went out and searched for a schoolgirl to abduct and rape. They were caught within 48 hours by the U.S. Navy Criminal Investigative Service, NCIS. There was absolutely no doubt that these were the guys that did it in part because they had all been out in a rented car on Labor Day which was a day off. There were originally four of them altogether, three Marines and the hospital corpsman who was the ringleader. They began talking about kidnapping a schoolgirl and raping her. When the fourth guy began to realize that the other three were serious, he asked to be taken back to Camp Hansen where they were all stationed.

That night, the other three went out and found a 12 year old girl, and they had duct tape and rope and stuff that they had bought at the PX in preparation for this crime and they beat and raped her. When the NCIS began going around the barracks at Camp Hansen, the "fourth man" told his sergeant or NCIS that the other three had been talking about this, and he realized they had actually carried out the crime. So within 48 hours they were in the brig at Camp Hansen, each in solitary confinement. Monday was Labor Day; Wednesday is when these creatures were arrested. The first I learned about it was that day in a serious incident report cable from the Marines back to their headquarters and to everybody throughout the military chain of command, copied to me.

That Wednesday afternoon I immediately called Embassy Tokyo, to the head of the political military branch in the political section. He said he already knew about it because the mayor of Kin Town, next to Camp Hansen, happened to be meeting with them that day. Mayor Yoshida of Kin told him that this had happened, so the embassy knew about it already. I was talking to my Okinawan chief political employee who was absolutely wonderful to work with on this whole terrible business. He said the Okinawan police were trying to keep the knowledge of this out of the press.

It turned out that the MEF commander Major General Wayne Rollings, the senior Marine and the ranking U.S military officer on Okinawa had left that Labor Day weekend, to go to Hawaii for a commanders' conference and see some of his own units in Hawaii. The III MEF was scattered all from Hawaii to Iwakuni in mainland Japan to Okinawa.

On that Friday, since General Rollings was gone, I called Brigadier General Mike Hayes the relatively newly arrived Marine Corps base commander, to talk about what to do because obviously it was going to become public at some point. While I was on the phone with General Hayes, my FSN came in with the Friday afternoon newspapers that had this appalling story all over the front pages. I told General Hayes that we needed to figure out what we were going to do to respond.

I was also in touch with the chief of staff to Governor Ota in the prefectural headquarters in Naha, as I did several times over the weekend. We agreed in the course of our discussion that I would go and meet with Governor Ota on Monday to apologize for this awful crime and apologize to the Okinawan people. It would also be an opportunity for me to explain what the judicial processes would be. I was also in contact with the embassy in Tokyo several times over that weekend.

When, later on Friday or over the weekend, I spoke again to General Mike Hayes about meeting the governor on Monday, he said General Rollings was not scheduled to be back in Okinawa until that following Monday night which would be a week after the rape. He said that if Rollings was not back that he, General Hayes, or the deputy commander of the Marine Expeditionary Force, another newly arrived brigadier general, would go with me to Governor Ota and apologize. My political FSN and I spent a lot of time on the phone mainly with the governor's staff that weekend arranging the mechanics of the Monday meeting. So on Monday morning I was really stunned when I heard from the General Hayes that General Rollings had come back Sunday instead of Monday night and had decided that neither he nor any of his generals would go with me to meet Governor Ota.

As background, I had been in Okinawa for 13 months by this time. General Rollings and I knew each other well. We worked together on many things. He had been the Marine Corps base commander when the MEF commander, Major General Carl Fulford, was reassigned to the Pentagon. Wayne he was promoted to major general to command the MEF and become the senior Marine general on Okinawa.

Wayne Rollings was, by way of background, a tremendously brave man. He had been awarded the Navy Cross in Vietnam which is our second highest medal for valor. He had the Silver Star twice, the third highest medal for valor. The Marines don't give away medals for valor. He had two Purple Hearts, and he was missing the two last fingers on his right hand. So Wayne was a real lion on the battlefield. But like many generals, he was really camera shy despite his demonstrated bravery in combat.

As further background, in the previous four or five months there had been a couple of cases where Marines had murdered people in Okinawa. In one case a Marine had beaten a woman to death with a hammer. Because this was not an on-duty crime, obviously, he was subject to the Japanese judicial system and was then on trial in Naha as far as I can remember. But there were no Okinawan protests, interestingly, about that murder and previous one. In neither case had I recommended that Wayne Rollings or his predecessor and I go see the governor. But I knew instinctively this gang rape of a child was going to be bad just from the very disgusting nature of the crime and that we needed to deal with it in an extraordinary fashion. At that moment though, I had no idea how bad it would be, the extent of the reverberations nationwide.

I called Wayne right away about going to see Ota and said, "We really need to do this. This is really very important." He said no; he had two reactions. One, that if he went with me to see Governor Ota then the press would "make the military look bad" and two, he said he was going to do something preemptive. He said he would send a letter of apology to Ota before there was a protest, and he thought that this would be a valuable gesture. I told him that would not work in this case, that this is really something very bad indeed. As soon as I could I called David Shear who was the political military branch chief in the embassy in Tokyo and told him that to my amazement that General Rollings would not go with me. I added that I was going to talk to him right away and rode immediately to Wayne's office at Camp Butler which was about 20 minutes away.

When I got to Wayne's office, he had about four or five colonels and his Japanese-American civilian public relations specialist with him. I went by myself and began lobbying General Rollings as hard as I could. I told him that by this time I'd been in Asia for 15 years and there's no place in Asia where apologies count for more than in Japan and it is really important for us to do this. He was very resistant. I even used the example from 1981 of that fatal accident where the U.S. submarine George Washington sank the Nissho Maru. As I told you, ultimately Mike Mansfield himself went to the Japanese foreign minister and apologized for that accident. There was a famous photograph of Mansfield bowing deeply in front of Foreign Minister Abe. I said that helped. It didn't solve the problem by any means, but it did help. While I was there he called General Myers who was the commander U.S. Forces Japan and said, "Al wants me to go with him to Governor Ota. It's going to be a public thing, sort of a press conference." It was not exactly a press conference, but I guess it was close enough for military purposes.

Now, anytime you met with Governor Ota in his office there were TV cameras all over the place. There were microphones stuck in your face and all that, and you were meeting in his big conference room in his office suite.

Myers gave him permission not to go, so I had to call back to the prefectural people and tell them that I was coming by myself and I had to make up excuses as to what exactly General Rollings had in mind. So in the end Wayne didn't go and I did. Meeting Ota on camera gave me the opportunity to convey directly to the Okinawan public the shock that we Americans all felt at this horrible crime, and I said that the suspects were in U.S. custody but they would indeed be turned over to Japanese jurisdiction when they were indicted, in accordance with the Status of Forces Agreement or SOFA.

Later I realized I'd made a critical mistake. Having worked closely with Wayne Rollings for over a year, and not having recommended going to the governor for every incident, even a murder; I mistakenly believed that Wayne would trust my political judgment on this one. I underestimated how much he hated cameras. During the previous few days that he was in Hawaii if it had occurred to me for a second that he would refuse, I would have called him in Hawaii. His subordinate generals would have gone with me and I am sure that his predecessor Major General Carl Fulford would have gone with me too.

As I was going to Ota's office from the elevator and afterward going back to the elevator, I was swarmed by the TV cameras and reporters demanding "Why don't you turn them over now?" I kept repeating that we would follow the procedure under the SOFA. They would be investigated by the Japanese police while they were in U.S. custodwhich they were at that very momenand as soon as they were indicted would be in a Japanese court. They would be turned over to the Japanese police for imprisonment prior to trial which in fact did happen. Beforehand, the Japanese police did investigate them very thoroughly.

The feelings among the Americans against that trio were almost indescribable. The annual Futenma Air Station flight line fair was about a week or so after this rape. All of the American military bases had a big open house every year with rides and food, etc., to display all their military equipment and allow the Okinawan public on the bases. My political military officer was at Futenma that day. He just casually asked some of the Marines who were with a helicopter display what they thought about the rapists. One said, "We'd like to kill them."

Q: This was in a way...

O'NEILL: Pretty intense to say that, but that was the kind of feeling that Americans had.

Q: What was in these guys' minds? The idea of going after some teenage...

O'NEILL: A 12 year old sixth grader. I don't know that we ever found out exactly what motivated them other than just really twisted minds. It was really - and still is - sickening to talk about. Of course, we had an unbelievable wave of protest groups coming into the consulate general. Everybody from one end of Okinawa to the other all sorts of groups, political, non-political, business, you name it, to the point where most days for weeks after this crime became public we had to line up the protest groups in our consular waiting room on the first floor and bring them up one group after the other to meet with me on the second floor. People were really angry as they had every right to be. There was nothing feigned about this. It was the worst thing that happened since reversion, and it sparked the largest series of demonstrations.

There was another aspect to it, too, which was because of the very fragile state of Japan itself, this child rape incident really caught on nation-wide. You had this whole series of bad occurrences in Japan during 1995 which added strength to the Okinawan protests. They reverberated in Tokyo and throughout Japan. When the Okinawans finally saw some of their pain and tribulations were gaining traction in mainland Japan, which spurred them on to more protests that kept feeding back and forth.

These were the factors in Japan in 1995: You had an extremely weak prime minister, Tomiichi Murayama, who as I mentioned before was a pacifist who had fought against the security treaty for 50 years. Also, Japan was in the fifth or sixth year of a recession which seemed to have no end to it. In February, you had had a gigantic earthquake in the Osaka-Kobe area which was extremely destructive. It was not only destructive in terms of about 5,000 people being killed and great damage being done to Japan's number one port area but also a psychological blow. The Japanese had looked at the earthquakes that we had in Los Angeles and San Francisco and said, "Americans don't really know how to deal with earthquakes. Well, we Japanese know."

March brought not only the 50th anniversary of Iwo Jima but also the truly bizarre sarin nerve gas attacks in the Tokyo subway system engineered by the weird cult named Aum Shinrikyo. They killed 15 or so people and sickened quite a number. It would be like a nerve gas attack at Metro Center in DC.

Then there was the trauma over the 50th anniversary of the Okinawa battle and the two atomic bombings followed by the surrender. So that was the Japan that in September of 1995 was faced with this horrendous rape case.

I was in touch with the prosecutor in Okinawa, a Japanese central government official. He told me he was quite pleased with the cooperation of the U.S. military authorities and the course of the police investigation. He had no problem at all; the police had access to the suspects for as long and as frequently as they wanted. The police were taking the three suspects to the scene of the crime and to the nearest police station and were investigating them. There were always U.S. Marine escorts with them to the best of my knowledge every time they went for police interrogation. The Japanese police operate very differently than ours do. They don't allow lawyers to be present during interrogations anywhere in Japan. It has nothing to do whether it was military or civilian. So we had to provide more protection to these creatures than would normally have been the case, but the Marines felt obligated to do it. Otherwise, they were in solitary confinement in the Camp Hansen brig.

But meanwhile the Okinawan press was spreading lurid stories about how these three were free to roam around Camp Hansen which was an absolute lie. Frankly, if they had been out free they might have been killed, as I said, by their fellow Marines. The news media were spinning all sorts of lies; so ultimately I got the Marines to bring the press onto Camp Hansen to show them the brig and show where the three were being kept. After the news media had done so much damage by spreading lies, they did finally report the facts.

This crime also was reverberating in the central government in Tokyo, and also in DoD. The defense secretary at the time was William Perry who by coincidence had been an Army engineer in Okinawa right after World War II; so he had some feeling for the place and Okinawan people that the average secretary of defense would not have had. Perry was incensed at the child rape. He directed the Commandant of the Marine Corps to order the Marines on Okinawa to have a two day stand-down. They'd stop all training. The idea was they would have a couple of days of reflection about this vile crime and what might have caused it, etc. Ota himself went to see Ambassador Mondale after I saw Ota. General Myers from U.S. Forces Japan was with Ambassador Mondale when the session with Ota took place. Beforehand, the ambassador was good enough to talk on the phone with me quite a bit to ask what was Ota like, what to do, and how to handle the meeting. He was quite willing to take some of my advice on how to deal with Ota.

General Wayne Rollings took one step on his own that was very helpful, and I told Ambassador Mondale so. There was artillery training coming up, and he cancelled that before anybody mentioned it so it would not be a focus of more demonstrations.

Also, I knew that a pacifist organization called the Okinawa Peace Movement Center headed by a man named Arakaki Zenshun was going to hold a demonstration which was supposed to end up at the gates of Camp Butler, the Marine Corps headquarters, in the central part of the island right near Kadena Air Base. I kept in touch with General Rollings about this, telling Wayne what we knew. I told him I would invite Arakaki to talk with me about the demonstration and his plans. So I got my political Foreign Service National, FSN, to invite Arakaki to talk, which he was quite happy to do. Arakaki was a gentleman, a long-time pacifist, very much anti-base but a decent man. We had a long chat. The thing I was most concerned about was the march to the base gate. I wanted to know how the march was going to be controlled and how it was going to be controlled afterward so there was no opportunity for any mischief or misunderstanding. I also wanted to know what the objective was. What did Arakaki want to get out of this demo?

He explained they would march from assembly areas and have marshals for each subgroup. He was expecting 6,000 in all. When I said, "We really want this to be a peaceful march." He smiled and said, "We have a lot of experience with demonstrations." He didn't want anything untoward to happen either. There were a couple of tiny extreme leftist radical groups on Okinawa, offshoots of ones from mainland Japan, and he said he was going to make sure that those people were not part of the march because he didn't want anything to put a blot on it. He said when they got to the gate at Camp Butler he just wanted a Marine to take their protest petition. He said he didn't care who it was, just somebody at the gate to take the petition. Then the march would break up, and he had plans for moving everybody back in an orderly way.

The American news media on the other hand had gotten wind of this planned demonstration and were hoping for firebombs and blood. CNN was gathering and so were others. They were really hoping for something really messy. Our collective idea was to disappoint them. Right after this very productive meeting with Arakaki, I called Wayne Rollings and described the discussion. When I told him what Arakaki wanted, Wayne said, "I'll send Colonel Stu Wagner," his public affairs chief, "Stu Wagner will be at the gate to take the petition." That was great because Stu was very savvy when it came to handling these kinds of things.

In fact, that demonstration of about 6,000 people in a very congested area, in the midst of several military bases, went off without a hitch. CNN and all the rest were absolutely disappointed, which was a great achievement. That was the beginning of what turned out to be quite a large number of demonstrations of various kinds, over a long span of many weeks, all of which were non-violent.

The biggest one took place on my birthday, October 21, six weeks after the rape. It was held in a large sports field not far from my office. It turned out to be the largest demonstration in Okinawa since reversion in 1972. People from the embassy came down to observe, as did several of my people. I didn't go; I was watching on television from my house and was on the phone with Ambassador Mondale and the deputy chief of mission Rust Deming and getting reports from the scene. By that time I was recognizable enough that it would not have been helpful for me to be there.

We figured, given the size of the field and also the number of buses that you could observe, there were probably 25,000 people which was a significant portion of the population of Okinawa. The police eventually estimated 58,000 counting the crowd at the field and people as far as they could see in the general vicinity. The Okinawan press printed the figure of 85,000 which then passed into legend, and became the accepted figure among Okinawans. Wildly inflated, but there it was.

Nonetheless, as I pointed out to Embassy Tokyo, CINCPAC and Washington in a cable that day, even if our low estimate was correct it was still the biggest demonstration since 1972. That was the important thing. Just about every Okinawan group was represented there. The main speaker was the speaker of the prefectural assembly. The business community was even represented which was quite interesting. The business representative was Keiichi Inamine who eventually replaced Masahide Ota as governor. The only group that stayed away was the conservative base land owners.

The whole thing was absolutely peaceful except for one woman, an anti-base activist from Osaka on the mainland. She wanted to burn the American flag on the dais where the dignitaries all were lined up. The speaker of the prefectural assembly prevented her from doing that because he didn't want that kind of thing to mar their demonstration. So she went off to a far corner of the field and set fire to the flag. The next issue of Time International had a close-up of the burning flag as the cover photo. I still have that issue of the magazine. That cover photo was a good example of what the news media wanted.

The demonstrations continued. The main upshot of all this was the formation by the U.S. and Japanese governments of something called the Special Action Committee on Okinawa or SACO which included the State Department, Defense Department, Foreign Ministry, and Japanese Defense Agency policy level a major effort to decide what could be done to ameliorate the base situation in Okinawa. The idea was to reduce the so-called footprint of bases in terms of land area and also to reduce training and noise and disruptive training to the minimum allowable; in a word, to still keep the troops ready for the missions in Southeast Asia and Korea. We had floods of Japanese and American officials coming out of Washington and Tokyo to Okinawa to look at what could be done. Most of them had never seen the bases or at least hadn't looked at them through any kind of a fresh eye, so this was quite a new thing for them.

One of the amazing things was that few Japanese officials from Tokyo whether they were in the foreign ministry or even the Japan Defense Agency understood the way the U.S. military operated, or understand the command relationships. They thought, for example, that Wayne Rollings as the major general commanding the Marines also commanded Brigadier General Tom Hobbins the Air Force wing commander and the rest which was not true. In reality, each of the senior service commanders on Okinawa answered to their service component commanders on the mainland. The top Marine general was simply the coordinator. So an awful lot of education was needed on just in terms of dissuading some Japanese officials from some bright ideas they had that were predicated on the idea that the senior Marine commanded everybody else.

In the midst of all the protests, the mayor of Kin Town where the little girl lived used to come see me fairly frequently. I knew Mayor Yoshida well. He'd come to see me dressed in a polo shirt, jeans and running shoes but not as the leader of a protest delegation. We'd just sit and talk. He unfortunately knew the little girl and her parents very well and that made it worse. He wanted to talk it out. It was a nauseating crime.

Q: Had anybody made an official apology to the parents?

O'NEILL: There were public apologies from me, Ambassador Mondale and Lieutenant General Myers, the U.S. Forces Japan commander. These weren't made directly to the parents. For one thing, Mayor Yoshida and the family did not want the girl's name to come out at all. He kept telling me that the Tokyo weekly news magazines were desperately trying to find her name because they wanted to have that big scoop. He was doing everything he could, and I think the people of Kin were doing everything they could, to prevent that. To the best of my knowledge, the little girl's name never came out.

Of course, U.S. Forces Japan provided what is called a "solatium payment" as an initial token gesture. The military families, the various military families' organizations throughout Okinawa and the rest of Japan were putting together voluntary donations for scholarship funds for the girl. I can't remember the total amount collected or the exact mechanics of how this was done, but it was substantial. There was an arrangement whereby these funds were given in a way that did not reveal the family's name. It was really hard to describe how the Americans felt about this. The ordinary rank and file Marines were as disgusted by the rapists as anybody else would be. We knew that those creatures were lucky they were in solitary confinement in the Camp Hansen brig.

Q: Maybe it was after you left, but what happened to the Marines, the perpetrators?

O'NEILL: Well, usually the Japanese judicial system is extremely slow. It goes on and on. Between being charged and actually being indicted and then tried in the Japanese system can take months or years. Those three were indicted in record time for several crimes. The actual names of the crimes in Japanese law sound kind of peculiar to us. One was something like apprehension which was roughly equivalent to kidnapping, and then there was one that equated to sexual assault. But those were just about the only charges.

Once the police investigation was finished, the three were certain to be indicted. They would then go straight into Naha District Prison. They were indicted, tried and convicted all in record time. I think it was not later than mid-November that they were convicted of these several crimes. The Japanese prosecutors were asking for what they thought was a tough sentence. They wanted 10 years each, if you can imagine that in such a case. In the end, two of them got seven years in Yokosuka civil prison, and one of them got six and a half years. They got amazingly light sentences by American standards although these were considered relatively heavy sentences for child rape in Japan. In fact, a few months earlier in June 1995 two Japanese men had abducted and raped a 15 year old Okinawan girl. Just by coincidence, they were convicted shortly after the September rape. Those two Japanese got two and a half and three years for abducting and raping a 15 year old.

If the Marine Corps had been able to try those people they would have been jailed for the rest of their lives, in part because there would have been so many more charges that a Marine general court martial could have brought against them. There really are no conspiracy statutes in the Japanese legal system, for example. So even though they conspired to kidnap, conspired to assault and conspired to rape, that wasn't part of the legal equation in the Japanese system. The Marines could have gotten them on all those charges plus any number of other ancillary charges that really would have added to their sentences. I couldn't imagine them getting less than 50 years each and they probably would have all would have gotten life at least as an initial sentence of a Marine general court martial. Two of them were married, so the Marines could even have, if they thought about it, charged two of them with adultery on top of everything else. But they would have put them away forever.

Some Okinawans understood this, but with the intense emotion of the time, there was no conceivable way the Marines could have tried those people. The demand throughout Japan was to follow the SOFA and have them tried in a Japanese court which was exactly what we intended from the start. There was absolutely no question in our mind that that was going to happea Japanese criminal trial.

Q: I'm looking at the time now, Al, and it's probably a good place to stop. We'll pick it up... Is there anything more you want to talk about after that just to mention a little about what we'll be doing?

O'NEILL: Not now, but later on we can talk about the process, the results such as they were, of the SACO process and the changes that took place in Okinawa, the involvement of President Clinton and Prime Minister Hashimoto in signing the agreement in the spring of 1996.

Q: Today is the 26th of November 2008 with Al O'Neill. Al, we were talking about the aftermath of his horrible rape. You've gone through the legal things, but just one last question on that. Do you know what the final fate? Did these guys get out or what?

O'NEILL: I'm sure they're out because they had very light sentences of seven years in the case of two of them and six and a half years in the case of the third one. They served this in a civil prison in Yokosuka in the same town where the big naval base is. I'm sure, although I've lost track, that all of them were released at the end of their sentences. I would be surprised if they had gotten out early. After release they would have gotten dishonorable discharges from the Navy and Marine Corps. The ringleader was a Navy hospital corpsman of all things, and the other two were Marines. I think it would have been legally possible for the U.S. forces to prosecute them further without double jeopardy because there several crimes that they had committed that aren't even in the Japanese legal system: conspiracy to kidnap, conspiracy to assault and conspiracy to rape. I think the Marines reluctantly just decided they had better just let things go with the Japanese punishment, mild as it was by our standards for such a loathsome crime.

The three rapists certainly triggered almost an earthquake you might say, in U.S.-Japan security relations. As I explained earlier, Japan was very vulnerable in September of 1995 when this rape took place and when the Okinawans began protesting as they naturally would at such a disgusting crime, it resonated unusually strongly in Tokyo and elsewhere in Japan. The Okinawans found themselves getting an unusual amount of support for their protest against the American military presence, more so than they did when they were protesting against accidents or other crimes in times past. That further encouraged particularly the anti-base Okinawans led by Governor Ota to further protests and to further attempts to parlay this horrible crime into decisions by the national government to curtail training, to demand the return of training areas, etc., and other base areas to Okinawa. This reverberation back and forth continued for some while.

Prime Minister Murayama quit in the first week of January 1996. He just couldn't handle the conflicts between his 50 year long pacifist ideological stance and the demands of being prime minister of Japan and, therefore, a defender of the security relationship. His replacement was from the LDP, Ryutaro Hashimoto who was a conservative politician in the LDP mold but who realized that there had to be visible adjustments in the security relationship in order to preserve it.

Even before Murayama quit, the two governments had formed what they called the Special Action Committee on Okinawa known as SACO or "Sacko." This was headed on the U.S. side by deputy assistant secretary of defense Kurt Campbell and on the Japanese side by North American Affairs deputy director general Hitoshi Tanaka. It involved State and DOD and U.S. Forces Japan on our side and the Japan Defense Agency with the Foreign Ministry in the lead on the Japanese side.

The deliberations of SACO continued for several months. The initial stage of negotiation between the Japanese and the U.S. sides, took place mostly in Tokyo there were lots of visits to Okinawa by everybody. The foreign minister was coming down; lots and lots of members of the Diet, particularly those Diet members who fancied themselves as experts on the security relationship were coming down in quite good numbers. I learned from dealing with them that some of these experts knew a lot less about the mechanics of the security arrangements than they thought they did.

But anyway, it was an opportunity to try to instruct, and so I wound up going with more than a few Japanese visitors to meet with my military counterparts. There was value in this anyway in terms of a learning experience for the Japanese and also to bring home - though I don't think it needed to be - to the U.S. military people just how serious this whole thing was. The SACO process produced a statement that was ultimately endorsed in April of 1996 by President Clinton and Prime Minister Hashimoto to curtail a number of training activities, remove certain training activities to other locations, and make commitments to reduce the size of bases and training areas.

This interim SACO report that was issued when President Clinton came to Japan in the spring of 1996 was followed up by a final report in December of 1996. I'll just run down some of the main items. There were 30 major recommendations on training and on facilities. One of the biggest, the centerpiece of these SACO decisions, a decision in December of 1996 that has still not been carried out as of November 2008 was to return Marine Corps Air Station Futenma after a suitable replacement was completed in northeastern Okinawa. Futenma is still in operation. It's a very important facility for the Marines and also gets some use by the Air Force under certain circumstances, but it is right in the middle of the City of Ginowan.

Just as an aside, every consul general since reversion in 1972 had a very clear view of Futenma and its operations because the consul general's residence is on a ridge which is one kilometer from the south end of the Futenma runway. The house is on a straight line to the end of the runway, so every airplane that either lands or takes off from Futenma goes over the consul general's residence.

SACO was the big issue and it still hasn't been completed. About half of the northern training area which is in a very remote rugged area in northeastern Okinawa, the Pacific coast side, was to be returned, and I think some of that at least has been. The northern training area can't be developed commercially because it's so rugged and forested. It's also the watershed area for Okinawa, which suffers from water shortages from time to time. They did move parachute training from Yomitan Auxiliary Airfield which is at the 1945 invasion site. The parachute training, which was the minimum possible to allow people to remain qualified, was moved over to Ie Shima, an island which can be seen just off the coast from Yomitan.

Q: That was where Ernie Pyle was killed?

O'NEILL: Exactly. That is where the famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle was killed in 1945. There's a little monument there. I've been to that, too. Also at Yomitan there was - probably still is - a large antennae array called the "elephant cage." This is run by the U.S. National Security Agency for its purposes. Under SACO it was to be returned once a much smaller more modern facility was built within Camp Hansen, a Marine base.

The Marines had been asking for years to move their very minimal artillery training to one of the mainland artillery ranges for more realistic training and the Japanese finally agreed. The reason for the delay was that until the rape case and the uproar over it, Tokyo was simply not willing to spend the political capital to persuade the Japanese towns near the mainland ranges to accept a few more days of gunfire noise. In the aftermath of that horrible event they finally mustered the courage to do this.

The last big ticket item, if you will, was to relocate Naha Military Port just up the west coast from Naha to the next city which was Urasoe. To the best of my knowledge that still hasn't been done even though, as I explained before, the Urasoe Chamber of Commerce welcomed the idea for a new port that would be dual use; that is, both for military purposes and for their purposes.

It might be worthwhile to talk a little bit about why some of these base returns take so long; not just Futenma. But some of the points are also germane to relocating Futenma out of the center of Ginowan City and moving the air operation up the east coast to Camp Schwab which is where the Marine infantry division's units are based now.

One factor is that in some cases the Japanese government is unwilling to pay the costs whether they're financial or political, or both. Another factor is Japanese requirements for environmental studies which can take a minimum of three years. These regulations often involve not only Tokyo's equivalent of the Environmental Protection Agency but also the prefectural government and in some cases cities have their own environmental rules.

There were also numerous NGO's - Non Governmental Organizations - on Okinawa, and others from the mainland that has been active in trying to block the move of Futenma's operations to the new location near Camp Schwab. They profess concern about coral reefs in the area, for manatees and other marine life. Then sometimes there are cases where the U.S. military force involved is reluctant to make the change on the grounds that it could be disadvantageous for training and readiness.

There were also political and economic cross currents within Okinawa itself. One good example concerns Futenma. The anti-base activists wanted Futenma to be closed immediately whether or not there was a replacement facility which would allow the helicopters to work. It's important to note that when you have Marine infantry you've got to have Marine helicopters because the helicopters move the infantry in Marine Corps doctrine. You couldn't, for example, keep the infantry in Okinawa and move the helicopters to Hawaii or to the mainland of Japan. That would be one of the virtues of moving the helicopters to Camp Schwab where they would be co-located. Instead of flying from central Okinawa to northern Okinawa simply to pick up the Marines and move them to the northern training area, they would be right near the troops and the training area. So this move would be an improvement, if it ever happens.

Another example of the cross currents in Okinawa was also related to Futenma relocation. Governor Ota and his anti-base activist following wanted to get Futenma returned by moving the Marine aviation operations to Kadena Air Base which is just a couple miles away. Ota was busily lobbying Prime Minister Hashimoto, the Japan Defense Agency, and the Foreign Ministry to co-locate the Marine air units to Kadena and then to close Futenma right away and return it. He was forcefully ignoring the mayors and the people of the three towns whose land comprises Kadena Air Base: Kadena Town, Chatan Town, and Okinawa City. Those mayors were adamantly opposed to taking on Ginowan's aviation burden when they already had three F-15 squadrons, an air refueling squadron, P-3s and other air units operating out of Kadena.

Since I was talking with the mayors, I knew this directly. They kept trying to go see Governor Ota to present their opposition to him. He adamantly refused to see the three mayors. He didn't want to hear from them because he wanted to get the credit for closing Futenma faster than anybody thought possible. A big part of my job was to explain these complexities through reporting cables to Embassy Tokyo, U.S. Forces Japan and Washington agencies because Ota was the one who had the bully pulpit as the governor. He was the most famous Okinawan figure outside the prefecture. We had to make sure U.S. officials knew that not everything that Governor Ota said was shared throughout Okinawa, especially about Futenma.

The three mayors were all very nice people and fundamentally accepting of the need for the bases despite their constant lobbying for restrictions on training and other measures that would have reduced the burden of the bases on their people. Ota's idea was a non-starter for them; Mayor Miyagi of Kadena for example, told me that if Tokyo and Washington decided to move the Futenma air operations to Kadena, the people of Kadena Town led by him would block the entrances to the base to prevent it from happening. He said it in the very nicest way, and he would have done it in the very nicest possible way, and there would be no animosity toward the Americans on the bases. After they were repeatedly stonewalled by Governor Ota the three mayors saw their chance when Prime Minister Hashimoto went to a conference in Okinawa. The three mayors cornered him at the meeting site and made clear that none of them or their people supported Ota's plan. I might add, too, that the total population of these three municipalities that hosted Kadena was about 12% of the population of the island, so it's not insignificant in voting terms.

But Ota was prey to other influences. Ota himself was a very complex character. In the beginning of 1996 I wrote a long biographical cable about Ota which I sent to everybody in Washington and all the military addressees from Japan to Hawaii giving his background including his combat service during the war. Even though he was wounded, Ota the student soldier didn't surrender till November 1945, two months after the surrender of the rest of the Japanese forces. He was one of the holdouts. Also, after the war he went to Syracuse University on an U.S. scholarship.

Ota was a pacifist, and he came I think by his pacifism reasonably honestly even though he was sort of a charlatan in certain respects. Kurt Campbell, the DOD deputy assistant secretary for Asia, told me one time that Anthony Lake, the national security advisor, had said that President Clinton had read my cable on Ota. So our reporting which was voluminous was getting a pretty good audience. People were really beginning to look at reporting from this little tiny post in the middle of nowhere. Winston Lord was the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and during the remainder of my tenure there, we got more than a few personal cables from him congratulating us on the quality of our reporting. That made very pleasant reading.

Added to the complex currents regarding Futenma was that Nago City, the northernmost large city in Okinawa, was to get the replacement aviation facility and they were basically lobbying for it. There was some opposition from some groups within Nago but Nago's mayor and the generally conservative people of northern Okinawa saw this as a big opportunity for jobs, for business. They expected that the air facility would be dual-use both for civil and military, and they resented Ota for hogging too much of Japanese government largesse in central and southern Okinawa where there were more people and, therefore, more voters. So there were lots of reasons why the good folk in Nago were interested in getting this new facility and they were doing what they could for it.

One of the things that Tokyo did to assuage Okinawan feelings in the aftermath of the rape was to have the Foreign Minister set up a Foreign Ministry office in Okinawa. Since Okinawa was a Japanese prefecture that was somewhat like a U.S. embassy in Hawaii. But anyway, that's what they did with an ambassador in charge. He had two or three diplomats with him.

When this was announced, the U.S. generals and admirals were alarmed because they saw themselves as getting dragged into an arena that they didn't want to be in at all. They worried about what this new office would do and how it would interact with them. So I asked the DCM in Tokyo, Rust Deming, to make sure the foreign ministry understood that as the U.S. consul general I was to be the counterpart of the head of this MOFA office, not the generals. The first chief of the office was an ambassador named Harashima who was a fine person to work with. He was also a real aficionado of American western movies to a degree that no American could possibly fathom!

So I relieved the generals of their worries on this score. In addition to the new Foreign Ministry office, there were other three institutions of much longer standing that dealt in one fashion or another with Okinawa base issues. The first one was called the Joint Committee which was set up under the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement or SOFA, for dealing with issues related to military bases, military training, and military operations. That organization of course dealt with U.S. Forces Japan countrywide, not just in Okinawa and I would say that the Okinawans didn't understand it very well. Nonetheless, when the SACO final report was issued in September of 1996 the U.S.-Japan Joint Committee was designated by the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee (the foreign minister, the defense agency director, the secretary of state, and the defense secretary) to be the implementing agency for the SACO process.

There was also a U.S.-only grouping called the OACC or the Okinawa Area Coordinating Committee. It was made up of the senior Marine officer, the Marine Expeditionary Force commander, then a two star general; the Marine Corps base commander who was usually a brigadier general; the consul general; the commander of the Army's Tenth Area Support Group and the Navy captain who commanded Fleet Activities Okinawa. In addition, the commander of the amphibious forces Seventh Fleet was normally invited to these meetings. He was located on Okinawa for ease of planning with the Marines, although his ships were at Sasebo on the mainland.

That committee met both formally and informally usually quarterly but other times as needed. It was kind of the central means for doing two things: One was working out some fairly large issues with the prefectural government and also sometimes coordinating within the services certain things that needed to be worked out because of what might be called cultural differences between, for example, the Air Force and the Marines. The OACC also handled things that overlapped the various services, and there was a lot of this. When you look at the names of the bases on Okinawa, you see one is a Marine base, another one is an Army post and another's an Air Force base, but in fact almost all these bases had people of the other services on them. For example, at Kadena you had the Navy P-3 Orion squadron and the headquarters of the Navy's Fleet Activities Okinawa. When the 7th Fleet's carrier would go into port at Yokosuka, the carrier air group would often do bombing practice off the west coast of Okinawa. The Marine air wing from Iwakuni sometimes would have its F/A-18s go down for the same purpose.

One example of OACC action involved Chatan Town, which comprised the west side or East China Sea side of Kadena Air Base. There was a good bit of graffiti writing and trash, etc., along Chatan's sea wall. There were also some incidents of drunken U.S. service members urinating in people's yards, which was totally unacceptable anywhere. So when the mayor of Chatan brought this to the Kadena Air Base commander's attention we knew this would involve all the services. We had an OACC meeting very quickly.

Two things happened: One, the OACC imposed a curfew on military people in Chatan Town and perhaps some of the other areas, too, to limit the amount of time they were allowed to be out at night. Two, there was a very visible cleanup campaign where service members volunteered their time to clean up the graffiti off the seawall, clean up trash, which went over very well with the local population. I remember some of the generals saying in the media that they're homeowners, too. They wouldn't put up for any of this bad behavior in our own neighborhoods. Why should the people of Chatan have to, especially with foreign military people? So there was no question about the need for action, and that was one of the things that the OACC handled.

There was another more specialized group; I suppose you could say, the Tripartite Liaison Committee or TLC which combined the OACC, the prefectural government represented by the governor and his senior staff and the Japanese government which was represented by the Defense Facilities Administration Bureau in Naha, an organization under the Japan Defense Agency. Those were the officials who worked on base issues for the Japanese government with the towns and the prefectural government.

This TLC had been set up originally at the behest of the long-serving conservative governor Junji Nishime in the 1980s, and its purpose was to bolster Governor Nishime's credentials as somebody who could deal with base issues. In other words, it gave U.S. support to a conservative governor of Okinawa who was indeed still trying to limit training and to get land returned where possible but was going at it from a perspective that was in favor of the security treaty and recognized the need for the continued existence of certain essential bases.

During the time that I was there, you had largely leftist, or reformist as they're called, mayors in most of the major cities in Okinawa and a very reformist, pacifist governor who was very active in anti-base issues. This was sort of a different situation for the TLC. The TLC met only one time during the three years that I was in Okinawa, on St. Patrick's Day in 1995. Basically the military people were quite reluctant to give Governor Ota a big forum for his anti-base activism. I supported them because I'd been dragged in with Governor Ota to some examples of his on-camera anti-base activism, so to my mind the TLC was not a useful organization during his tenure. I think it was revived under his successor, Governor Inamine, who was a more moderate person on base issues.

These were all institutions that were peculiar to Okinawa to address base issues. In addition it's important as I've touched on a couple of times, to note that frequently during the course of a week and sometimes almost daily, there was contact between the mayors of the various towns that hosted the bases and senior base personnel in things large and small. The issue could be a complaint about some particularly loud noise or an accident that took place or a request to curtail certain training because school examinations were taking place. Almost invariably, unless there was some crucial training reason why they could not agree, the bases acceded to whatever adjustment that was needed.

As one example of this continuing cooperation between the bases and townships, one of the high schools in Ginowan City was having its gym rebuilt, and the school officials asked the Futenma commander if the kids could use one of the gyms on Futenma for their gym classes while construction was underway, and it was done. This was typical.

I left in July 1997 after a very good tour. I want to mention several items that happened there, one of which was a very sad situation and the other three were kind of unexpected for Okinawa. A few months before we left in 1997, my wife and I went to a concert by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra in one of Okinawa's very fine concert halls. On another occasion, I met the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip who was there in his capacity as the president of the World Wildlife Federation looking at endangered coral reefs. Separately from his visit, the royal yacht HMS Britannia came to Naha civilian port, and the Commodore Royal Yacht Squadron invited all the generals and their wives and me and my wife to a reception aboard Britannia which was a 450-some foot long yacht, now out of service. They had a small Royal Marine band contingent on board, and after the reception they did a formal "beating of retreat" twilight ceremony on the dockside, too. It was quite an unusual thing, totally unexpected for Okinawa.

The sad story is an example of the kind of thing that can crop up in any Foreign Service post, I suppose. It was a miniature tragedy in August of 1996. One Friday night about midnight I got a call from my newly arrived vice consul. The Kadena command center had just told him that a C-141 transport had arrived from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. In the nose wheel well of the airplane the crew found two Mongolian kids one of whom was dead and the other of whom the Air Force security police managed to revive on the tarmac. The two were transported immediately to Lester Naval Hospital next to Kadena.

I told him to call the Department's Op Center, of course, to be put through to our embassy in Ulaanbaatar immediately to say that this had happened. Also, to tell them that I was going to call the Mongolian ambassador in Tokyo in the morning, Saturday, and ask him to send an embassy officer down to Okinawa that day so we could deal with this. I also called our embassy's duty officer right away, and I called our deputy chief of mission (DCM) on Saturday morning and told him what happened. I did get in touch with the Mongolian ambassador and explained who I was and what had happened, and asked for an officer to come down. I said I would meet the officer at the airport. He sent a Mrs. Nasanbuyan, their commercial attachï¿½ to Naha that Saturday night. She spoke very good English and she stayed overnight at my house.

The first thing Sunday morning I took her to Lester Naval Hospital where Captain Don Anderson the hospital commander escorted us to see the kids, the body of the one that was in the mortuary and the other boy who was in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). One boy had on shorts, a short sleeve shirt and shower shoes, and the other one had sneakers, a long sleeve shirt, and long pants. They looked like they were about 12 years old. They had no identification, so we had no idea who the boys were.

The hospital people took photographs of both of them which we had faxed to our embassy in Ulaanbaatar so that they could put the photographs on Mongolian national TV in hopes that somebody could identify them. The hospital people were doing just everything they could. The pediatric doctors in the intensive care unit were briefing Mrs. Nasanbuyan and answering all her questions about the surviving boy who was in a coma.

I then drove her up to Kadena where we met Brigadier General John Baker, the 18th Wing commander, and a colonel from Military Airlift Command because the C-141 transport was a Military Airlift Command plane. Before the four of us went out to see the airplane, John Baker gave a briefing of the flight from Ulaanbaatar. Basically, for more or less five hours those kids had been at the elevation of Mt. Everest because the plane was mostly at about 29,000 feet and sometimes higher. Of course, they had no oxygen. They had no proper clothing. General Baker and the colonel took us to the tarmac to see the airplane, and Mrs. Nasanbuyan looked into the nose wheel well, and could see where the boys stowed away. She met the air crew and also the Air Force security policeman who had revived the one boy.

Then, in relatively short order two things happened: One, the boy who was on life support died, which sadly was a blessing because he would have stayed in that condition, if he had been moved back to Mongolia somehow. Also the Mongolian authorities identified the boys fairly quickly. It turned out they were not brothers as they seemed, and they were teenagers, a bit older than they looked.

It turned out that they lived on the outskirts of the Ulaanbaatar airport, and the older boy had seen a movie called Passenger 57 with Wesley Snipes. In the movie he's a counter terrorist operative. A 747 is hijacked and the hero gets into the nose wheel well of the 747, gets inside the airplane, and eventually overcomes the hijackers and wins the day. Over the following days, I got more information through our embassy in Ulaanbaatar and also from Mrs. Nasanbuyan during the night or two that she was at my house and calling back to the Foreign Ministry. The older boy came up with the idea that they would fly to Germany. So while the crew was offloading the humanitarian aid from the rear of the airplane, the two kids managed to get through the security fences, and into the nose wheel well. The crew chief, when he did his preflight check, just couldn't see them.

The crew was devastated. They were staying at Kadena because there was going to be an investigating officer flown out from Dover Air Force Base. I met with them and made clear that the Mongolian government did not blame them at all. In fact, it fired the airport security chief at Ulaanbaatar Airport and punished several other officials involved but did not blame the air crew. Then we had to work with the mortuary people at Kadena to get the bodies back to Ulaanbaatar. In Okinawa, you just never knew what was going to be in store when you picked up the telephone late at night.

By the way, there was a chapel service for the Mongolian boys at one of the Kadena chapels. The Officers' Wives Club organized a service for them. I sent the leaflet from the service to the Mongolian embassy in Tokyo. It was a sad little story, and that is where it came from - a movie. Mrs. Nasanbuyan, when she was first looking at the boys in the hospital said sadly "We teach our boys to be brave."

Q: Al, was there any... You may have covered this right from the beginning, but what was the rationale for our troops on Okinawa? Was this ever questioned, moving to Guam or something like that, while you were there?

O'NEILL: Oh, well, it is now. The bases are a combination of both history and geography. The U.S. forces occupied Okinawa after perhaps the bloodiest battle of the entire Pacific war. In 82 days of constant combat, 240,000 were killed; most of them were Okinawan civilians. A huge base complex was built up particularly during and after the Korean War. The U.S. kept Okinawa under occupation for another 20 years. Reversion didn't take place until 1972.

While I was in the embassy in Tokyo from 1980 to '84, there was a considerable consolidation of U.S. bases in the Tokyo area and Yokohama, from north to south, Tokyo to Yokohama to Yokosuka. Even during that same approximate period there were some consolidations of U.S. military bases and closings of U.S. military bases on Okinawa but it was not nearly as sweeping.

To hop back in time a bit, during the Vietnam War those Okinawan bases were very valuable because we had B-52s stationed there which were taking off from Kadena and doing bombing missions in Vietnam. That could not have happened had reversion taken place. So again, there was this enormous feeling of the importance of these bases. If you look at a map you can see Okinawa is closer to Pusan than it is to Tokyo, and so it's also straddles the space between Kyushu, the southernmost main island of Japan and Taiwan. It's a keystone between northeast Asia and Southeast Asia in a physical sense. From a strategic standpoint, it's a thousand miles closer to the mainland than Guam. All these strategic, historical, and political factors militated towards continuing a large and robust base presence on Okinawa even while there were returns and cutbacks, etc.

You asked about Guam. In the meantime, and I don't know exactly the time frame but certainly after the Vietnam War and all the Indochina involvement was over, we largely closed down a lot of the facilities in Guam. This was in part because of Guamanian opposition to the bases. Even while I was in the Philippines from 1997 to 2000, to the best of my recollection there were no U.S. Air Force flight units assigned to Anderson Air Force Base in Guam, and few if any U.S. warships at the naval base. There were pre-positioned ships which are large supply ships that can be sent anyplace. They've got vehicles and repair parts and all kinds of supplies, but overall there was a much reduced military presence on Guam while that significant presence continued in Okinawa.

I don't think I mentioned this before but there is in Japan something called the UN Command Rear which is directly linked to Korean contingency planning and the UN Command in Korea. These UN Command Rear bases include Yokota Air Base in Honshu and Sasebo in Kyushu, where the amphibious force ships were based. On Okinawa, Kadena, White Beach Naval Station, and Futenma Marine Corps Air Station were the UN Command Rear installations. They flew the U.S., Japanese and UN flags to symbolize that status. There was a separate SOFA or Status of Forces Agreement with the Japanese that governed the use of these UN Command Rear bases. So you had this factor as well, the concern about the availability of the bases in Okinawa for a Korean contingency. In fact, there's a 6,000 acre ammunition storage area adjacent to the 5,000 acre Kadena Air Base, where a huge amount of ammunition for a Korean contingency was stored.

Following through from the SACO process, the two governments have reached some agreements on relocating some of the Marine units from Okinawa to Guam. I think there's a target date of 2013. In any case, in the natural course of things in the SACO process I think it's fair to expect that any such plans are going to be slipped by many years. The Japanese government is supposed to spend several billion dollars, and it may be six billion, but don't quote me. Several billion dollars to build facilities on Guam for the forces that will be relocated out of Okinawa. This would result in a significant reduction in the manpower in Okinawa and, therefore, the noise levels and the kinds of disruption that the noise levels produce. A very visible gesture, assuming it takes place.

Q: Was having this force there in some manner a warning to China about Taiwan?

O'NEILL: There were various operations out of Okinawa aimed at learning about what the Chinese were up to, including the operations of the P-3 Orion anti-submarine squadrons there. Not only was there the U.S. P-3 squadron at Kadena but the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force had two squadrons of P-3s at Naha International airport. There was also what I'll euphemistically refer to as the acquisition of information through some of the U.S. facilities on Okinawa which I'm sure involved the Chinese.

Q: Actually, one of those planes landed on Hainan Island.

O'NEILL: That was, of course, much later, and that was an EP-3. The ones that normally operated out of Okinawa were plain P-3 anti-submarine planes. The EP-3 that was involved in this collision with the Chinese fighter in what, spring of 2001, was strictly surveillance. It had no weapons as the regular P-3s can carry. It was also marked very differently, too. The U.S. news media very annoyingly called the EP-3 a spy plane. Well, the P-3s on anti-submarine patrol are painted a pale flat grey with slightly darker grey U.S. markings on them, very low visibility. The EP-3 that was knocked down by the Chinese fighter was painted a bright glossy white on top, with shiny dark grey undersides and big red, white, and blue U.S. markings on the sides and the wings. They were not trying to hide anything.

Anyhow, China figured more in national thinking at the Tokyo level than it did in the thinking of Okinawans. The 7th Fleet amphibious group did at least one visit to Shanghai, and the group commander at the time, Rear Admiral Walt Doran, told me that as they were heading into the roads at Shanghai, he didn't know if the port visit was on or not. There was always something going on in U.S.-China relations that made these things uncertain but that particular port visit to Shanghai did take place. So there was a combination of positive interaction and also watchfulness, I guess, with respect to the Taiwan Strait situation and China on the part of the U.S. forces in Okinawa. It was an enormously interesting place. I couldn't have asked for a better assignment.

Q: With your Japanese experience, did you sense any changes in the way the mainland Japanese regarded Okinawa? I'm thinking that Okinawa was treated the same way that the Germans in the northern part of Italy were viewed from Rome, as being a bunch of peasants who didn't really speak the language, etc. Did you see any change in this?

O'NEILL: There was a certain amount of change. To my mind the prejudice that you're speaking of toward Okinawa was quite strong, and I think that something of a change occurred in the aftermath of the horrible child rape case in September 1995. There was more sympathy on the part of mainlanders for the Okinawan situation in the aftermath, which was a good thing because largely the mainlander view of Okinawa was just similar to what you mentioned: They're not exactly Japanese; they speak funny, and they have weird customs and all that. In their dialect, the Okinawans call the mainland Japanese Yamatunchu or Yamato people and themselves Uchinanchu.

A lot of prejudices continued to linger particularly among the older generation of mainlanders. That awful crime did generate a certain amount of sympathy and a recognition that there did have to be adjustments in the base situation. Part of the equation was the NIMBY syndrome, the "not in my backyard" syndrome: "We're so glad those bases are down in Okinawa because that's what Okinawans are for. We don't want Marines and airmen wandering around our neighborhoods and making noise nearby."

During that time, and it may have been coincidental, maybe not, Okinawan musical groups playing Okinawan music got a much wider hearing and much larger audiences in Tokyo and Osaka for concerts and for CD sales and all that. So there was a beginning of greater appreciation of the richness of Okinawan culture. In lots of ways despite the small population and tiny size, it's very rich in sculpture and pottery, weaving, textile dying, and distinctive lacquer work that's often very pretty.

There's also a generational element into it, too to mainland Japanese thinking about Okinawans. Younger Okinawans tend to be non-political to a degree that was surprising to anybody who served in Seoul and knows how spectacularly political younger Koreans have traditionally been. Also, I think, younger mainland Japanese, are more accepting and open to Okinawans particularly because of tourism. The largest component of the Okinawan economy in recent decades - the last 15 or so years - has been tourism, which is almost all from other islands of Japan, rather than from the outside. So younger Japanese have been there for tourism, for honeymoons, etc., and they have encountered Okinawans as being Japanese like themselves, people who do not think that they should be separate from Japan. So that's been a leavening influence as well, a good effect.

Q: Speaking of cultural changes and all, I've seen reports from time to time that Japanese teenagers, particularly girls, seem to get on to fads, which has become quite an element in Japanese society. How did the teenage girls from Okinawa and our troops there get along?

O'NEILL: Well, they often were very friendly, and there were more than a few marriages of service members and Okinawan young women. There was the usual bar culture, too, that you have around any military installation of any nationality anywhere in the world and any time, going back to Caesar's legions. This was less prevalent in Okinawa than it had been, say, during the Vietnam War era. The reduction in such activities from an economic standpoint, whatever the concern from a moral standpoint may be, had a very depressing effect on a number of the towns of Okinawa that didn't necessarily have a lot of other things to substitute for the townspeople's' livelihoods.

The number of marriages between Okinawan women and American servicemen was perhaps less than in the past because a lot of the American military people were on accompanied tours. The Department of Defense school system ran 13 schools on Okinawa including two four-year high schools. The consulate general used to issue 100 "reports of birth abroad" per month, month after month, year after year, because of births at Lester Naval Hospital. Lester Hospital also had extremely good neo-natal intensive unit. Despite the fact that the hospital itself was rather shop-worn, its people and equipment were really first rate.

In the Okinawan language the word for a stir-fry dish is champuru, and they call their culture "champuru culture" because they have mixed in so many elements from different places in the world including Southeast Asia. They're allowed to import Thai rice to distill awamori which is their rice whiskey. Nobody else in Japan could import foreign rice, but the Okinawans for historical reasons are allowed to do it for that purpose. Some of their musical instruments look similar to ones from Southeast Asia. Some of the original court dress and the formal dress have Southeast Asia elements particularly the caps that resembled the ones that used to be worn by Vietnamese mandarins. Their tombs that they call "turtleback tombs" are unique to Okinawa. You don't see them anyplace else in Japan. They're from Fujian Province in China across the East China Sea.

Okinawans who were descended from Korean potters or Japanese or Chinese traders would tell you this with some pride. If you had that situation among mainland Japanese, they'd hide it from you. One of the stir-fry dishes in Okinawa has vegetables and corned beef hash in it which is obviously not a traditional Japanese delicacy, but that's a literal example of their "stir-fried culture." They're a very easygoing people. There were Americans who married Okinawan women before reversion and after, and these mixed families and their children are not seen as odd by Okinawans. It's a very refreshing situation in comparison to the generally more rigid views of mainlanders on such things.

Q: One last question on this. How did you find the relations with the embassy? Was the embassy happy that you were there? But sometimes the greatest joy of a consul general is not to have to have the embassy pay much attention to him or her.

O'NEILL: Well, it was basically inevitable that the embassy would pay a lot of attention to Okinawa during that period. I was very fortunate. Ambassador Walter Mondale was wonderful. He was a great believer in the U.S.-Japan security relationship.

He and Mrs. Mondale, Joan Mondale, were great people to be with, too, and they made several visits mostly for ceremonial occasions having to do with the Iwo Jima 50th anniversary and the Okinawa 50th anniversary. During the June 1995 50th anniversary events, they stayed at our house for three nights. Mrs. Mondale, who is an artist and a potter in her own right, was very interested in all the arts of Okinawa. She came down one time on a visit of her own - she was with us for two or three days, visiting potters and weavers, etc., and it was a tremendous thing, got huge publicity in Okinawa. That the wife of the American ambassador and ex-vice president was clearly interested in the arts in Okinawa was tremendous. We couldn't have designed something better than that.

Rust Deming, the DCM, was one of the foremost Japan hands in our Foreign Service his entire career. His father, Ambassador Olcott Deming, had been on Okinawa; his title probably was political adviser to the U.S. military commander. He - Olcott Deming - was very fondly remembered even by people like Governor Ota, the scholar and pacifist, for what he had done to try to ease the base burden on Okinawa in the 1950s.

Another thing, in consular operations we had one potential problem that I was able to defeat with the support of the embassy consular and administrative sections and ultimately, the ambassador and DCM. The Department was moving toward electronic visas that would be printed out on a serial-numbered visa sheet and then pasted into the passport as opposed to being stamped as the old non-immigrant visas were. These things would have a photo of the visa applicant electronically imprinted in the visa itself.

As the State Department was moving to this system worldwide, its initial view was that non-immigrant visa processing at Consulate General Naha would end. Okinawans would have to go to Fukuoka on Kyushu to get their visas, not the most convenient place. I argued that we should continue the non-immigrant visa operation. My argument was that much of what the U.S. represents to most Okinawans is the bases. There are a few narrow areas in which we could do something other than operate bases. An obvious one was convenience of visa processing for Okinawan visitors. I forget the exact number, but it was a reasonable number. It would have sent a bad signal in that era to take it away from them and say they had to make a special trip to Kyushu and then maybe fly to Tokyo and then to the U.S., because direct flights from Okinawa to the U.S. were closing out. There were just a lot of reasons, and fortunately the embassy agreed with me, lobbied the State Department, and we retained the non-immigrant visa processing. So that worked out well.

Q: Today is the 12th of December 2008. I'm continuing with Al O'Neill. Al, we're off to the Philippines.

O'NEILL: I went there in summer of 1997 for three years: '97 to 2000.

Q: Okay. How stood our relations with the Philippines when you got there, and also what was going on in the Philippines, and then we'll go to your work.

O'NEILL: I went to the Philippines on a direct transfer from Okinawa. My predecessor as political counselor had left a month before. Had I gone the usual route which was to go on home leave, then to the Philippines, there would have been a two month gap in the political counselor's position. Since it's about a three hour flight, I applied for a direct transfer and delayed home leave. The department eventually granted it - not because it made sense to have a one month gap instead of a two month gap - but because it was cheaper to do what I wanted. Had it been five dollars more expensive Personnel wouldn't have cared about the two month gap.

Anyway, I got to the Philippines in July of 1997. U.S.-Philippine relations were, I guess, good at times, less active than they had been for a long time because the bases were long gone. The last of the U.S. military bases, Cubi Point Naval Air Station, had closed in November of 1992 when I was in PHL as deputy director as I described earlier. As it happened, the ambassador when I arrived was Tom Hubbard who had been the DCM in Manila when the bases closed. Tom was very experienced, a lot of Japanese experience. He had also been DCM in Kuala Lumpur and then came back to Manila as ambassador, I think, in 1996. I had known Tom for a long time, so I was very happy to get the chance to be his political counselor.

There was still a very active U.S. trade relationship with the Philippines, a lot of economic activity despite the fact that the Philippine economy was in very bad shape when I arrived. That was the summer, you may remember, of 1997 when the Asian economic crisis hit all of Southeast Asia, Korea and other countries and did a great deal of damage. The president of Philippines was Fidel Valdez Ramos. Known as Eddie Ramos he was among other things a 1950 graduate of West Point, a Philippine army veteran of the Korean War and former defense secretary under Cory Aquino.

One of the biggest problems that Ramos was trying to grapple with was severe electric power shortages, caused by a burgeoning demand for electricity and coupled with the fact that during Cory Aquino's entire presidency no national base-load power plant was ever put in operation. He was doing all sorts of stopgap measures including bringing in barges with huge generators that would help the electricity situation. That was a pretty acute problem added to the tremendous problems caused by the economic downturn of 1997.

The Philippines has always had a very strange relationship with the U.S. which played out in a lot of ways. One of the big pending issues that I got involved in literally from the day after I arrived was creating a replacement for the old Status of Forces Agreement or SOFA. In contrast to other situations where our SOFA is an annex to an alliance treaty, the Philippine SOFA had been subordinate to the bases agreement because the bases predated the treaty. So it went when the bases went. Since there was no SOFA, there was only a shaky arrangement to let tiny handfuls of American military personnel in for minor exercises and training. But ship visits were really out of the question as well as larger exercises like the old Balikatan exercise which was somewhat analogous to the old Team Spirit exercises with Korean forces.

Q: Why were ship visits out of the question?

O'NEILL: Well, because there was no legal protection for the U.S. personnel. There was an ad hoc agreement that the Philippine senate acquiesced in. It was a stopgap agreement between the two governments to allow, I think, up to 50 people from the U.S. military in the Philippines at any one time. They had enough legal protection that everybody could live with, but if you brought a destroyer in, that would be a lot more than 50 people, so that was beyond the scope. So there was this big hiatus in navy-to-navy training which the Philippine Navy desperately needed. It was in dire straits.

Q: If we were able to bring ships into Hong Kong, Singapore, ships were going all over the place. The Philippines is practically our own back yard. I would have thought there would be something. Was this part of anti-Americanism, or was this something that slipped under the rug or what?

O'NEILL: It wasn't something that slipped under the rug because, as I say, when the Philippine Senate refused to approve by two-thirds vote the newly renegotiated bases agreement in 1991, the expiration of the base agreement also meant the expiration of the Status of Forces Agreement or SOFA. So we didn't have the kinds of legal protections that we need particularly to settle the always-vexed question of legal jurisdiction over criminal activity or other misbehavior by American servicemen.

Q: Which you by now having come out of Okinawa were the expert.

O'NEILL: I had a certain amount of experience with that, yes.

Q: Could you talk a little about this? It seems so incredible that we hadn't patched this up.

O'NEILL: By the time that I arrived in 1997 there had been initial discussions between the two countries over a new Status of Forces Agreement for a non-base situation. It was very difficult. Some of the difficulty was caused by the U.S. side because some of the people working on Philippine affairs in DoD figured that the way to do this was to give the Filipinos a piece of paper, throw it on the desk and say, "Sign it or else." That was what passed as diplomacy among some of the DoD people who were doing Philippines at the working level and who shall remain nameless. There were other people above them who had a somewhat more sophisticated approach, but those people were kind of sandwiched in the middle of a layer of working level anti-Philippines sentiment, if you will, and higher levels who were not very thrilled with the Philippines, either, on the grounds that they rejected the base agreement.

Q: So you were still dealing with the sort of, "Well, screw you," attitude.

O'NEILL: There was a certain amount of that. As I say, not everybody in DoD agreed with that approach. Certainly the State Department believed in the necessity of some new arrangement. I mean, for one thing the Philippines hasn't moved in quite a few thousand years. It is still right between the Japanese archipelago and the Straits of Malacca and the Indonesian archipelago and not all that far away from China. That was another thing the Philippines was preoccupied with which was Chinese claims to the South China Sea and places like Mischief Reef and the Spratly Islands.

The community of Filipinos who thought in strategic terms was, as far as I was concerned, quite a bit smaller than the number of Americans who thought in strategic terms about the Philippines. There were at least 10 and perhaps as many as 12 English language daily newspapers published in Manila. Try to find an American city that has that many papers published in English or, indeed, in any language. You also had a very lively radio talk show network and TV talk show network, so there were plenty of opportunities and outlets for the chattering classes, a large segment of whom always felt aggrieved at the United States, to vent their psychological problems. One of the things that that class spoke about when the senate failed to get the two-thirds majority in '91 to renew the base agreement was "slaying the father figure," i.e., us.

Anti-Americanism is probably too strong a word for it unless you qualify it in a Philippine context. I mean, there was no violence against Americans, no personal animosity towards any individual Americans, but you'd have columnists who would use the abbreviation ORS standing for Only Remaining Superpower for the United States in their columns, venting their psychological problems about the United States. Indeed, we had been quite overbearing in the Philippines for many decades after their independence.

I used to get irritated at unconscious echoes of this overbearing attitude in certain U.S. military circles dealing with the Philippines. We in the State Department would use the abbreviation RP for Republic of the Philippines in cables and memos and that kind of thing, sort of bureaucratic shorthand. A lot of DoD and military people continued to use PI for Philippine Islands, seemingly forgetting that the "Philippine Islands" or PI passed into history on July 4, 1946. It had been long gone as an official expression from the U.S. lexicon except in the some quarters of Pacific Command and the Pentagon, etc. So there was that kind of residual sort of... disdain may be too strong a word, but somewhat of an attitude of looking down on the Filipinos as being not all that competent. Unfortunately, a number of Philippine government organizations often did things that lent credence to that unhappy belief. And there was indeed resentment on the Pentagon side about the Senate rejection of the renegotiated base agreement in 1991.

In any case, all of this was part of the mixture as I arrived in Philippines. Fortunately, we had a number of very experienced people, especially Tom Hubbard. He was pushing the idea of a realistic negotiation with the Philippines on a SOFA. In fact, about no more than 48 hours after I arrived, truly by coincidence, Kurt Campbell the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asian-Pacific, arrived with a delegation of State Department, DoD and JCS people - Joint Chiefs of Staff - to begin what became a final six month negotiating push to conclude the Visiting Forces Agreement. I had worked with Kurt Campbell very closely in the last two years that I was in Okinawa on the Special Action Committee on Okinawa, SACO.

Kurt was a very able person. Well, he was a real renaissance man in a lot of ways. He had studied violin in Yerevan, Armenia among other things and was a former naval officer. Kurt certainly understood negotiating and that when you negotiate especially with a friendly power you will be giving up certain things that you might want to get the greater good which was a mutually beneficial agreement.

Q: You use the term "Visiting Forces Agreement?"

O'NEILL: Right.

Q: It's spelled out what we're talking about. It didn't smack of the old thing.

O'NEILL: Exactly. And this, to the best of my recollection, was a stroke of genius on the part of the secretary of foreign affairs of the time, Domingo Siazon, who was one of their best Japan hands and had in fact come from their Embassy Tokyo to become foreign secretary. Siazon was a quite able diplomat. This was the rubric under which we were negotiating; we were negotiating the Visiting Forces Agreement.

When Kurt Campbell and his joint Pentagon-State Department delegation came out from Washington, there was a reception that Ambassador Tom Hubbard hosted for the Philippine negotiating delegation and the Americans at his residence. That night Tom was talking to the woman who was the senior Philippine Justice Department lawyer on the negotiating team, who had been involved in the original base negotiation renewal negotiations back in 1991 and was very nationalistic. Tom told me later that as they were talking she had this epiphany - after all this discussion of a SOFA that had gone on already - "Oh! You mean you're talking about a SOFA for a non-bases situation!" "Yeeeessss, Tessie, that's exactly what we're talking about!"

The leader on the Philippine side was an undersecretary of foreign affairs named Leonidas Caday. He went by Leony Caday. Caday was very well known to the American side particularly to Tom Hubbard. He was an American hand, a lot of service in the U.S., and very well disposed toward the U.S. So Secretary Siazon had picked a very good negotiating partner, somebody who was disposed to think in strategic terms, of whom there were a limited number in the Philippines.

Since this happened so early in my tenure, it's probably good to talk about it now and go through it. We had that negotiation session, and there were several others where the American team came out. In fact, for reasons having to do with the Philippine foreign affairs travel budget, the U.S. negotiators tended to come to Manila more frequently than the Filipinos went to Washington. I think there was just one VFA trip to Washington.

Since the Philippine foreign affairs department did not have any facilities for conference calls - you could hardly call them from our embassy on most rainy days because the phone system was so bad in Manila - we arranged to have the Philippine team in the ambassador's conference room in the chancery which was a little unorthodox, but we had conference call facilities there. The U.S. team was calling in from Washington.

So Undersecretary Caday and his team came, and Tom Hubbard and I and a couple of other people I think from DAO - Defense Attachï¿½'s Office - were in the room as we were going through this negotiation session. There was one particularly fascinating aspect to this. Even though the negotiation was being conducted in English which the Philippine team spoke as well as the American team did, Tom Hubbard was actually interpreting between the two sides in this English-only conversation because of the different perspectives. It always came back to criminal jurisdiction which is always the sticking point in any SOFA with anybody.

At some points, the U.S. side would say something over the conference link, and the Philippine side would recoil with very negative looks on their faces. Then Tom Hubbard would say, "What they really mean is this, this, and this." And the Filipinos would relax and say, "Okay. Well, we can do this." A bit later the Philippine side might say, "Well, we need to have this," and you could hear the American side recoiling on the other end and Tom Hubbard would come in and say, "But what the Filipinos really mean is this ...." Then you would hear the relaxation sounds back in Washington. It was a very odd thing to have an American ambassador interpreting between two English-speaking groups both of which were trying to come to an acceptable conclusion.

As I say, this was July 1997 that we started the final negotiating push. Eventually by February of '98, we had succeeded in finishing the Visiting Forces Agreement and the two executive branches had an agreement. In the U.S. system this was like almost all our other SOFAs, an executive agreement which did not require being submitted to our Senate for approval. Although under U.S. law we would need to give formal notification to the Senate after it went into effect.

As one of the peculiarities of the Philippine constitution which came in with Cory Aquino after Marcos's ouster, there were a whole bunch of articles called "transitory provisions" which, as far as I know, are still in effect. One of these required that any kind of bases agreement with another country would have to be approved by two-thirds of the Philippine senate. This meant two-thirds of all sitting senators, not just who showed up to vote on that particular day. By that constitution there were supposed to be 24 senators. One had died, and so there were actually 23. So this meant in the event that the VFA came to a vote in the senate, 16 out of the 23 would have to vote for it.

In the very same month that the two executive branches agreed on the VFA text, February 1998, Senator Franklin Drilon and I were at a conference on the Visiting Forces Agreement at one of the big Manila hotels. There were a lot of news media present. With no warning, Drilon dropped the little bomb that the Philippine senate was not going to take up the VFA right away. As things panned out, the executive branch didn't submit it to the senate until October of '98, and it was not voted on until May of 1999. I think a major consideration in the senate thinking, was that postponing the vote would keep the VFA from being a major issue in the 1998 presidential election. This was wise in fact even though we were taken aback because we didn't have any warning of it.

In May 1998, there was going to be a presidential election, and much of the senate was going to be up for reelection as well as the entire House of Representatives and thousands of other municipal and provincial positions. By postponing submitting the VFA to the senate, the Ramos administration would take it out of the election campaign which was a very wise move. In fact, there were a number of senators who were pretty much in the pro-VFA column. There were other definitely jingoist senators who were against it. Then there was an amorphous group in the middle who could go either way.

The man who was elected president in 1998 was Joseph Ejercito Estrada who had been a senator and was the vice president when he ran for president. Originally he had been a very popular movie actor, a combination of Stephen Segal and Sylvester Stallone in his movie persona: the tough guy who overcomes all odds and then outfoxes the rich fat cats. As a senator Estrada had voted down the renewed base agreement in 1991. He was lauded by the chattering classes for this. What was particularly interesting was that as president he became a very vigorous proponent of the VFA. In fact, Ambassador Hubbard and I went at Estrada's invitation to the house of a friend of his while he was still president-elect to talk about the VFA. There were several of his very close advisors at the meeting, a couple of whom became cabinet officials including his future defense secretary, Orlando Mercado. Estrada made it very clear that he was going to push hard for the VFA which turned out to be absolutely essential when it did come up for a vote in the senate.

The vote on the VFA was not held until a year later in May 1999. Despite intense lobbying by Ambassador Hubbard and me and President Estrada who was a sort of a Lyndon Johnson-esque kind of lobbyist, we only got 18 out of 23 votes for the VFA. It was enough, but it was fewer than we expected. We needed 16 out of the 23, so it squeaked by with two extra votes.

One of the senators, a very nationalistic guy, who Estrada believed he had persuaded to vote Yes, during the actual vote made a long speech largely laying out reasons for voting for the VFA but then the punch line was, "And so I'm voting against it." But anyway, it squeaked through. There was still grumbling about the idea that since the VFA didn't go to the U.S. Senate for approval it really wasn't in effect. There was a lot of that kind of noise in the chattering classes and the newspapers and TV.

To backtrack a little bit, as I mentioned, Ambassador Hubbard and I did a lot of lobbying of senators ourselves. In some cases we were giving additional bolstering arguments to senators we were pretty sure were going to vote in favor of it just so they could use these arguments themselves. In other cases we were sort of hoping against hope to persuade some of the anti-VFA senators to change their minds. I don't think we managed that at all. Then in other cases we were doing what we could with the wavering group. One time the two of us went over to Senator Gregorio Honasan who was known as Gringo. I mentioned him earlier. He was a Philippine military academy graduate, a former colonel in the Philippine army, who became famous for leading a number of very bloody coups against Corazon Aquino. He was a really narcissistic character. The two of us lobbied really hard with Honasan, and we knew Estrada was doing the same thing. As we were walking over to the ambassador's car, Tom turned to me and said, "The things we have to do for our country...." He loathed Honasan because of the coups he had led against Aquino during Tom's time as the DCM. I certainly shared the feeling. He was a fairly disgusting character, but he was an elected senator, and he was one of the 24 votes - or 23 at the time - that was necessary.

But anyway, it did go through. The first ship visit took place two months later in July of 1999. A friend of mine who was commanding the 7th Fleet at the time, Vice Admiral Walt Doran, decided that the first ship visit was going to be the USS Blue Ridge, the 7th Fleet flagship and that he was going to be on it. So this was fantastic! This was all the things that you'd want in an initial ship visit: tremendous symbolism, the admiral commanding the 7th Fleet, one of the most powerful naval units anywhere on the globe coming into Manila Bay, passing Corregidor, passing Bataan Peninsula, and tying up right next to the Manila Hotel near the chancery.

Q: What was the ship?

O'NEILL: USS Blue Ridge. It's a command ship. It's one of a kind; I don't think there's another exactly like it in the Navy. Anyway, we had invited President Estrada to come out to the ship for a ceremonial welcome and briefing aboard the ship and then a little reception on the foredeck afterwards. Estrada did go aboard with his defense secretary and senior generals and admirals and was given the lavish welcome as the Navy can always do especially on a ship like that.

That night we also had a much larger reception. A large number of the Philippine senate came, members of the House of Representatives, other Philippine military people, etc.; the defense attachï¿½ corps was out in strength, and we got a lot of diplomats, particularly all the allied countries. But I made a point of inviting Ambassador Fu Ying, the Chinese ambassador. She even brought her 14 year old daughter who was visiting from China. As soon as she came aboard I got Admiral Walt Doran to meet her. He immediately said, "Let me give you a tour of the ship." He took Ambassador Fu and her daughter down to the combat information center so she could see the computerized maps that showed all the ships of the 7th Fleet from Hawaii to the Persian Gulf and the big CNN weather map display showing the meteorological conditions throughout his entire area of operations. When my deputy asked her reaction to the tour of the ship Ambassador Fu said, "Very eye opening." She had gotten her start in foreign affairs as the English language interpreter for Deng Xiaoping and she once told me that she was in the first class of Chinese diplomats to graduate after the Cultural Revolution ended.

Anyway, it was really terrific, a wonderful visit. Of course as the Navy always does during the several days that they were in port, there were community relations operations in nearby orphanages and schools with sailors and marines volunteering their time instead of running around bar hopping. They were cleaning up and painting schools and orphanages and that kind of thing, playing with the kids, etc.

So it was off to a really good start. When I went aboard the Blue Ridge when it first docked, I told Walt Doran, "I've been here for two years and this is by far the best day that I've had in the Philippines." It was one of those rare occasions when you could see a tangible result for a lot of hard work, not only my work, but that a lot of other people had put in too.

The attitude towards the VFA by the great majority of the Filipinos was, "Fine. Good. Where have they been all these years?" It was a sore point among, as I say, the chattering classes and the far left. Some of the opponents were nationalists in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Q: The French and the Americans get along very nicely, but you have this political and chattering class. There there's an intellectual affinity to the left. Did the Philippines have that?

O'NEILL: Well, there are leftist groups in the Philippines including communist party affiliated groups, and they were often they were the noisiest in their demonstrations against the VFA when it was under consideration. There were two or three, one called Bayan sticks in my mind, a communist front group. They were always demonstrating against something and the VFA was a natural for them. There was a women's group called GABRIELA, which was an acronym for a long Philippine organizational name. GABRIELA was a very leftist organization, too. As far as they were concerned, the VFA equated to mass rape of Philippine womanhood by all the sailors in the U.S. Navy. People like that you just really couldn't deal with at all. Anti-U.S. agitation was their livelihood, their bread and butter so they were a lost cause far as I was concerned.

Between my arrival in July 1997 and the vote in May '99, I talked on college campuses both about the Visiting Forces Agreement and also about Philippine-U.S. relations in general, about strategic considerations in Southeast Asia including the South China Sea, etc. I always stressed the mutual advantage of the arrangements because Filipinos tended to think that if they agreed to something with the U.S. that somehow the U.S. would put one over on them. They didn't necessarily know how, and they couldn't probably point to anything specific, other than the criminal jurisdiction thing which is always neuralgic. And in the case of the Philippines we were particularly concerned about custody issues.

I think we were quite forthcoming on what constituted the kind of crime that the Philippines would normally have primary jurisdiction on. To the best of my recollection, it matched very closely with the kinds of principles that we have in SOFAs with Japan, Korea, NATO, Thailand, etc. Essentially if, and this is an over-simplification, but if a crime is committed on military duty, then normally the U.S. would have the primary jurisdiction unless there were some reason for us to waive jurisdiction to the Philippines. If it were a crime committed off duty, then normally the Philippines would have primary jurisdiction unless they had some reason to kick it back to the United States for trial.

The particular neuralgic issue was custody in the meantime and during the judicial process. Philippine jails are not exactly a model. They're in fact usually filthy dumps, and we were not going to have a person who was still in the judicial process, a U.S. service member, in a Philippine jail no matter how strong the evidence was against the person. So we wanted to retain custody through the appeals process even when the Philippines had primary jurisdiction of the crime. We were helped in this by our defense secretary. In August 1998 Secretary of Defense Cohen made a great visit to the Philippines a couple of days after Secretary of State Albright was there for a meeting of the ASEAN regional forum ministerial group. Cohen came and, as you know, he's a very polished, extremely intelligent man and he knows how to present arguments. He talked a lot to the Philippine press about the question of what was on-duty and what was not on-duty. He said, for example, rape is not a military duty, so if somebody is credibly accused of rape then we would expect the Philippine side to have primary jurisdiction.

At the same time we were using arguments like a military truck driver who was ordered to go from point A to point B and during the drive from point A to point B as he was ordered to do, he had a collision with a taxi and he had caused injury or death. He was under orders to do a certain thing and was doing it when the accident arose. We would expect the determination to be that he was on duty and we would have primary jurisdiction. If on the same route the driver stopped his truck, robbed a store and then got back in the truck and went to point B, that crime... He was not under orders to rob a store, so that would be an example of a crime that was committed while off duty, and we would expect in that case for the Philippines to have primary jurisdiction.

Q: With jurisdiction, since we no longer had bases, what would you do with Seaman A who committed a rape or something like that?

O'NEILL: It's a very good question. Not only were Philippine penal institutions really dungeons and often run by gangs of inmates as in the case of many a third world country, but Philippine trials take ages. A trial doesn't go into session and then go day after day until a verdict. They'll go into session for a day and the adjourn for weeks on end and then maybe come back for another day and be adjourned for weeks on end on and on. So we were talking about situations where an American service member who was accused and not yet found guilty was going to be in limbo for quite a long time. In the end after tough negotiations we got agreement on the custody issue. An accused service member could be removed from the Philippines with his ship or his airplane and the U.S. government would guarantee his return to the Philippines for whatever judicial processes needed to take place. This, to my great surprise, the Philippine negotiators and, indeed, their Senate who had to agree on this in the end, recognized that if the United States made such a promise we would keep it - which we did.

There was a case fairly early on in which some sailors beat up a taxi driver in Cebu. They probably had a few too many beers. It was also pretty clear from their testimony that the taxi driver had been cheating them, and the combination of things ended up with some bruises on the taxi driver which is not supposed to happen. But in fairness to the Philippine press which I often malign, more than a few columnists wrote, "Wouldn't you like to beat up a taxi driver who cheated you?" It was a very interesting dynamic because there were those who were saying the sailors had outraged the honor of Philippine "taxihood" and deserve the direst possible penalties and there were others, were saying quite the opposite. So there was a leavening of good sense and humor in that incident.

These men were, in fact, were charged with assault under Philippine law but were taken away on their ship. They were brought back for whatever proceedings took place. I can't remember what actually resulted, but this was a clear public indication that we would do what we said we would do.

There's another case that's still going on where a Marine has been convicted of rape. This was another thing. Until the appeals process in a case of a guilty verdict, until the appeals process played itself out the service member was to be in U.S. custody; in other words, would not be languishing in a Philippine jail until the appeals process was completed. The convicted Marine, who is appealing, is kept within the U.S. chancery compound in downtown Manila. This has been at least a year, maybe longer, and he was convicted of rape; he's appealing but he is in the hands of the U.S. government until the process ends.

The VFA allowed us to have not only the ship visits but also much larger scale and more realistic exercises which were a benefit to both sides. Our forces have gotten pretty restricted on what they can do in Okinawa in particular and also in mainland Japan; so being able to go to Philippine forces training areas like the amphibious landing area near Cavite, for example, and other large training areas was a great benefit. Also, this was the time between Desert Storm which was a very short campaign and before the 2001 attacks and the wars with Afghanistan and Iraq.

So we were in a hiatus in which not a whole lot of American military people had real combat experience at the company and battalion level. Philippine forces by contrast had been fighting company- and battalion-level wars against the communist New People's Army, and against various Moro insurgents for years. So they had a lot of combat experienced guys who regardless of how modest their equipment might have been, knew what it was like to be shot at in the jungle and knew how to survive in the jungle.

To my mind that was what the Philippine forces were bringing to this mix, and we were bringing our techniques, our technology, know-how, plus the benefit of association through alliance with the Only Remaining Superpower, as the columnists called it. When I would talk to Philippine groups, particularly civilian groups, I would point out that the VFA was not a one-sided deal; our side was going to be gaining from association with Philippine soldiers who knew the jungle and knew how to deal with the combat situation. So there was mutuality as far as I was concerned to this renewal of exercises.

Q: How did we view the Philippine military at the time?

O'NEILL: Well, it was certainly in bad shape in terms of equipment and in what might be called the culture of maintenance. That was pretty deficient in the mindset of the Philippine forces. This was especially true in the navy and the air force because they can't move if their stuff isn't well maintained and can neither fly nor sail. Soldiers can always walk if their truck breaks down, but a sailor cannot swim very far with a torpedo under his arm. Likewise, pilots don't get very far if their airplanes don't start. The upper level officer corps was a mixed bag. Most all of them were Philippine Military Academy graduates which is an all-service academy, established originally under U.S. auspices during the Commonwealth period. It's an institution which I think is capable of producing good junior officers, second lieutenants and ensigns. The problem comes later as they rise higher within their services and get corrupted by venal superiors beyond the navy lieutenant level and captain level in the army, air force and Marine Corps.

You've got dedicated professionals who don't want any part of the corruption, and you've got others who are trying to fleece the system for anything they can get out of it. It's just never been resolved. In fact, most recent coups attempts and mutinies by junior officers have focused almost exclusively on the corruption issue. I'm generalizing, but it's pretty common that lieutenants and captains who've carried out some very ill-planned and often bloodless coup attempts will be motivated, they say, probably genuinely so, by the pervasive corruption at the top levels of the armed forces. It's really sad.

There was one famous case of an ensign who was almost certainly murdered aboard his ship. The Philippine senate conducted an investigation into that young man's death. He was almost certainly murdered by his superiors because he was prepared to expose illegal logging operations that his ship was doing for the profit of the ship's captain and senior officers, and other higher-ups in the Philippine navy. It was made to look like a suicide but there was enough forensic evidence that the National Bureau of Investigation, NBI, had found that belied the idea of a suicide. I think that before he was killed the ensign had written to his parents about what he was discovering, etc.

In another case, an active duty major in the Philippine air force was arrested because he was running a kidnap for ransom gang. This tremendous corruption in many forms and many levels is one of the greatest brakes on the Philippines in many fields.

Q: Do you want to talk about that corruption as far as we saw that in the political life during this period you were in the Philippines this time from 1997 to 2000?

O'NEILL: Yes. Well, it didn't take much to find that it was all over the place, and it was pretty blatant. For much of the time that I was there Ernesto Maceda was the president of the Philippine senate. He had a reputation - remarkable even by Philippine standards - for corruption from his very early days as an aide to the mayor of Manila. The mayor he worked for was famous for the admiring quote "So young and so corrupt." Maceda later became ambassador to the U.S. That was only one example. The number of examples of large-scale corruption is just mind boggling. It's just a permanent fact of life.

This was after my time there, but corruption was what triggered the ouster of President Estrada in favor of his vice president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. She was elevated to presidency when he was thrown out, in a scandal in which it was credibly alleged, by other Philippine politicians who were similarly crooked, that President Estrada was taking kickbacks from a sort of numbers game which is a nationwide illegal gambling game. One of the ironies of this charge was that Estrada had always portrayed himself whether in the movies, the senate, the vice presidency and then the presidency as the champion of the poor, and lots of poor Filipinos bought into this and vigorously supported his political ambitions all along the way. This numbers game is one in which mostly poor Filipinos play, and so he was taking money out of their pockets as president.

Q: I have to say that as we're talking today, in the state in which I was born, Illinois, the governor is accused wanting to sell the senate seat that opened because Obama resigned.

O'NEILL: Also, that governor has been hauled off in chains. In many cases the penalty for this kind of corruption in the Philippines is to get re-elected until you reach term limits. There is no question that there is corruption in the United States, and this one with Governor Blagojevich is certainly an Olympic contender. But anyhow, you find it at all levels in the Philippines. There are a lot of reasons for it. Family loyalty's extremely strong in the Philippines, and it tends to trump many other things like a sense of the common good, the common weal, and it produces a lot of this corruption.

One of the features of Philippine society, and it may have roots in Malay society, I'm not sure, but Catholicism in particular provided an avenue for it to grow, is the concept of "fictive kin." The simplest example is a person who is a godfather or godmother to somebody at baptism. Those godchildren at whatever age are still are part of your family, and you're expected to continue to have not only religious obligations but also parental obligations toward them for marriages and births and all that kind of thing. They in turn have sort of filial obligations toward you for the rest of their lives.

In the case of Estrada, the now ousted president; there was an organization in the Philippines of his godchildren which to the best of my recollection numbered about 5,000 people. The then head of it was an assistant secretary in one of the cabinet departments. He was a godson of President Estrada, and he was the president of the fictive kin association of Estrada. You had that multiplied throughout the Philippines, and it produces distortions, shall we say, in the political process and in almost everything else.

Q: As the head of the political section, did you have a problem with this Philippine society which can be pervasive. I speak as a consular officer where we've had several of our consuls general leaving Manila in disgrace, usually not much for money but for sex or for services rendered, you might say, of a horizontal nature. There's also been this concern that in the Philippines that... I'm thinking of the Marcoses that our officers might get involved in the social set and not see American interests in the correct light.

O'NEILL: There was a very famous case of a consul general in the Marcos era. I can't remember which...

Q: I think it was Vernon McAninch.

O'NEILL: Yes, exactly. He was certainly delighted with the Marcos' company and was partying on the presidential yacht and all that kind of thing. I encountered a version of these potential Philippine pitfalls on one occasion. My deputy Tom Ferguson and I were going to meet with the chief of staff of Senator Dominique Coseteng because we wanted her vote in favor of the Visiting Forces Agreement. In 1991, she had been one of the twelve senators who had voted to kill the new bases agreement. Well, Nikki Coseteng, as she was known, was second to none when it came to corruption in the Philippine Senate. She had a well deserved reputation for the open hand. We were meeting with her chief of staff, whose family name was Roque.

The first thing Mr. Roque told us was that he was in the witness protection program. He was the chief of staff to a serving senator, telling us that he's in the government's witness protection program. What the reason was, I don't know. Tom and I noticed that Roque was seated with his back to an open window; you could see the building next door not too far away. So if somebody wanted to pop him, they could have done so. This was all pretty fanciful but not terribly odd for the Philippines. While we were talking about getting Senator Coseteng's vote, Roque was saying all the right things about how important the VFA was. Then he kept saying over and over again things like, "We would like to help you, but you really need to help us."

Q: [laughter]

O'NEILL: I kept saying, "Whatever arguments you need, whatever information you want." He said, "But you've really got to help us!

Q: The emphasis on the "help."

O'NEILL: On the "help," yes! We concluded the meeting very diplomatically. When we were going out to the car to go back to the embassy, Tom and I were both looking at each other and saying were we hearing what we were hearing? Was this guy trying to get us to give him U.S. government money in exchange for Nikki's vote? Absolutely! This was a loopy kind of situation that you run into all the time and you had to brush it off.

While we're on the subject of corruption, let me mention one more messy case that I was involved in for the whole three years I was in the Philippines and that other U.S. diplomats got entangled in before and after me. It was called the Fuller Aviation Case. As background, the Aquino government had set up a Presidential Commission on Good Government or PCGG. Its mission was to search for and seize ill-gotten assets of the Marcos family and the many Marcos cronies, dispose of the assets and return the proceeds to the national treasury. There were many reasons why that turned out to be a worse idea than it seemed on the surface. This case focused on a business jet, which allegedly belonged to Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco, who was both a Marcos crony and a cousin of President Corazon Cojuangco Aquino. In 1989, the PCGG seized the jet and sold it to Fuller Aviation, a Texas company, for $7.2 million. A court in Arkansas, where the jet had been relocated, ruled that Cojuangco did not own the jet and that the PCGG had seized the aircraft in error from the rightful owner. So Fuller Aviation did not get the plane but the Philippine government inexplicably refused to return Fuller's $7.2 million.

Fuller sued in the Philippine courts which began a case that lasted over a decade. The imbroglio involved the anti-graft court called the Sandiganbayan and its obnoxious chief judge, the US and Philippine Supreme Courts, and powerful members of Congress from Fuller's home state of Texas, not to mention a lot of people in Embassy Manila and the State Department. In the end, in August 2001, after years of entreaties, demarches and litigation, the Philippine Government had to pay Fuller Aviation over $16.3 million, not only the price of the jet but also accumulated interest over a decade. The whole thing was amazingly contentious and time-consuming over the administrations of two U.S. presidents and three Philippine presidents. Two years after I retired, the other State "combatants" and I got a group Superior Honor Award for our successful efforts in that affair, signed by the State Department's Legal Advisor, William Howard Taft IV.

Q: Did you have to sit down and talk to the officers - the junior officers - when they came and just be a little bit fatherly about this and say, "This is what it is and be damned careful that you don't get caught up in it."

O'NEILL: Actually most of the JOs - junior officers - that I had in the political section were coming from the consular section, so I didn't feel they...

Q: They had already been through it.

O'NEILL: They had already been through the mill, so to speak.

Q: A real mill!

O'NEILL: Yes, exactly! So I figured that if they hadn't figured that out, nothing I could tell them would make any difference. Three of my other officers were returning to Manila for a second tour, and two of them were married to Filipinas. I had a pretty solid group of officers to deal with these kinds of situations.

In one other case a former member of the Philippine House of Representatives was trying to get in touch with my internal officer Mike Klechesky, a Tagalog speaker whose wife was a Filipina. Mike had gone back to the States, and he was replaced by Dan Larsen whose wife was also Filipina, and Dan was a Tagalog speaker like Mike. So Dan fielded the call and explained to this former congressman that he would be happy to meet in Mike's stead. Dan returned with a Xeroxed paper purporting to be some kind of U.S. Treasury certificate for millions and zillions of dollars that this former Representatives wanted help in redeeming. He supposedly had the original of this note. The date on this thing and the signature were supposedly from Henry Morgenthau's time as Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of the treasury. But nicely printed in the border at the bottom in the scrollwork around this lovely little certificate was the Treasury Department's zip code...

[laughter]

Q: Which of course came in the '60s!

O'NEILL: In the '60s, yes! Exactly. This was as fraudulent as almost anything else in the Philippines, and yet .... Whether the former congressman knew it was a fraud or not, I don't know. We didn't care because we obviously didn't pursue it. Dan took his fake document to the embassy's Secret Service rep who said, "That's nothing!" He said, "We have Filipinos coming in with samples of fraudulent documents downloaded from the Treasury Department website that say 'sample' right across them!"

[laughter]

That's comic, and there are lots of other comic examples, but there were other things that weren't so comic, either, which really damaged not only the political structure of the Philippines but also faith in government and the economy, too.

Q: You mentioned these officers married to Filipino women. We talked about the Chrysanthemum Club in Japan. Was there a cadre of Philippine hands in the State Department?

O'NEILL: Yes, there was, which was very good because they tended to be very sharp people. There were certainly, in USIS as it then was, and certainly in my political section. There could have been consular officers as well.

Q: Oh, of course.

O'NEILL: Ed Wilkinson was consul general for part of the time I was there, and his wife Lisa's from the Philippines. I don't know when Ed had first served in the Philippines, but unlike some of his predecessors as consul general, he was above reproach. One particular predecessor was literally led out in chains by Diplomatic Security, because of visa fraud. Ed's immediate predecessor was Kevin Herbert. He's a former Peace Corps volunteer in Davao who came back as consul general. He and Ed were the kind of people that you'd want as consul general in that very trying environment.

Embassy Manila had shrunk a good bit in the aftermath of the base closings, particularly the political section and defense attachï¿½'s office and even more so the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group or JUSMAG. But it was still a very large embassy. We had 23 U.S. government agencies, a huge number even by big embassy standards. We had some unusual ones like the American Battle Monuments Commission which oversaw Manila war cemetery. It's the largest single American cemetery overseas, with 17,000 war dead from the Pacific War. Also related to the colonial era and World War II, the embassy had a large Veterans' Affairs office which kept track of the still considerable number of Philippine veterans who were entitled to U.S. pensions. They also had a robust fraud detection program, too.

The other thing, too, in the embassy there were five or six law enforcement organizations, including Diplomatic Security, Drug Enforcement Administration, Secret Service (for counterfeiting and credit card fraud as I mentioned), INS, Immigration and Naturalization Service law enforcement people and there was one Federal Aviation Agency security officer.

Among the law enforcement organizations was a legal attachï¿½ office with FBI agents. They were kept quite busy with fugitives from American justice whether they were American citizens or Filipinos. That was the big ticket item for them: extradition. Also, they worked on transnational crimes. Jim Nixon, who was the senior legal attachï¿½, narrowly escaped a sort of early retirement. On an extradition case, Jim went one time about midnight to the National Bureau of Investigation, NBI, which was roughly analogous to the FBI. Jim told me later that as he was going through the building with one of his NBI counterparts, he noticed a large pile of explosives in the hallway. Perhaps it was from dynamite fishing or something similar. Within two hours that part of NBI headquarters vaporized when the pile of explosives was ignited. That earned NBI a Darwin Award for that year. It's given to people who manage to kill themselves in a spectacular fashion through their own ineptitude. Had Jim been there a couple of hours later, he could have gone up with it.

Q: There's a significant number of Filipinos in the United States. They don't seem to show up here in Washington, but certainly in the West Coast and other places. Did this represent a significant political lobby or not?

O'NEILL: Not to my knowledge in any sphere except veterans' benefits, and there were individual congressmen, some in Hawaii, and particularly in southern California, who were champions of better benefits for Philippine veterans of U.S. forces, Philippine Scouts and others, and what were called "recognized guerilla units." There were some Philippine guerilla units that were in some cases led by U.S. officers, in some cases led by Philippine officers but were of such quality that in terms of pension, they were actually counted with the regular forces. Congressman Filner from the San Diego area had a particular Philippine veteran constituency and was interested in the business of getting fuller benefits. That was always on the bilateral agenda. There was certainly lobbying by Filipinos including Philippine officials to try to get better benefits for those Philippine veterans in the U.S. forces.

Q: How stood things guerilla-wise during your time?

O'NEILL: There were two main guerilla movements. One was the Communist New People's Army which in those days you really had to go looking for. If you were going to get shot by a New People's Army guerilla, you really had to go out and find one to shoot you. They were no threat in the cities at all. We occasionally got intelligence reports about their so-called sparrow squads, their assassination teams which had been a concern in years past. In 1989 as I mentioned they had managed to murder Colonel James N. Rowe, Nick Rowe, who was the head of the army branch of JUSMAG in the embassy.

We used to talk about it and hold emergency action meeting every so often. Basically the conclusion we came to was that the traffic in Manila was so horrendous that nobody could stake you out because nobody could tell what route you were going to take or at what time you were ever going to pass a certain point even if you were enamored of a certain route between your home and the office. So we tended to shrug it off.

The other thing, and I focused on this a good bit, was the Islamic insurgencies. There were three. One was the original MNLF, the Moro National Liberation Front, headed by Nur Misuari who was originally a Marxist professor at the University of Philippines in the Marcos era. His band was quite large and had been engaged in quite a bit of combat against Philippine forces for a long time. The MNLF came to a political accommodation with the Marcos government which held basically through the time I was there. It broke down somewhat a little bit later. In my time, Misuari was the governor of what was called the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao or the ARMM which was much of western Mindanao and the islands in the Sulu Sea. He was a figure in the political scene. We used to meet with him quite regularly.

The largest group that was still in combat against the Philippine government and is still in a state of insurrection was the MILF, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, which had broken away from the MNLF in years past. It purported to be more religious, and was allegedly fighting for an independent Islamic state. I say allegedly because to the best of my knowledge nobody in the MILF was ever able to articulate what this state would look like, who would think it would be viable, what governments would recognize it, or any of those pesky details, but they were fighting for that, whatever it was.

The last of the groups was by far the smallest, and by far the nastiest, which was called the Abu Sayyaf Group. They were a bunch of cut-throats who wrapped themselves in an Islamic aura. They were the ones, for example, who not long after I left kidnapped a group of Americans, including the Burnhams, from a resort near the island of Palawan. The Burnhams were missionaries. Another American was kidnapped at the same time along with several Filipinos. The other kidnapped American was secretly visiting the Philippines to see his girlfriend unbeknownst to his wife.

During the months that they all were held, the Philippine-American man was beheaded by the Abu Sayyaf. Mr. Burnham was accidentally killed by Philippine forces in a rescue attempt in which his wife was slightly wounded, and the remaining survivors and Mrs. Burnham were released. So that was a tragedy. It was basically a very good rescue operation by the Philippine forces that went awry enough that Mr. Burnham was killed, but even the best of forces can have an operation which will have that result.

The Abu Sayyaf group operated in fairly narrow areas of the outlying islands. There is one feature of these various Islamic groups which is true throughout the Philippines. You still have a strong tribal identity. There are hundreds of different ethnic groups in the Philippines. These groups are very much a part of a person's identity particularly in the hinterlands, maybe not so much in Manila, but in the hinterlands they are. Among the Islamic population of the Philippines which is very much a minority even in Mindanao, their former stronghold, you had people who identified themselves as Tausugs, Maranaos, and Maguindanaos and other groups. These tribal identities were among the reasons why there was a break away from the MNLF, Moro National Liberation Front, to form the MILF, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Nur Misuari was a Tausug and the head of the MILF was either a Maranao or Maguindanao. You had this kind of tension even within people who alleged that they were fighting for the same objective.

I made several trips to western Mindanao because I was particularly interested in seeing what could be done by us first of all to learn more about the situation in the Muslim majority areas of western Mindanao and also to see what we might be able to do to help out. One time I went with my internal political officer Dan Larsen down to the town of Cotabato on the west side of Mindanao. The main reason was to meet with a former congressman named Michael Mastura who was among other things a hereditary chief, a datu, a very urbane fellow whose wife was born Catholic and converted to Islam. He was running a fairly large and ambitious madrassa near Cotabato City. He wanted me to come down to speak to the students there which I did and got a big tour of his madrassa, and he was talking to me about...

Q: You might explain what a madrassa is.

O'NEILL: A madrassa is a Muslim religious school although like the best of them, this one had not only a religious curriculum but also a secular curriculum as well. They were teaching them math and languages and all that kind of thing. It was in a sense a Muslim parochial school, if you will, in sort of Catholic terms.

Anyway, before this trip down there Michael Mastura had said that he would be happy to arrange for me to go to Camp Abu Bakr, the headquarters camp of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. I was really tempted to go. I knew I'd be completely safe. Even though they were in an armed insurrection against the Philippine government, they would not have harmed me as a guest, as an American diplomat. But I figured that my boss, Ambassador Tom Hubbard, would not be thrilled with his political counselor going to the headquarters camp of the main Philippine rebel group, so with great regret I had to turn down Michael's invitation.

During that whole trip, we had a lot of security whether we need it or not, including a heavily armed policeman from the National Police's field force. We also had a contingent of six Philippine Marines under a second lieutenant, all armed to the teeth, who went with us everywhere. We were accompanied by two staff members of the incumbent local congressman, Congressman Dilangalen, one of whom was also a hereditary chief, a datu. When we were at Michael Mastura's madrassa, he arranged for several members of the MILF central committee to meet with me in the second floor of the madrassa offices.

As Dan Larsen and I were chatting with these nice men, one of the things that they said was that in 1945 the United States had made "a great mistake" which they wanted us to rectify. The "great mistake" they were complaining about was that we had given the entire Philippines independence all at once. There was at that time a movement among the Muslims who were still in the majority in Mindanao to stay under U.S. control longer than the rest of the Philippines, the Catholic Philippines if you will, and eventually get independence from the U.S. as a separate Muslim state. Well, the U.S. decided that the entire Commonwealth of the Philippines would become independent in 1946 as soon after the end of World War II as we could decently arrange it.

The MILF officials' demarche didn't surprise me because I had read enough to know that it had a historical basis. My response was that I rarely claimed to be speaking for the president and the vice president of the U.S. but I said in this case I'm pretty sure I can say that President Clinton and Vice President Gore would say there was no chance of the U.S. trying to rectify that mistake or whatever you want to call it. But it was a very interesting conversation. Meanwhile when I was meeting with those rebels, you had these heavily armed Philippine Marines standing around in the parking lot. Dangerous and violent things happen in the Philippines, but there are loopy things that happen, too. You wonder when one sort is going to come up and the other is not. But anyhow, that was a fascinating trip, one of several that I took to that part of Mindanao.

Q: I think this might be a good place to stop and we'll put an end here. What I'd like to do is talk more about the rebel forces. I know maybe at a little later date we had some small American training missions...

O'NEILL: That was much later.

Q: ...dealing with them, and don't know if that was during your time.

O'NEILL: No, it was much later.

Q: Also, I'm looking at a map of the Philippines, and they've got all these island around them, including the Spratlys; they intermingle with Indonesia and actually are adjacent to Taiwan. How did this geography fit into their worldview and then let's talk about the Filipino role in international organizations. Is there anything else you think we ought to mention?

O'NEILL: Those were the main things. The whole business of the South China Sea, the Spratly Islands and Mischief Reef, all of which was entangled in multiple territorial claims by the PRC, Taiwan, Philippines, etc. That got very tangled in Philippine-U.S. relations as well because of exaggerated Philippine expectations of what the U.S. could and would do. But also I want to talk a little bit more about the situation in Mindanao.

Q: And a bit about social life, too, and the influence of any other powers there: Japanese, Chinese, and all that.

O'NEILL: And another thing I should have talked about earlier is the Philippine population growth as a factor in the economic and social sort of deterioration, if you will.

Q: Today is December 23, 2008 with Al O'Neill. We're looking at the Philippines external policy now. Do you want to do a tour of the horizon? I'm looking at the map, with Indonesia, Vietnam, China, and other states nearby. Also, you've got the Philippines as being part of the various Asian organizations.

O'NEILL: Obviously one of the immutable factors about the Philippines is its geographic location. It's right between North Asia and Southeast Asia. That produces a number of influences on its foreign policy. It's, among other things, a founding member of the Association of South East Asian Nations or ASEAN which despite its ups and downs has been probably over the last 40 years the most successful regional grouping I can think of.

The Philippines has always felt itself to be one of the leading lights in ASEAN much like Indonesia always has. At the same time the Philippines has a complex relationship with China. Trading relations between China and the Philippines go back many centuries. There were Chinese settlers in the Philippines also going back maybe three hundred years. A number of very prominent Philippine families are of Chinese ancestry including, for example, Corazon Aquino's family, the Cojuangcos. Ferdinand Marcos had some Chinese ancestry. In many ways the Chinese in the Philippines have woven themselves into society fairly well. There are newer Chinese who are less assimilated and somewhat more distinct in some of the big cities.

China's a place with which the Philippines want to do a great deal of business and Chinese companies invest in the Philippines. But the big shadow over that relationship is a series of territorial disputes which are not acute. They normally bubble along although they got fairly active during some of the time that I was in the Philippines in 1997 through 2000.

These disputes are in most cases multilateral, involving the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea which are scattered to the west of Luzon and on towards Vietnam. These islands are disputed among Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, China, Taiwan, and perhaps Brunei. But the major claimant is China in terms of military power and its regional power projection capability.

These disputes are normally diplomatic and rhetorical, and it's pretty rare that there's any military confrontation although there is another area separate from the Spratlys but adjacent called Mischief Reef, which is well named. That's a dispute principally between the PRC and Manila. The Chinese have occupied Mischief Reef for quite a few years, and they've built several structures on it. It drives the Filipinos to distraction every time they think about this because they think they have a good claim to Mischief Reef and, of course, the Chinese have pretty much stymied them by simply occupying it.

One time the Chinese ambassador was explaining to me that the Chinese ships at the reef were really from the ministry of agriculture, fisheries and forestry. She was a very capable diplomat and a very able representative of China, but I must say it strained credulity to think that these sleek gray ships were actually from the ministry of fisheries. Anyway, there were a couple of occasions where the Philippine navy tried to bolster a claim to adjacent rocks in the Mischief Reef area by beaching one of their LSTs, a World War II-vintage Landing Ship Tank, on one of the islands. That really didn't do much other than somewhat alarming us and Washington as to how far the Philippines might go with their claim to these various rocks and outcroppings. Their interest is a combination of marine resources such as the prospect of oil, minerals perhaps, and also fisheries resources, fisheries being as important to the Philippines as to anybody else in the area.

There are other disputes, too, with Malaysia, for example, the Malaysian state of Sabah in northeastern Borneo to which the Philippine Sultan of Sulu has a hereditary claim. President Marcos tried to back up those claims from time to time with guerilla actions in Sabah. The whole thing is pretty much dormant now except there is a certainly a standing Philippine claim. The Philippine relations with Malaysia tend to be good, and normally the lid is kept on this dispute. It flares up a little bit every time the Malaysian authorities round up illegal Filipino immigrants in Sabah and deport them, then somebody in the Philippine Congress or the newspapers starts beating the drums about the claim to Sabah.

Overall, the Philippine relations with China are pretty good. They're obviously still leery of the Chinese. At the same time, they want to increase Philippine exports to China and the Chinese are basically accepting of that idea. Of course, Philippine exporters face lots of competition.

Overall in diplomatic relations the Philippines is a pretty responsible player. They have a generally able diplomatic corps and are overall well disposed toward the United States. There are some pockets in the Philippine department of foreign affairs of what I would call "NAM-think" or Non-aligned Movement thinking which is a feeling that the Philippines really isn't aligned with the United States and that their real destiny is with other countries which do not have an alliance with any of the major powers. It really doesn't have a huge effect because even with someone with that mindset as, say, an assistant secretary, it's pretty normal that the Philippine president, vice president, and the presidential staff have a much more pro-American point of view.

But it is interesting that you kind of see these vestiges of that particular thinking. In fact, in terms of international organizations, the Philippines are pretty much a newcomer to the Non-aligned Movement which it joined after the U.S. bases closed in 1992. It was an oddity in that of course the United States still had a treaty of alliance with the Philippines despite the end of the bases, so the NAM had relaxed its membership criteria sufficiently to allow a U.S. ally in. It may say something about the state of the NAM as well.

Q: Did the Non-aligned Movement mean anything?

O'NEILL: I don't think it did really, and particularly not by the time the Philippines joined it. I just mentioned it as an oddity in one niche in Philippine thinking about the outside world. I think the very fact that the NAM would accept a U.S. treaty ally into its fold is evidence that they were really looking to build up their membership as much as they possible could. But no, I think it's pretty much insignificant.

The main point is, though, that the Philippines likes international organizations. In fact, during my tenure the secretary general of ASEAN was a very capable Philippine diplomat named Severino. I think his first name - he went by Rod - was Rodrigo. Severino, a former undersecretary of the department of foreign affairs did at least one term as secretary general of ASEAN. It's an organization that the Philippines likes to be associated with partly because, when you look around the world at regional groupings of modest size countries, ASEAN stands out as an unusually successful one which you could see by the very fact that they established the dialogue partners over a number of decades ago. Those dialogue partners were the United States and Soviet Union and Japan and other countries of similar importance. China has become one.

At the time that I was serving in Korea from 1988 to '92, one of the things that the ROK gained as a mark of its rising stature was to be recognized as an ASEAN dialogue partner. So it was a very attractive grouping of modest-sized countries. During the time I was the Philippines, ASEAN expanded its membership from six to ten somewhat gradually adding the Indochina countries of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and also Burma into the fold. ASEAN's purpose was that by including these four states that ranged from authoritarian to dictatorial, they would be countering the influence of China.

Certainly my qualm, and I think the qualms of other Western diplomats, was the great danger that ASEAN was going to dilute its authority by bringing in these states of varying degrees of unsavoriness, particularly Burma. That was the big one. They'd likely wind up spending an awful lot more time refereeing issues among themselves than dealing with external issues. That's what has actually happened. I think ASEAN might be somewhat less influential now than it in the past because it's got all these problems again, particularly with the Burmese. Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam do not loom as large, I don't think, as the Burma issue. ASEAN has spent a great deal of time and effort trying to figure out whether they were to continue the normal ASEAN mindset, which was operating not only by consensus but also on the basis of not criticizing publicly their other members. That oftentimes has put them - the original ASEAN, if you will - at odds with, say, the United States and the European Union, etc., particularly on the issue of Burma and the treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. Still, I would say overall that ASEAN is still an attractive regional grouping, and it's one that the U.S. does well to cultivate.

Q: You as political counselor in the Philippines, did you find yourself spending a significant amount of time talking to the Philippine officials who were responsible for ASEAN about policies?

O'NEILL: To some degree, usually before certain ASEAN meetings. For example, as the Burmese military's treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi and her party worsened or if we were trying to encourage the organization to take a stronger line against the Burmese military. But it wasn't a daily preoccupation. I would say that most of my effort, certainly for the first year or so, was devoted towards the Visiting Forces Agreement and reestablishing a regime in which the United States and the Philippines could cooperate on ship business and military exercises. Again, the Moro problem in western Mindanao and the islands of the Sulu Sea was an issue to which we devoted a good bit of effort.

Also, there were other things that we wanted to participate in like 1998 presidential elections. We got probably a dozen of our officers ranging from me as political counselor to a number of the junior officers in the consular section accredited as election observers with the Philippine Commission on Elections or COMELEC. We went here and there around the country in the spring of '98 to go to polling places. We divided the country up into different districts and sent people out to these locations. It was a good opportunity to get out to the countryside and also to get some of the younger officers out to see something different from the hordes of visa applicants they faced every day. One of the things that struck me about the '98 elections was that the level of violence was remarkably low. The security was quite good, provided by the army and police. This was a major contrast to the historical record in Philippine elections.

I went to Cebu, the main city in the central Philippines, the Visayas. As with almost everything in the Philippines, there was a big carnival atmosphere. It doesn't take much to get Filipinos to do some kind of fiesta, and this was no exception. One of the things that I remarked on when I talked to our officers after we all gathered back in the embassy: the number of people who were taking their kids to the polls. Maybe because there wasn't daycare, but in any case they felt safe enough that they didn't think they were going to be exposing their children to a crossfire between the mayor's gunmen and his major opponent's gunmen or something like that. So I thought that was healthy. I think you get the acclimatization, too. If you take your kids to the library when you go to get books, the kids figure out the library's a good place. Eventually if people keep taking their kids when they go to vote, kids are going to grow up with the idea that voting is a good idea. I forget the turnout but compared to American elections it was embarrassingly high, probably in the 80% range.

There were very few people killed, and mostly candidates or incumbents, so it was really sort of them killing each other rather than that any ordinary voters were caught in the cross fires. The problem that the Philippines tends to have is the follow-on. The campaigning is wonderful, kind of fascinating. But the slogging job of governance tends to be, as it is in an awful lot of countries, more difficult than campaigning.

Let me tell one campaign story that it gives you an idea of the relative weakness of political parties in Philippines. Before Marcos there had been two political parties of long standing which candidates joined in order to represent the platforms of those parties much like the American system. Marcos wrecked all that and in the debris that he left behind, parties became far more personal. Somebody would start a party in order to promote his candidacy for this, that, or the other thing, and that weakness persists. There was a spectacular example of that in 1997 in the run-up to the 1998 presidential election.

Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the current president, is the daughter of Diosdado Macapagal who was president in the early '60s and was defeated for a second term when Marcos ran the first time relatively legitimately. She was a senator, one of the 24 senators, and she decided that she wanted to run for president. So she established a political party which went by the Philippine initials KAMPI. I can't remember exactly what this stood for. She was its presidential candidate of course. She picked a fellow senator, Vicente Sotto III, as her vice presidential running mate and was prepared to go into the election. Gene Martin, the DCM, and I had lunch with her as she as she was preparing to run. She was talking about how many millions of dollars were necessary for a viable presidential candidacy although she said that she could get away with spending less money because she had so much name recognition, which was true.

When the incumbent president Fidel Ramos picked the then Speaker of the House of Representatives Jose de Venecia as his party's candidate for president, he also offered the vice presidential slot to Gloria. She accepted, dropped her party like a rock and left poor Tito Sotto, her vice presidential candidate, not knowing what had happened to him. In fact, because of the strange way that elections operate in the Philippines her party's presidential candidate, Jose de Venecia, did not win but she became the vice president. They vote separately for president and VP. When a variety of forces engineered the ouster of President Estrada, the Philippine Supreme Court ruled that constitutionally she would be the president. This is the daily bread of politics in the Philippines.

Q: Al, I'd like to go back to foreign relations. How stood the Philippines regarding Taiwan?

O'NEILL: Interesting because there were certainly trading relationships for centuries, really. Before 1949, almost all of the ethnic Chinese on Taiwan were from Fujian Province on the coast and long established for centuries. Fujian and the Taiwan Fujianese were major trading partners of the Philippines before the Spanish came, but particularly so during the Spanish era and thereafter. There were plenty of people of Chinese ancestry in the Philippines who probably felt more political affinity toward Taiwan than to the mainland. The Philippines, from the time of Marcos, had full diplomatic relations with the PRC. They maintained an unofficial AIT-like relationship.

Q: AIT is the American Institute on Taiwan. That's the way we conduct our relations with Taiwan.

O'NEILL: The Philippines does the same thing. I don't recall particularly the mechanics of it in part because nobody made an issue of it. It did not become an issue in those days, at least, in the PRC-Philippines relationship even when there were fairly hot territorial disputes. So it was pretty much a regularized relationship based on trade and tourism back and forth and nothing remarkable at all.

Q: How about with Japan? Of course, Japan was not a very nice occupier of the Philippines during World War II. How stood things in your time?

O'NEILL: It was interesting. A number of senior Philippine diplomats who had considerable experience in Japan. The Secretary of Foreign Affairs through the entire three years I was there was Domingo Siazon, Jr., a career diplomat, a very capable one who had come to that job from being ambassador to Japan. His wife was Japanese. He spoke extremely good Japanese and later on as I recall Ambassador Siazon went back to Japan as ambassador. There were other Philippine diplomats who if not specialized in Japan, served there a number of times that they were pretty familiar with the country.

The relationship during the time that I was there was quite good normally. Toyota and other Japanese companies were operating in the Philippines. Toyota had at least one assembly plant that built Toyota Corollas. Japanese tourism in the Philippines was noticeable. One kind of export from the Philippines was the large number of Filipinos, male and female, who went to Japan sometimes as factory workers, sometimes as entertainers. This was mostly legitimate though there were certainly cases where Philippine women went to Japan thinking they were going to be doing one kind of entertaining, and their prospective employers had other entertainment in mind.

Q: We're really talking about brothels.

O'NEILL: Prostitution and that sort of thing. I'm sure it kept the Philippine consular officers in Japan pretty busy, but the majority of Filipinos in Japan were working there in factories or in legitimate entertainment with bands at hotels and resorts as well. I'm sure there was a brisk business of exporting products from the Philippines to Japan. The things that I'm sure come to mind are seafood and marine products including a seaweed extract called carrageenan which is used in lots of things from cosmetics to ice cream. That's a big Philippine export.

In my recollection in dealing with Philippine affairs in the Department from 1992 to 1994 and also the three years that I was there it was rare that the memories of the horrific Japanese treatment of Filipinos during World War II came up much. Japanese veteran groups come to the Philippines to some of the old battlegrounds including places like Corregidor and Bataan to memorialize the men that they lost. The Filipinos just accept that. The Filipinos are remarkably accepting people.

Q: You don't have sort of the rape of Nanking sort of...

O'NEILL: You do in one case and that is the destruction of Manila during the liberation. Having served in Vietnam, I always find it particularly annoying that the American news media made so much of this offhand remark by one American officer in the course of the Tet 1968 offensive that "we had to destroy the town to save it," talking about the town of Ben Tre. The media people who made a lot of hoopla about that remark apparently didn't know that we used to destroy whole countries to save them in World War II. France and the Benelux countries were basically untouched early in the war, the Philippines as well. In 1942, the Philippines collapsed so quickly that there was relatively little damage done to the country. Our liberation, which Filipinos really welcomed, did vastly more damage to the Philippines than the original Japanese invasion.

The worst example of that was the liberation of the city of Manila because the Japanese overall commander, General Tomoyuki Yamashita, had withdrawn most of his forces to the mountains of northern Luzon and established his headquarters at the summer capital in Baguio. The Japanese admiral who remained in control of Manila decided without orders from Yamashita to hold Manila to the last man. When the Americans attacked to liberate Manila he and his defenders held on to almost the last man and in doing so, they went around massacring as many Filipinos as they could get their hands on, innocent civilians, just slaughtering as many as possible.

MacArthur prohibited close air support to attack Japanese strong points particularly in the big Spanish walled city of Intramuros which was the center of old Manila. So our forces were using heavy artillery at point blank range to break through the walls and then tanks would go in. It was horrendous. The figure is usually given that about 100,000 Filipino civilians were killed in Manila, mainly because of the way the Japanese behaved and also in the resulting fighting with the Americans. Manila was reputedly second only to Warsaw among friendly cities in the degree of its total destruction during the war. It was horrendous, and the Japanese reacted with real savagery elsewhere in the Philippines, too.

There was a movie not too long ago called The Great Raid, about the liberation of about 500 American prisoners of war at Cabanatuan in Luzon. The movie starts out with an atrocity carried out by the Japanese on the island of Palawan across the Sulu Sea. They packed American prisoners into an underground air raid shelter, and poured gasoline in and set it on fire. It killed most of them in that horrific way. I've been to that site in Puerto Princesa which is the capital of Palawan province. It's now on the grounds of a police station.

There was a very interesting phenomenon during the war. Whether or not Filipinos liked the idea of an American colonization, they knew that the Americans were on the verge of granting them independence. I think in general most Filipinos thought that American colonization was probably preferable to colonization by just about anybody else. It was largely a fruitful relationship although it certainly had its rough edges. Certainly a lot of Filipinos, particularly very ordinary people, not so much the elites, but ordinary Filipinos sacrificed a great deal in resisting the Japanese and in aiding the Americans in the liberation of the Philippines.

There were all sorts of reasons for a lot of hard feelings toward the Japanese, but I think that has certainly eroded over time. The Japanese have a very large embassy there, and they're very active. There's a lot of cultural exchange, etc. They tend to put able diplomats in Manila. I think over time there has been a great deal of erosion of the harsh feelings that deservedly were directed to the Japanese in the aftermath of WWII. I can't remember any flare-ups other than, perhaps, problems with overseas workers.

Q: Maybe this is a good place to move on to what did you do after you left the Philippines, and when did you leave the Philippines?

O'NEILL: I left the Philippines in July of 2000 and came back to the States. In 1999, when I was been two-thirds of the way into my tour, I'd been notified that I was not going to get promoted into the Senior Foreign Service. I got a rather officious, badly worded letter from the Director General notifying me of all this, basically saying, "Your career is now over, but we're going to be nice enough to let you stay on another year to complete your tour in Manila." At first when I saw how badly worded the letter was I thought, "I'm going to write this man and tell him I think he's doing a pretty bad job." Then I figured I was so damn busy being the political counselor in Manila, I wasn't going to waste my time. Anyway, that was my valedictory message from the DG.

Q: Here's your hat. What's your hurry?

O'NEILL: Exactly. Don't let the door hit you in the tail when you go. In fact, I'll toot my own horn. One of my junior officers in the political section, who is still in the Foreign Service, came to me during that last year and said that he was struck by how hard I was working even though I knew that I was being thrown out.

The next step was quite uncertain. We didn't know what we were going to do. We were coming back to a house that we owned in McLean. I was 55, and I had been in the foreign service for 24 years, in the Army for eight years before that, so I wasn't about to sit under a tree and just vegetate, so I was going to be looking for something.

I went into the retirement course here at FSI which actually was quite good. State Department training has its ups and downs, some more realistic than others. I suppose that I could say that by odd coincidence the first and last courses I took were probably the best, the first being ConGen Rosslyn. The retirement and transition course was good. I learned a lot about resume writing, what to look for, how to talk to people in interviews and all that. Obviously in the Foreign Service you get used to talking to people and trying to organize your thoughts in advance, etc., but that's not the same thing as asking somebody to hire you. The practice of that was, I thought, quite helpful.

I did a number of interviews with some of the think tanks and institutes around town. A person in the AID democracy center whom I had known in the Philippines pointed me in the direction of a couple of the institutes. Then I got a call fairly soon, probably before I retired, from the executive director of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization or KEDO in New York. It was the organization that had been established to build two light water reactors in North Korea under the US-North Korea Agreed Framework of 1994. He wanted to know if I'd be interested in being hired by KEDO, to work six week stints at the reactor construction site in North Korea.

He's a Japan hand, Desaix Anderson, whom I'd known for a number of years in connection with Japan and Korea. I told Desaix that I was flattered but I had been out of the country for 12 years from 1986 to 2000 except for the two years that I was working on Southeast Asia. I just wanted to get back into the U.S., and I wasn't ready to uproot myself even for a series of six-week TDYs in North Korea with two or three weeks break between them.

Then a few weeks later Desaix called again and said that his senior policy advisor had decided to quit KEDO after one year of a two-year contract. Would I be interested in becoming the senior policy advisor working in New York? That certainly was very attractive. The mechanics of working in New York while my wife and home were in Virginia gave me some pause. When we returned, my wife Jin went back into real estate work which she'd done off and on over the years. She threw herself very wholeheartedly back into real estate. I was very happy with that because it was her way of making her own mark after 20 years as a Foreign Service spouse in which she was going all out to help me and my career. I agreed to take the KEDO job. It took some months of internal workings in KEDO before I was hired, but I did start work in mid-February 2001 as the senior policy advisor. I just rented an apartment in Manhattan and most weekends I'd take a train or a plane back to McLean.

It was a very interesting position. I was working with Japanese and Korean diplomats some of whom I had known before and who were on loan to KEDO, or were friends of friends from those foreign services. Plus I knew some of the Americans including Desaix Anderson and his successor Charles Kartman who became the executive director about two months after I got there. He stayed on after I left after two years at KEDO.

In those two years, I made five trips to North Korea ranging from overnight to nine days. Negotiating with North Koreans is a field of negotiation all its own. It's much closer to root canal surgery than negotiations with most people. But it was fascinating. Even with my Korea and Japan background I never imagined that I would be dealing with them.

Q: How would you characterize and maybe give an example of North Korean negotiations?

O'NEILL: Several things: one, if you're in a position in North Korea in which you're negotiating with foreigners, you are ipso facto a trusted member of the regime. You know which side your bread is buttered on. You're able to spend a week in New York, for example, or in Geneva. You're not filling sand bags on the DMZ, and your family is not starving in a rural village. So you've got a very select group of people who are very dedicated, and whatever they might think about the regime you'll never know because, "I'm okay, Jack," is their motto. They also are on a very tight leash, of course. The penalty for making big mistakes is maybe you'll go into some kind of re-education camp.

You're dealing with people who are determined to achieve their objectives. You're also dealing with people who are really smart and who really do their homework. Again, that's probably how they got into their positions. Undoubtedly their family connections and all that sort of thing are at work in a Korean society, and North Korea's definitely a Korean society before it's anything else. At times I describe North Korea as "distilled essence of Koreanness." That's something of an exaggeration and maybe not entirely fair, but it's a lead into dealing with the North Koreans.

They're very well prepared. They study hard. They're tough. They know what they're doing. Of course they do have their instructions. I'm sure they never go into a negotiating situation in which they've must get 100% of their desiderata or else. And there is something else that U.S. government negotiators knew up until 2001 but were not allowed to believe from about 2001 to about 2005. This is if you have a number of people on your team who have been negotiating with a similar team of North Koreans over a span of time, you actually develop human contact on some level or another with the North Koreans which helps you achieves your objectives. Also, as I always say in my lectures about North Korea, they're not crazy; they're not devils; and they're not suicidal.

This is what happened. Over time, you had a reasonably constant group of KEDO officials dealing with a fairly constant group of North Koreans.

Q: KEDO is spelled...

O'NEILL: K-E-D-O.

Q: And it stands for...

O'NEILL: Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization. The reason the Peninsula is in there and the P is not in the abbreviation has to do with the peculiarities of the Japanese language. There's no single way of referring to both Koreas in the Japanese language. There is, however, a fixed expression for the Korean Peninsula. When the name Korean Energy Development Organization was originally suggested by the U.S., the Japanese said there was no good way to translate that title into Japanese so it had to be Korean Peninsula; so that's why the P is silent.

I had seen North Koreans negotiate before. I mentioned these two returns of UN Command remains through Panmunjom. These were alleged remains of Americans who had been killed in action during the Korean War or who had perhaps died in prison camps. So I'd seen two American CODELs (congressional delegations) dealing with the North Koreans. The North Koreans tend to start out with maximalist positions in which they bombard you with the rightness of their position and the wrongness of yours. By the time I was in KEDO, the North Koreans did not hit us with a lot of political rhetoric about Great Leader Kim Il-sung and Dear Leader Kim Jong-Il and Juche ideology, etc.

But what we did get was tough positions. They'd say the North Korean people want these nuclear reactors for power generation. The people can't understand why you are not moving faster, etc. It was sort of job-focused but very tough. We normally gave them texts in English when we were negotiating an agreement like a protocol on some particular subject. Everybody was working from English language text. They had people who were quite expert in the English language, and if you made a grammatical error somewhere in the text and forgot about it - which happened to me once - bingo! They'd find it. "No loose ends" was our rule in dealing with them.

True, we were not going out drinking with them every night although we had meals with them; we chatted and talked about this and that. They were always more guarded than we were in that kind of situation. Nonetheless there was human contact between real people on that side and real people on this side despite all the strictures they operated under.

You could find out from them what their hang-ups were on this paragraph or that line of a draft or what they had to have in the agreement in order to agree and sign it. Often times this happened on coffee breaks. For example, the South Korean members of our team would go off and huddle with the North Koreans and then come back and say what they really need is this, and sometimes we could say, "All right, we can do that." Other times we would have to go back to them and say, "We could go this far. We can't do everything that you want." Sometimes they would have to get instructions overnight from Pyongyang. Then they'd come back and often say, "All right, we can live with that."

Of course we were operating in a situation where we had something they really wanted - these light water reactors - so that was something pushing them in a direction that we thought was positive. But nonetheless, it was very tough.

Q: We're also talking about having our own Great Leader and our own political stance. This was with the early Bush II atmosphere. Anything that Clinton had done was bad.

O'NEILL: Absolutely. That cast pretty much of a pall over everything, and it got worse, of course. There were certainly well-known people, the vice president among them, John Bolton and many other of these so-called neo-cons - chicken hawks as I refer to them - who were adamantly opposed to the KEDO project. The rubric was it was "rewarding bad behavior." It was something that, of course, the despised Clinton administration had instituted as a solution, as a way of solving the 1993-'94 nuclear crisis with North Korea. But this bumper sticker "rewarding bad behavior" was very much in their minds, and they were eager to find any way that was possible to torpedo and destroy the KEDO project and the Agreed Framework of October 21, 1994 between the U.S. and the DPRK out of which KEDO had come. Ultimately they succeeded.

Let me mention something else about negotiating with the North Koreans. As a result of the agreed framework, the U.S.-DPRK framework, the North Korean expectation was that KEDO's executive director would always be an American citizen. The first was Steven Bosworth, followed by Desaix Anderson, followed by Charles Kartman, all of them very distinguished former diplomats.

In early years the North Koreans took this stricture that KEDO was American-led to the degree that in negotiations they would not talk to anyone except the American head of delegation. Americans from KEDO always were heads of delegation no matter how large or small the interaction with the North Koreans was. But what happened over time was that partly because of the interaction that I talked about and the human contact, this limit eroded completely, and it became normal for the Japanese and Korean members of our delegations to talk directly to the North Koreans and the North Koreans to interact with them. So it was a lot more businesslike and realistic by the time I got there.

But yes, the Bush administration in its first four years did everything they could to make life for the KEDO project as difficult as possible and ultimately the objective was to destroy the organization and end the LWR project. They achieved that ultimately in the aftermath of Assistant Secretary for East Asian-Pacific James Kelly's October 2002 visit to Pyongyang in which he accused the North Koreans of running a secret uranium enrichment project. That set in train the end of the project which is now completely shut down; we're just dealing with the financial and legal debris of KEDO at this point.

What the opponents of the engagement approach ignore is that under the KEDO project for eight years and two months the North Korean plutonium production facilities and Yongbyon were frozen. They were under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) supervision. There were IAEA monitors on site at Yongbyon for all those years and seals and cameras for additional monitoring. The North Koreans did not make a gram of plutonium during that whole period. They surely did in the aftermath of the Kelley visit when the U.S. cut off heavy fuel oil shipments in December, 2002. The North Koreans then ejected the IAEA inspectors, removed the seals, disabled the cameras, and restarted the Yongbyon reactor and reprocessing facility within perhaps two months. By the end of February of 2003, they were back in the business of making plutonium which they had not done for eight years.

Q: The accusation of secretly getting uranium enrichment technology... Was this a true accusation?

O'NEILL: Well, this indeed is a fascinating thing. I am quite convinced that the North Koreans did indeed acquire some centrifuges which are very specialized tubes that spin and produce ultimately increasingly enriched uranium. You keep putting the increasingly enriched uranium into these arrays, and when it gets to something like 90% or 95% enriched, and then it becomes weapons grade uranium which can be used in a uranium bomb. North Koreans has always used plutonium because that's what they could get from their reactors and reprocess into fissile materials for its nuclear devices.

I'm certainly no expert on nuclear weapons, but you could say that it is easier to create weapons grade plutonium than weapons grade uranium but harder to create a plutonium bomb than a uranium bomb. So those were the problems the North Koreans were dealing with. They acquired some centrifuges and some centrifuge technology from the Pakistanis. I believe this from things I have heard from within the government. I don't think the North Koreans were able to come up with a working centrifuge array particularly not one that has produced a useful amount of weapons grade uranium. There have been public expressions of such doubts by senior intelligence officers in the U.S. and even by Chris Hill, the assistant secretary for East Asian Pacific affairs. This means that the Bush administration hawks - Bolton, Cheney, and others - achieved their objective of destroying the KEDO project on very flimsy grounds.

A wiser response would have been to keep an objective and non-ideological diplomatic course, finding a way to punish the North Koreans for this cheating - which it really was - on the one hand and keeping the KEDO project going on the other. Because KEDO did, indeed, close off source of weapons grade plutonium which is what they always used for their devices. The little device that they set off in October 2006 was a plutonium device, not uranium-based. Whatever weapons or devices they have in their arsenal are plutonium-based. Following the destruction of the KEDO project they have a lot more plutonium now than they did while the KEDO project was still viable. Of course, during the entire period of the Agreed Framework the North Koreans never launched ballistic missiles except for one over Japan in August 1998. The other thing is they did not detonate a nuclear device.

Q: What was the reaction while you were doing this from our Japanese and South Korean colleagues?

O'NEILL: The South Koreans, Japanese, and the European Union, the other three members of the KEDO executive board, were pretty appalled, of course, by where we were heading. They knew all along that the Bush administration was looking for ways to destroy the KEDO project, and I guess they kept their fingers crossed that there wouldn't be anything that could cause it to be torpedoed. But they basically had to acquiesce in the U.S. line of thinking.

Our partners often forgot how much money the United States put into the KEDO project, largely in purchasing heavy fuel oil. The U.S. spent over $300,000,000 - almost a third of a billion dollars - in the KEDO project. The Japanese and the South Koreans were committed to spend roughly about a billion dollars each, largely devoted to construction of the reactors which the U.S. was not funding.

But they still saw tremendous value in continuing with the projecnot that anything about it was perfecbut it was just better than any realistic alternative. The three broad policy options in dealing with the North Koreans have always been, always will be, either: you attack them, you ignore them, or you negotiate with them. Obviously attacking them would guarantee the destruction of much of North and South Korea in a horrendous war. Ignoring them is a really bad idea because they are up to an awful lot of different kinds of mischief so that leaves number three which is negotiating with them.

Q: All right. A couple of things: What about the neo-cons within the administration? How did they operate? Did they have another plan, or was this purely ideological, and did you have much contact with them?

O'NEILL: I personally had no contact with them, but a lot of my long- suffering colleagues in the State Department did. In KEDO itself, we were dealing with U.S. officials who were under strict instructions from the neo-cons to say this, that, or the other thing and not to deviate. I don't think the U.S. officials had any more negotiating room than the North Koreans did. The evidence of the neo-cons' work was everywhere. In the end they were very effective. They were able to seize on these semi-verified reports of acquiring small amounts of equipment and technology from Pakistan to enrich uranium and to inflate that up to the point where it was alleged as an active program for the production of highly enriched uranium. But to the best of my knowledge no one could be sure there was a nanogram of bomb-grade highly enriched uranium (HEU) produced in North Korea.

One of the people at KEDO who knew a great deal more about nuclear engineering than I did, said that one of the things that's required for a centrifuge array, and say, five or six thousand of these precisely machined, precisely maintained spinning tubes, is a large supply of very steady electricity. That's not a concept that I have ever associated with North Korea; so the chances that the North Koreans had actually put together an array like this are quite slim.

However, if they did it would be basically undetectable from the outside, other than from human intelligence. There's no cooling tower for a centrifuge array. There's no particular signature as there would be, say, from plutonium related facilities including reactors and reprocessing. And you could probably put several thousand of these centrifuges in, say, a Kmart. You'd have a big warehouse type building and you could have 5,000 centrifuges in there and nobody would know other than the fact that there has to be a very big electric cord going to the building.

Q: So what happened to you?

O'NEILL: The Americans in KEDO, from the executive director to me and several other officers, were the only ones who were employed by the organization itself with no outside affiliation. The Japanese, Europeans and the Koreans tended to be on loan from their foreign ministries or ministries of science and technology. I wasn't sure if I could go beyond one year of commuting from Virginia so I got a one year contract to the customary two year deal. I did one year and extended for another year. But at the end of that second year February 2002 through the end of March 2003, I decided that two years was enough. Terrific, one of the most interesting things I've ever done, and I enjoyed the people I was working with. Chuck Kartman was a great boss, a friend for years. Most everyone in KEDO was fine both professionally and personally. And, of course, there was the bizarre attraction of periodic trips to North Korea. But two years was enough, so I went back to Virginia.

I worked for two more months on a personal services contract for KEDO because in the aftermath of the October 2002 Kelly visit and restarting of the North Korean facilities at Yongbyon, we knew we had to make emergency evacuation plans for the 1,400 KEDO workers at the construction site, about 800 South Koreans about 600 Uzbeks. All of them had for all practical purposes diplomatic protection under KEDO agreements with the North, but we were heading into 2003. It was obvious that the U.S. was going to invade Iraq. The North Koreans certainly believed the U.S. was going to attack them after Iraq. We had no choice but to make as quickly as we could emergency evacuation plans and this is what I was mainly working on my last few months at KEDO. In fact, my last trip to North Korea in February 2003 was to go to the site overnight by ship to brief the KEDO staff and a very limited number of people from the Korea Electric Power Corporation or KEPCO, our main contractor, on the emergency evacuation plans as they then stood.

I continued to work from home for a couple of more months until we got a viable plan. Obviously, one thing that was not going to be a part of our evacuation plans was anybody's military, not South Korean, not U.S.; so we were trying to do an totally non-military evacuation plan for 1,400 people from a small place on the coast of North Korea. As you know, that's an unusual kind of evacuation plan; there's usually some military involvement. One of our assumptions was that under almost all circumstances, the North Koreans would let our people go from the site. We could envision certain limited circumstances in which they would say nobody could leavfor example, if there was an active military operation underway or if the U.S. had declared a blockade of the North Korean coast. Otherwise we expected it would not be in North Korea's interest to keep the people at the site, so it was really a mechanical question of ships and time, plus a lot of coordination. Anyhow, as it happened we were able to withdraw our people over a long span of time quite peacefully, but this was the operating environment in early 2003.

After I returned from New York, David Straub who was then the director of the Office of Korean Affairs at State, asked me if I'd be interested in coming back to work as a WAE or When Actually Employed, a part-time rehired retiree. After my top secret security clearance was revalidated, I started working in February 2004 on the Korea desk which I've done ever since. I've also done some other things. I've been lecturing at the Army War College since 2004 in their Asian studies course. Each year I've given the lectures on the two Koreas and Japan. In 2007 they had a shortage of faculty members for a large Asian studies class, so I helped teach all 10 sessions of that course.

I've also done other lecturing. On November 11, I went to the Citadel in my home town of Charleston, to speak on the Korean War and U.S. foreign policy and also on the peninsular origins of the war. They liked my talk enough that they've asked me to come back in the spring to speak on U.S.-Japan relations over the course of the 20th Century. So I keep busy and I also will do the Japan and Korea lectures in the spring at Carlisle Barracks, too, in their Asian studies elective. I've also done some war games mostly with Science Applications International Corporation or SAIC, North Korea-related war games for which they need people with security clearances and the right experience. These games might be done for the Department of Defense or the intelligence community staff. You work with a lot of interesting people, sometimes with realistic scenarios, sometimes pretty wacky scenarios but they're fun to do.

Q: Okay, Al, as a follow up. As a valedictory theme, how stand would you say today, 2008... The Bush II administration is going out, but how stand things with South Korea and with North Korea?

O'NEILL: I think our relationship with South Korea is quite good. It tends to be fundamentally good even when it's atmospherically bad and disruptive which it certainly has been many times over the years. You've got a still useful and evolving military alliance that is very different in many respects from the alliance that was formed in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War.

The Koreans themselves are more active militarily in different things than they had been. They have peacekeepers in Lebanon. They've had forces of some size in Iraq and also in Afghanistan. They've gotten engaged in places and activities that they never would have imagined decades ago. There's always the potential for problems. We have an alliance in which the forces of a vastly powerful country are stationed on the soil of a much less powerful and smaller country, a country that's always conscious of its position among various large powers. There's always the chance of friction. That's a constant management problem, an alliance management and leadership problem. But by and large, South Koreans tend to believe that the alliance with the United States is valuable. They certainly gain a great deal from the trade relationship with the United States. And there are more South Koreans studying in the United States than even Chinese or Indians I think. I'm not sure of the exact comparison because I think the statistics about the Chinese and the Indian students tend to be college and post-graduate only whereas some of the statistics about the South Korean contingent are high school through graduate level, so it may be slightly distorted. But that's yet another link between the United States and the ROK. You do have this tremendous sociological web between the two countries. South Korea is the 13th largest economy by most measures, but it's also roughly our seventh largest trading partner.

One thing Americans need to keep in mind in dealing with the ROK is that South Koreans are very proud of what they've accomplished, and you know even more than I do because you got there earlier. You saw Korea during the war itself and Korea in the late '70s as they were beginning to take off, and I saw them from that period until now. There is almost no place that has gone through the socio-economic changes that the ROK has in such an exceedingly short period of time. This is particularly true when you consider that the last royal dynasty, the Yi or Choson Dynasty came to power in 1392, 100 years before Columbus reached the New World and lingered on until 1910 when William Howard Taft was president. During those five centuries, the institutions of Korea were largely unchanged. There were certainly many Koreans born during the Yi Dynasty who were alive when I was doing consular work in Seoul during Park Chung-Hee's last years. At that time gigantic Korean corporations were building huge ports in Saudi Arabia, and doing similar things just totally beyond anybody's imagination.

North Korea's much tougher. We really don't know anything about North Korea. We think we know, but we really don't. Americans who have deep experience in North Korea are very few in numbel don't count myself among theand even they will say that they don't know. I'm thinking of a missionary-based organization run by an American from a multi-generational missionary family on the Korean peninsula who has worked in North Korea for 10 or 20 years on humanitarian projects. He says that he doesn't know how the place works. For the U.S. government with its constant flux and change, it's no surprise we don't know a lot about North Korea. We're just going to have to plug away and deal with it as best we can.

Q: One of the things you said and I think that is very important when we're making our calculations: One, the North Koreans aren't stupid, and two, they're not suicidal. This has always been. I go back again to the Korean War more than 50 years ago. They're sitting there, and they haven't attacked even when the president of South Korea's assassinated and when there's been turmoil and...

O'NEILL: Although they've tried to assassinate two different ROK presidents.

Q: Yes, yes. I know this. They've done this sort of thing but it doesn't seem to be the real follow through that shows they're crazy.

O'NEILL: That's the thing. It's too easy for Americans to think they're crazy, that they do weird things, which they certainly do. North Korea is to my mind with possible exception of Qadhafi's Libya, the most bizarre governmental system on the planet. It's easy for Americans whether in the news media or in governmental circles that don't deal with Asia to caricature North Korea and its bizarreness and then focus on that and not look at certain realities below the surface there. I think of one example that always sticks in my mind. Kim Jung-Il about 2001 or so made a long trip to Russia, away almost 30 days. He went by train, and he went all the way to St. Petersburg. He went to Moscow, and got all this adulation that the North Koreans played up in great detail then for a long time to show the great international respect that the Dear Leader has earned. The American news media were making a big deal about the fact that he went by train because he was afraid to fly like his father and all these sorts of peripheral things.

They ignored point number one which is if you can be out of a bizarre country like that for 30 days, you show a lot of confidence that you're not going to be overthrown while you're out, which has happened to more than a few dictators. This was evidence of Kim Jung-Il's self confidence and a regime that was actually quite stable despite its huge problems. This was a regime that under his leadership had already gone through what the North Koreans called the "arduous march" their term of art for the horrendous famine that killed, who knows, hundreds of thousands of North Koreans in the mid-1990's. The North Koreans on occasion have even said it was at least as bad as the Korean War.

American relations with North Korea are going to be extremely difficult. Bizarrely, the North Koreans have somewhat ambivalent attitudes toward the U.S. They want American respect. My old friend Bob Carlin, the former analyst in the bureau of intelligence and research and my successor as KEDO's senior policy advisor, writes very convincingly that North Koreans want a strategic relationship with us. Most Americans would think, "This is nuts! Are they kidding themselves?" But in their world view this would be very helpful no matter how far-fetched it is to us, in part as a hedge against China. The dilemma that they have is that so far they cannot or will not take the steps that would even move them slightly in that direction, much less achieve it. One of the pillars of their regime is that, "There is this gigantic threat from the United States, and we the regime, the Dear Leader, protect you from these terrible Americans." It's very difficult even in a situation in which you control the news media to say, "Well, these horrible Americans who are trying to kill us all have now established an embassy in downtown Pyongyang, and you can see the American flag flying there. But they still hate us. They're trying to kill us." I don't think they can square that circle, not even in their system.

Q: Thank you very much.

O'NEILL: You are very welcome.

End of interview