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

AMBASSADOR RUDOLF V. PERINA

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Q: When and where were you born?

PERINA: I was born in Czechoslovakia on January 3, 1945 in a town called Tabor in southern Bohemia which was the seat of the Hussites in the 15th century.

Q: I always think of the Hussites and their armored vehicles. That's quite a legacy. What do you know about your family on your father's side?

PERINA: I see myself as a product of 20th-century Central European history. My father owned a lumber mill in southern Bohemia started by his grandfather in the 19th century. It was a fairly large enterprise that exported lumber all the way to Germany and throughout Central Europe in the inter-war period. He was thus considered a capitalist by Communists, which came into play after World War II.

On my mother's side, her father was a civil servant in Bohemia. He was also trained as a lawyer and served as a type of deputy mayor in the town of Tabor. He was during World War II one of the many Czechs executed following the assassination in 1942 of Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the German occupation of Bohemia and the most senior Nazi successfully assassinated during the war. The well-known destruction of the town of Lidice was one part of the retaliation for Heydrich's death but in fact thousands of people throughout the country were executed as well. The Germans targeted public figures and those suspected of being Czech nationalists. My grandfather, as a representative of the town government, and his brother who had been a military officer in the Czech army, were arrested within days of Heydrich's death. They were executed by firing squad on June 10, 1942. About 180 other people from Tabor were also executed over the course of the next few weeks. My mother was 17 years old at the time and learned of her father's and uncle's execution through the newspapers. It was a defining experience for the rest of her life.

Q: Would you talk a little more about the town of Tabor and how far back it goes. Where did the town fit into Bohemian history? I don't know much about that area.

PERINA: Well, the name Tabor comes from Mount Tabor, which is referred to in the Bible. The town was founded by the Hussites in the early 1400's. The Hussite movement was really a type of religious uprising by followers of Jan Hus who was a precursor of Luther in criticism of Church corruption. He was invited to meet with representatives of the Pope at the Council of Constance in 1415. Though guaranteed safe passage, he was in fact arrested and burned at the stake as a heretic. This sparked other social and ethnic tensions of the declining feudal order and led to a kind of peasant uprising against the Church and the establishment. The rebellion gained momentum and led to what is known as the Hussite Wars. All of this was, of course, more complex than I am making it sound here. The most famous leader of the Hussites was a fellow named Jan Zizka, and it was his followers who established this town of Tabor. He was a brilliant military commander who defeated Papal armies across Bohemia despite eventually losing both eyes in battle. Tabor is very identified with this history and with Jan Zizka, whose statue is on the main square.

My mother's side of the family moved there from the Pilsen region after World War I. My father's side of the family, as far as I know, had been in Tabor much further back.

Q: Sudetenland or not?

PERINA: No. It was outside the Sudetenland. It was part of Bohemia and then it became part of the Bohemian Protectorate established by the Germans.

Q: Given the Hussite history, was this a Protestant area? What was your family?

PERINA: Following the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620 when the Hapsburgs defeated the Bohemian forces, there was a counter- Reformation and most of the country was re-Catholicized. So most Czechs are Catholic but not very good Catholics. The Church does not have the standing that it does in Poland, for example. This applies to my family. We were technically Catholic but not practicing Catholics or particularly devout.

Q: What about the education of both your mother and father?

PERINA: My father was raised to inherit the family lumber business as was the custom of the time. That's why he had the same name as his father, and I'm actually the third Rudolf Perina because it was assumed that I would take over the business someday. My father was educated as a lawyer which is what one studied to go into business. He had a doctor of law degree from Prague University. He grew up in this little village outside of Tabor called Plana nad Luznici where the lumber mill was located on a river bank. Most timber at the time was transported by waterways.

My mother studied at a Prague vocational school for secretaries and clerical workers. That is where she was when she learned that her father had been arrested. My mother actually studied some English in this school. My father knew more German and Latin, which did not help much later in America.

Q: Obviously, you were born in 1945 which was sort of a critical time at the end of the war. How did things go during the war? Then we'll talk about the Soviet occupation which obviously you didn't experience but you were hearing about.

PERINA: Well, during the war my father was allowed to continue operating his business because the Germans wanted it to continue as a source of lumber and wood. He was able to continue operating, though under all the rules of the Protectorate. My mother's family was in a much more difficult situation because when the father was executed the family was also condemned to confiscation of property. She had horrible stories of how a carload of soldiers came with a truck to the house a few days after my grandfather had been executed. They went through the house and took anything of value: pictures, jewelry, the radio, pieces of furniture etc. They left the family with minimal necessities to survive. This was a family of two daughters and two sons, a mother and four children. They were allowed to stay in the house but they lost title to it, and they were moved to the upstairs of the house, with a German family moving into the first floor. It was a very difficult period for my mother through the end of the war. She also had to leave school and was put to work in a factory. Then she met my father, and they were married in 1944.

Q: Are there family stories about when the Soviets came?

PERINA: Yes. This is when we get to the next chapter of Central European history. I heard many stories about encounters with the Russian army from my parents. Apparently, at one time I was almost kidnapped by a Russian soldier who was drunk and thought I was really cute and wanted to take me with him. In the last months of the war, there was an incident very close to our house, actually just across the road, where there was a railroad track. There was an air raid and my parents saw what people said were American planes coming in and bombing the railroad tracks. With the Russian army, however, the main problem was a total lack of logistical support in the military structure. Russian soldiers had to find their own food and support themselves from the territory through which they passed. Thus stealing and ravaging the countryside were sort of unavoidable. But the real problem came with the domestic political situation after the War. Russia and the Czech Communist Party were the strongest political influences in the country. In February 1948, Communist Party leader Klement Gottwald came to power and began a policy of radical socialization: confiscating factories, businesses, persecuting so-called capitalists and so on. At that time, my parents and many others didn't believe that the Communist government would last very long. Everybody thought it would collapse, given the chaos developing in the economy. Very quickly, however, the government started turning against the so-called capitalists, which included my father's family. It was wealthy in the context of this little town but not really in a broader context.

The persecution became so threatening that my father felt he had to escape from the country. At the time, he still believed that it was a temporary move and that the Communists wouldn't last long. He escaped from Czechoslovakia by illegally crossing the border into Austria. He expected to be back in a year or two when the Communists collapsed but it soon became evident that the Communist government might last longer than anyone thought.

As things kept getting worse, my mother decided to take me and to join my father, even though by then it was much more difficult to escape. When my father left not long after the Communist takeover, the borders were still not very tightly controlled. By the time my mother and I were trying to leave, it was a challenge to get across the border. There were lots of patrols and so on. Had my mother been captured during such an attempted escape, she would have gone to prison and I would have been put into a foster home. My mother's sister, my aunt, was married to a Yugoslav, a Croat, and through him my mother found and hired professional Yugoslav smugglers to take us across the border. Yugoslav citizens were already then in a unique position- able to travel more freely than Communist bloc citizens but not considered enemies by the governments. The Yugoslavs my mother found were Croats who made a business of going back and forth across the border smuggling various commodities on which one could make a profit in post-war Europe. She paid them to take her and me across during one of their crossings. There were three or four of these fellows and I was tied to the back of one of them, and he carried me across the border overnight. I was apparently given something to drink to keep me drowsy and quiet. Still, I do believe I remember some of that night because it was so tense and unusual. It was the night of January 28 1950. Obviously we made it across the border into Austria.

My father by that time was living in Zurich, Switzerland which he had reached through some pre-war business contacts, and after a few months in Vienna my mother and I managed to join him. The person who carried me across the border returned to Czechoslovakia and was captured and arrested on a subsequent crossing. In Vienna, he and my mother took a photograph which I still have showing how I was taken across the border on his back. My mother also began a diary where she recounted the escape in some detail. I hope to translate it for my daughters at some point.

We ended up in 1950 as refugees in Zï¿½rich, Switzerland, and we lived for about a year trying to find an onward destination. The Swiss at the time were hospitable to temporary refugees but wanted us to move on as quickly as possible.

Q: The Swiss try to keep themselves out of the refugee business because of where they are. I understand that. They would be submerged. Do you recall any of that time?

PERINA: Vaguely. I remember some friends I played with in Zï¿½rich where we lived. My parents told me I picked up basic German, or rather Swiss German, fairly well since children learn languages quickly but also forget them quickly. Sure enough, I subsequently forgot it quickly, though some of it seemed to come back when I studied it much later in graduate school, and later I learned it quite well during assignments in Berlin and Vienna. But getting back to Switzerland, my parents applied for emigration to the United States, Canada and Australia, since the Swiss did want us to move on. My father had a congenital heart condition, for which he was later operated in the U.S., and he did not pass the physical for Canada which had a rule at the time that all refugee immigrants had to spend two years working as laborers on farms. Australia was not favored by my mother, who felt that the distance would make a return to Europe more difficult, and the U.S. visa was not forthcoming. My parents still believed the Communist government in Czechoslovakia would not last long and they would be able to go home in a year or two. This led to the strange episode of our short immigration to Morocco.

The French wanted Europeans to move to Morocco because there was growing resistance to colonial rule, and many French were leaving. They wanted more Europeans to populate the country and made immigration there very easy, and even subsidized it. We took this up and traveled to Morocco in August 1950. We went via boat from Marseille to Tangier, and then on to Casablanca. Almost immediately, however, my mother got culture shock and became very depressed. At the beginning of October, we returned to Switzerland before our Swiss visas expired. The Swiss were not completely surprised to see us come back. But this was an interlude that I remember because Casablanca, where we lived, was so different from Europe. I remember markets with parrots and monkeys and things like that-very exotic things for a young boy. When we returned to Zurich, my parents submitted visa applications for other places, including New Zealand and Venezuela, but still hoped for a U.S. visa. This finally came through in January 1951.

Q: Do you recall how this worked? Were you sponsored?

PERINA: We were sponsored by a Czech fraternal organization from the Czech diaspora in the United States. We did not have any relatives in the U.S., though my father had a cousin in Canada.

Q: Where did you go?

PERINA: We went from Le Havre in France to New York City by ship on the USS Washington. I do remember watching from the deck as we arrived in New York harbor, and my mother pointing out the Statue of Liberty to me. In retrospect it's almost like a movie scene but it did happen, and I remember it.

Q: When was this, 1951?

PERINA: It was May 15, 1951. My father always kept records of important dates. We were met by a lady who was from the New York chapter of the Sokol organization and taken to an apartment which initially we shared with another Czech family that had come over at approximately the same time. It was in Astoria, in Queens, right under the Triborough Bridge. But it was very convenient because it was right across the street from an elementary school, PS 85, which I went to for the next five years.

Q: Up to this point I take it you hadn't had any English?

PERINA: No, no. I didn't know any English and started school a year late. I was six and a half when I began the first grade. I never went to kindergarten. I recall that in my first two years of school I had special classes to learn English pronunciation, especially the "th" in English which is one of the hardest sounds for foreigners to pronounce. But I picked up the language rather quickly, as kids do.

Q: What were your father and mother doing?

PERINA: Well, my father had a first job washing dishes in a restaurant in Manhattan, and it didn't work out very well because his English was not very good. In his first week, he burned his hands with lye which he had mistaken for soap. So he lost that job rather quickly. My mother went to work as a housekeeper for the family of an older, successful Czech businessman. She later worked in his company, which was an import-export business. My father got a job as a waiter at the University Club in New York City, and he worked there for about a year. Subsequently, because he knew some French, he got an office job working for the French Line, the French steamship company that had ships going across the Atlantic. He worked there until we left New York in 1955.

Q: Did you find yourself acting as the interpreter and all for the family for the early part of the time?

PERINA: I don't recall that specifically because my parents did have to learn the language, and I think they learned it fairly quickly, although I'm sure I learned it faster. I think within a year or so I was pretty much into the kid culture of the 1950's: trading cards, Captain Video, Davy Crockett, and all of these things. One of the good things that my parents did was always to speak with me in Czech. Sometimes parents try to help their kids by speaking English with them at home, and usually this does not help kids learn the language but leads them to forgetting their mother tongue. We always spoke Czech at home. I still speak Czech with my mother today and in casual conversation speak it with a native fluency.

Q: Did you stay in Astoria?

PERINA: We stayed in Astoria for about five years, almost to the point where we got citizenship. But we had some friends- actually the family which for a few weeks had shared the Astoria apartment with us- who moved to Cleveland, Ohio. They wrote that the cost of housing was lower in Cleveland, jobs more plentiful, and so on. We moved there in 1955, and we became U.S. citizens there in 1956. I became a citizen through my parents when they were naturalized. I lived in Cleveland until 1961 and then moved to Seattle with my mother.

Q: What do you recall of your time there, your schooling?

PERINA: By then I was fairly well Americanized. I went to junior high and the first year and a half of high school in Cleveland. By that time I was a fairly regular American kid. I do remember, however, a very large, active Czech community in Cleveland. My parents became involved in it, and the family's social life was primarily with other Czechs. It taught me the remarkable strength and resilience of ethnic communities in the United States.

Q: What was your father doing then?

PERINA: He became what was then called a time study engineer, which would now be a type of efficiency expert for a production line. He worked for a company named Elwell Parker in Cleveland. My mother became a secretary in a company called Gibson Homans, which produced paints and varnishes. Eventually, my father learned to be a tax auditor and got a job with the city of Cleveland. He remained in Cleveland for the rest of his life and retired as the head of the tax collection department for the city of Cleveland. My mother later retired as a procurement officer for the U.S. Air Force. In hindsight, I respect very much how hard they worked in America and how well they did, considering where they started. Certainly they had much more difficult lives than I can even imagine. I reaped the benefits of their emigration from Europe to America.

I should mention one thing which proved to be important for my parents in later years, although we had no idea of it at the time. At the time that my parents got their U.S. citizenship in 1956, there was a lapse in the consular agreement between the United States and Czechoslovakia. The old consular agreement had expired and there were negotiations on a new agreement but, in the Cold War environment, they moved very slowly. There was a period of a year or two when there was no bilateral consular agreement. Many years later, after the Communist government in Czechoslovakia finally did collapse, we learned that because of this my parents had never lost their Czech citizenship under Czechoslovak law. Because of this, after the fall of the Communists, my father was entitled to restitution of his property. Indeed, he eventually got his original family house back because he was still considered a Czech citizen under Czech law. No one imagined before 1989 that something like that would ever happen.

Q: Were you aware in those days of current events more or less? Were you following the news and that sort of thing?

PERINA: I remember certain things being discussed in the family, such as the Hungarian Uprising in 1956. I remember that it sparked this hope in the Czech community that the Communist system was finally collapsing, as many still expected. Afterwards, of course, there was criticism in the ï¿½migrï¿½ community that the United States did not do more to help the Hungarians.

Q: You said that after Cleveland you went to Seattle. Where did you live in Seattle?

PERINA: After all they had gone through together, my parents divorced in 1961, and I moved with my mother to Seattle, where she remarried. We lived in south Seattle near Seward Park and Lake Washington, and I went to Franklin High School. I had not always been a good student, and I had some difficult years, particularly in junior high school where I received some C's and once even a D. But then in the 9th grade I had this realization that I was being categorized as a mediocre student. It made me angry. I became serious about school and got straight A's from the 10th grade to the 12th. I graduated as valedictorian out of a class of some 600 students. I remember my commencement address where I spoke about the lure of travel and exploring other countries. I had a great desire, from high school onward, to see other parts of the world.

Q: Did you find particularly from elementary school up through your time in Seattle any types of books that were particularly important to you?

PERINA: I began greatly to enjoy travel books and adventure books, and also historical fiction. I also became very interested in Europe, where I felt I had roots. In 1961, when my parents were getting divorced, they sent me for the summer to Europe. They were going through all the court proceedings and thought it better if I would be away. They sent me for the summer to study French in a school in Switzerland. It was my first trip to Europe. I was 16 years old and I traveled alone. It was quite unusual at that time for a 16-year-old kid to be sent alone to Europe, and subsequently the Cleveland Plain Dealer even carried an article about it. I went from New York by boat, which at that time was still cheaper than flying, and I think my father got a discount for me through his previous employment with the French Line. I arrived in Le Havre France and then went by train to Paris, Munich, Venice, Milan and Geneva, spending a few days in each city. Then I spent two months learning French in a boarding school in a little Swiss town called Les Diablerets, near Lausanne. It was a formative experience and instilled in me further desire to travel and see the world.

Q: I take it that you were for a long time pointed towards attending a university after high school.

PERINA: Yes, I was. I always assumed that I would go to a university. I almost always assumed that I would go to graduate school and, I always thought I would end up as a university professor.

Q: Do you remember where your family fell politically?

PERINA: Well, they were conservative. They were anti-Communist and Republican their whole lives. Most of the post-war emigration from Communist countries was closer to the Republicans than to the Democrats. It was a generational thing. There was an earlier, pre-war Czech immigration which was more economic than political, and it was closer to the Democrats. But my parents and most of their friends were Republicans because the Republican Party was seen as being more anti-Communist.

Q: You graduated from high school when?

PERINA: In 1963. I graduated from high school and got a full tuition scholarship from the University of Chicago. It was much more of a stipend than anything I was offered elsewhere. The College had a good reputation, and I liked the idea of living in a big city.

Q: How did you find the University of Chicago when you were there? Was it still under the shadow of Hutchins, the Great Books and all that?

PERINA: Very much so. The school considered itself very intellectual and serious. Some people took themselves a bit too seriously, but in general it really was a very stimulating environment. In retrospect, I particularly value the emphasis it gave to general education. There were almost no electives in the first two years, and one had to take core courses in all the major disciplines of the humanities and sciences. In what seemed like a throwback to English prep schools, there was even a mandatory swimming class to ensure that everyone knew how to swim. But I received exposure to certain things like art appreciation and music appreciation that I had never studied before, and really these courses have enriched my life ever since. In retrospect, I am very grateful that I received such an education. It also helped me to decide on a major. I was always interested in the social sciences and humanities rather than natural science, but that still leaves many majors from which to choose. I went through anthropology, psychology, and sociology for various periods. In the end, however, I settled on history because I saw it as the broadest discipline of all the social sciences, and I always resisted the idea of narrowing my focus. History gave me the broadest set of options and the best general education. I must say that to this day I have no regret that I chose history as a major. As I get older I appreciate history more and see it as the source of all other knowledge. Studying and relating to previous generations also provides a certain spiritual transcendence and comfort which I never found in religion.

Q: You're preaching to the choir. I have a history major and a Masters in history. And that's what we're doing right now is promoting history.

PERINA: Absolutely. That's also why I'm here.

Q: Did you find you were concentrating on any particular type of history?

PERINA: Well, European history. It was partly a way of discovering my roots, which was a popular thing for people to do then. Even though I enjoyed history of all regions, I gravitated toward the history of that part of the world from which I came, basically Central Europe and Bohemia.

Q: Did the University of Chicago influence your political thinking? It was considered a very liberal school, and still is.

PERINA: Yes, it was a very liberal school. I am not sure my parents realized that when they agreed to send me there. Marxism at the time was fashionable in academia, among both students and professors. But I think it was good for me to go into this environment. It did expose me to new ideas and other ways of thinking. Many children of ï¿½migrï¿½s never escape from the ethnic communities and worldviews of their parents. I knew many such kids. I started becoming more liberal than my parents while in high school. At Chicago, I think I developed a good balance in my political views. Basically, I became suspicious of all political extremism and radicalism, whether right-wing or left-wing. It is a position I have held all of my life.

Q: While you were at the University of Chicago, did diplomacy cross your mind at all?

PERINA: Never. I always thought I would be a university professor, and I never imagined that I would go into diplomacy. I never focused on the Foreign Service and knew little about it. I felt that as a first generation immigrant, I would be an unlikely candidate to gain entry, pass security requirements, and so on. It was only years later in graduate school, when Henry Kissinger became prominent in foreign policy, that I first recognized that being foreign-born did not exclude me from being a U.S. diplomat. That was the first time I even considered it as an option.

Q: Did the civil rights movement in that period impact at all on you at the University?

PERINA: Well, yes, both in Chicago and later at Columbia. These were periods of enormous social change in America, and one could not avoid issues like civil rights, particularly on urban campuses in Chicago and New York. I was a supporter of the civil rights movement, as were most students on campus. The other big issue was, of course, Vietnam. It was on these issues that my political views began to diverge from that of my parents and of the ï¿½migrï¿½ community. Most Czech ï¿½migrï¿½s supported the Vietnam War because it was a war against communism. I became very skeptical of the war very quickly. I remember all of the debates on campus about the draft, student deferments and so on. All of these things raised my political consciousness, as was the case with much of my generation.

Q: Were you subject to the draft?

PERINA: Well, first I had a student deferment, while those existed. Then, while I was in college, there was an experiment with a lottery system based on birthdays, and my birthday was in the bottom half, meaning I was far from being called up. I was summoned to take a physical exam later, while in graduate school at Columbia, and I flunked because of a congenital heart murmur I inherited from my father. So I was put into a category that would be called up only if the Russians were on Long Island. But I certainly had friends who were drafted and some who were killed in Vietnam.

Q: You're pushing toward an academic career which obviously means graduate school. How did you pick Columbia?

PERINA: I applied to a number of schools but received the most financial assistance from Columbia. They offered me a fellowship which covered tuition plus a living stipend and was, not surprisingly, federally-funded to train foreign area experts, particularly on communist countries. By that time, I had started focusing on Eastern Europe as an area of interest, and Columbia had a very good program and reputation in this field. In addition, it offered the attraction of being in New York City, which was very much the "Big Apple" and place to be at the time. So I was very happy to be going there.

Q: You were at Columbia from 1967 until when?

PERINA: I was enrolled at Columbia from 1967 until I finished my Ph.D. dissertation in 1977 during my first tour in Ottawa, Canada. Also, from 1970 to 1972 I lived overseas, in Munich, Germany, doing the research for my dissertation. I received what was called a Foreign Area Fellowship to do this research, primarily at the library of Radio Free Europe in Munich. My dissertation topic was very contemporary history. It was a history of political dissent among Czechoslovak intellectuals from 1950 to 1969, that is from the Stalinist years through the Prague Spring.

Q: Can you elaborate?

PERINA: Well more specifically my dissertation was the history of this newspaper called Literarni noviny, which was the Czech equivalent of the Literaturnaya gazeta in Moscow. It was the most prominent newspaper of writers and intellectuals. It was founded in 1952, in the Stalinist period, and remained the most prominent voice of intellectuals through the 1968 Prague Spring until 1969, when it was shut down by the government. The topic was interesting because I could chart the evolution of the newspaper from Stalinism until the Prague Spring, when it was one of the major proponents of reform. I got into this topic partly because during my first year at Columbia, during the Prague Spring, someone called the University and asked if there were any experts on Czechoslovakia who could serve as consultants on a documentary film being planned. The call was passed on to me and I followed up on it. It came from a small, private film company called Saturday House Incorporated that wanted to break into independent production of documentaries. I later learned that the whole company was sort of a tax write-off for a very wealthy New York convertible bond financier who had always wanted to be a film producer.

Q: This was while The Prague Spring was going on?

PERINA: Yes, this was in April 1968 when the Prague Spring was beginning to be in the U.S. news. To make a long story short, I met with the company President, and he offered me the job of going to Czechoslovakia with him and the film crew as a consultant and interpreter. We spent about six weeks during April and May doing something like 60 hours of interviews with politicians, academics, dissidents, people on the street, anyone who would speak with us. Among those whom we interviewed was the young Vaclav Havel who was then a dissident writer but destined, as you know, to become President some three decades later. We didn't interview Dubcek but we got film footage of him, and we interviewed the Foreign Minister Jiri Hajek, the economic minister Ota Sik, and many others involved in the reform movement. All of the footage, I think, comprised the most comprehensive collection of interviews about the Prague Spring available anywhere. What happened then was that we returned to New York and started editing the 60 hours of film into a one-hour documentary. The idea was that it would then be offered for sale to one of the networks or perhaps PBS. Such independent productions were more common then than they are today, when networks basically do their own documentaries. But as we were finishing the film, the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia came on August 21, 1968. This event raised interest in the Prague Spring, but, unfortunately, the networks wanted footage of the invasion and the tanks rather than of what led up to these events. So suddenly our film was overtaken by events and became history, literally. We did still make a documentary that was shown in a few theaters and also on some PBS stations around the country, but it was never purchased by a network. I have a copy of it, which is now probably one of the few in existence, perhaps the only one. I am still friends with the fellow who headed the company, and he told me in later years that the outtakes, the entire 60 or so hours of film, were lost when the company dissolved. However, the whole experience gave me an opportunity to really get acquainted with the dynamics and personalities of the Prague Spring and was surely a factor in my choice of dissertation topic.

Q: I would have thought there would be some resistance from the History Department. I mean you're getting too close to the present time and history departments like to stand back and look at things. Did you find this resistance?

PERINA: Well, it was unusual and pushed the envelope even in the field of contemporary history. But my two primary sponsors at Columbia were also modern historians who had written on relatively recent themes so I got away with it. Still, my topic was about as contemporary as you can get for a historian.

Q: When you were in the middle of the Prague Spring and doing this interviewing, did you get a feel for whether this reform process would last?

PERINA: Well, we interviewed many dissident groups and intellectuals, and I did start to formulate some ideas on the dynamics of reform in authoritarian societies. My primary thesis, which I later elaborated in the dissertation, was that sustained reform in this part of the world must come from the top down rather than from the bottom up. In other words, dissidents and reformist intellectuals can help to create reformist politicians, but they cannot substitute for them. Real change must come from the political level. I think this was seen in the Prague Spring itself, which would not have happened without Dubcek. Of course, at the time, it was hard to imagine that a Gorbachev would appear in the Soviet Union and completely change that system and the entire Communist bloc as well. I think my thesis did not diminish the role of intellectuals in articulating the need for reform. It just argued that the reform could not really happen without political backing from above.

Q: But looking at Czechoslovakia, the pressure for reform really did came from the intellectual core rather than other places where you have it coming from shipyards, as in Poland.

PERINA: Intellectuals did create the environment for change, but you needed someone like Dubcek to make it happen. It was very similar to what subsequently happened with Gorbachev. Dubcek was a party apparatchik, a career member of the party. No one expected that he would have such reformist views after he came to power, just like no one expected Gorbachev to do the things he did. In fact, both leaders were chosen by their respective communist parties because they were seen as safe choices that would not rock the boat. Had it been known that they would be such reformers, they never would have become Party leaders. This is why Kremlinology was so difficult. If the Party colleagues of Dubcek and Gorbachev could not predict how these leaders would behave once they gained power, how could analysts in Washington predict it?

Q: Did you go through a period of depression after the Soviets moved in? I mean, this must have been pretty depressing since you had been so involved.

PERINA: Yes. It was very disappointing although in some respects not surprising because some of the things that were going on in Czechoslovakia really were getting out of control from the Soviet viewpoint, and poor Dubcek was playing with fire. But it also showed the fallacy of the Marxist view that the individual is not important in history and all things are determined by larger social forces. Dubcek, just like Gorbachev later, was essential to the changes that happened in his country. One can argue that perhaps these changes were inevitable, but it still could have been 10 years or 100 years before they happened. Everything I have learned in my study of history reinforces a sense of how individual leaders are important, and what an enormous impact good leadership or bad leadership has on the fate of countries. I think this is something which I saw also throughout my Foreign Service career, not just with Gorbachev but also, for example, in Yugoslavia where a collection of bad leaders led that country toward disaster. I saw it reflected in other things as well. For example, when I was in college the place where everyone expected a disastrous civil war was South Africa, and no one expected an F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela would emerge and save that country from disaster. The quality of leadership and individual leaders plays a great role in history, sometimes to the good and sometimes, like in Yugoslavia, to the bad.

Q: What was the mood at Columbia during your years there? Did the events of the Prague Spring have impact on it?

PERINA: I don't think it had that much impact only because so much else was going on. 1968 was an incredible year. Columbia was in a tumultuous state because of Vietnam and the civil rights movement. There was also the assassination of Martin Luther King, student demonstrations in France and Robert Kennedy's assassination. The Prague Spring wasn't the number one issue on most people's radar scopes, but we had many demonstrations at Columbia on other issues, and thanks to some of these I in fact met my future wife.

Q: Did you get married while you were at Columbia?

PERINA: Yes.

Q: What was the background of your wife?

PERINA: My wife's maiden name is Ethel Ott Hetherington, she is from Dallas, Texas and of Anglo-Saxon and Swiss German heritage. We met in the aftermath of the student demonstrations at Columbia in 1968 that shut the University down. You may remember the name Mark Rudd who led these demonstrations. A number of classes were cancelled and shifted to the apartments of students. My future wife was the roommate of one of my classmates who hosted a class in her apartment .We dated on and off for several years and then we got married in Salzburg, when I had my fellowship. I received a Foreign Area Fellowship to do research on my dissertation in Munich, Germany which had the best archives on Communist Czechoslovakia through Radio Free Europe and also through something called the Collegium Carolinum which was basically a Sudeten German organization that collected everything that was published in Czechoslovakia after 1945. So I went to Munich for two years on this fellowship, from 1970 to 1972. Ethel came to Europe during this time and we were married in Salzburg on May 26, 1972. We found out that in Austria, with its socialist traditions, the cost of a civil marriage was a percentage of one's income. Since I had a fellowship and a very small income, we got married for about $30 in a beautiful castle in Salzburg, the Schloss Mirabelle. It was a small but very nice wedding.

Q: How did you find Germany at that time?

PERINA: I found Munich a very pleasant city. We were there during the 1972 Olympics and the tragedy that happened to members of the Israeli Olympic team, who were taken hostage and killed by Palestinian terrorists. There was one other incident, of a very different kind, that I recall. I did most of my research at Radio Free Europe. There was a Czech broadcaster at the Radio who was sort of our age, a young fellow who had left Czechoslovakia after 1968. His name was Pavel Minarik. He became very friendly toward us. He had a very nice German wife, and we went to movies a couple of times with them and so on. When we were back in New York and I was finishing up my dissertation and teaching the Western Civilization course in Columbia College, he even visited us once and we had dinner together. I always assumed he was just a friendly fellow, perhaps interested at some point in immigrating to America and wanting to keep up his contacts. Well, some years later, after I joined the Foreign Service and was on my first tour in Ottawa, I was reading the newspaper and suddenly saw a short report that a Czech employee of Radio Free Europe had appeared at a press conference in Prague where he attacked Radio Free Europe and said he had worked there for five years as a spy for the Czechoslovak intelligence services. It was Pavel Minarik. He was treated as a hero by the Czech government and gave numerous interviews and wrote articles about the alleged plots and evil deeds of Radio Free Europe. There was subsequently a big debate at RFE about whether he had always been a spy or simply struck a deal with the Czech intelligence service in order to be able to return home. We now know that he indeed had been a spy from the very beginning, sent out with the express purpose of infiltrating Radio Free Europe and embarrassing it. He was truly a dastardly fellow because his German wife knew nothing of his real purpose and was devastated when he left her. As I understand, he still lives somewhere in the Czech Republic but keeps a low profile. The whole episode was remarkable because it was my first experience with how deceptive people can be in the world of espionage. But of course, I still had no idea that I would join the diplomatic service and routinely deal with intelligence issues through my career.

Q: When did the Foreign Service come up for you?

PERINA: Well, the Foreign Service came up when we moved back to New York from Munich, and I was writing my dissertation and started sending out applications for teaching jobs. Lo and behold, there were very few academic jobs around. Some of my classmates said they sent out hundreds of applications with barely a response. I was still writing the dissertation and saw little prospect of a teaching job even after I was finished. We had some income, my wife worked at Columbia University Press, and I had a teaching fellowship but a very small income. Then my wife became pregnant, and I started making plans to work as a cab driver in New York, like some of my classmates were already doing. Somewhere on a bulletin board at Columbia I saw an ad to take the Foreign Service exam and decided to try it. As I mentioned, the prominence at the time of Henry Kissinger had started me thinking that perhaps a diplomatic career was not out of the question, even for a foreign-born, first generation immigrant, but I had not given it serious thought. Well I signed up for the exam, and I was as amazed as anyone when I learned that I had passed. I don't think I passed it at a very high level. I think I frankly I just made it but then I aced the oral interview.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions?

PERINA: Yes, I do recall the questions. But at that time the oral exam was very different from what it is now. It was basically a conversation with a panel of about five people. I walked into the room and chatted for about an hour. It was very civilized. To prepare for it, I bought this little U.S. Government publication that was a great summary of U.S. foreign policy positions. It was one of these periodic reports that the Executive Branch has to prepare for Congress on policy issues. It was the perfect thing to read, and I studied it carefully. As a consequence I knew about things like the Shanghai Communiquï¿½, which was completely out of my specialization in academia. I was in fact asked about our China policy and referred to the Shanghai Communiquï¿½ agreement that there is only one China and Taiwan is a part of China. I think the panel was impressed that as a European specialist I had heard of the Shanghai Communiquï¿½.

But then they asked me questions about the Watergate hearings which were then underway. They asked me what I thought of them and how I hoped they would turn out. I sensed right away they wanted to see if I was going to be partisan, if I was going to say, "Well, Nixon should be hanged" or "Poor Nixon, he's being persecuted." So I answered by saying I hoped that it would all end in a way that didn't divide the country even more than Vietnam ever did. It was clearly the right answer, the right diplomatic answer for better or for worse. I didn't tip my hand. I guess it was the thing that they wanted to hear and then they asked, "Well, what happens if the President gets impeached?" And I said, "Well, then there's an impeachment trial by Congress" and then they said, "What appeal is there from that trial?" I thought for a minute if it was a trick question because the answer was of course very simple. I said, "None. There's no appeal from the results of the trial." So I think they were satisfied that I at least knew the basics of the Constitution. The oral went very well. I think I hit it off with the board. I found out subsequently that I scored very high on the oral, and this was the main reason why I got a letter very shortly afterward that I had been accepted and that they were starting the security investigation. I was somewhat worried about my heart murmur, which had kept me out of the draft, but during my physical exam it did not seem to be any problem for the State Department. I was in the Foreign Service, I think, within a few months. It went amazingly quickly.

Q: So in 1974 you came into the Foreign Service?

PERINA: Yes, November 1974.

Q: You want to talk a little about your initial impression of your class and how you felt about the Foreign Service?

PERINA: Well, I was very happy to come into the Foreign Service because in the first instance I was happy to have a job. My wife was pregnant, and the first thing we checked was if the medical benefits covered pre-existing pregnancy. They did so we were relieved. I was also very happy because writing my dissertation I had grown a little tired of academia. I grew tired of the specialization and increasingly narrowing focus. Though I was determined to finish the dissertation, and eventually I did, I was excited about being in something new and different like the Foreign Service. It was viewed as prestigious by my friends and family, it was more competitive to enter, it actually paid better than an entry-level job in academia, and I particularly looked forward to the adventure of living overseas. I felt well qualified for the Service: I knew other languages, had lived overseas and so on. So I was quite enthusiastic about it, and my wife was also. She had lived as an exchange student in Berlin, spoke German, also enjoyed being overseas, and of course was relieved that I had finally gotten a job. We came down from New York, lived in Arlington Towers which is where the Foreign Service Institute was at the time, and met our class which was about 35 people or so.

Then I started negotiating my first assignment. This was, of course, before open assignments existed, so it was like a poker game because one had to try to figure out first what was available and how often one could say no before the offers got worse rather than better. I learned very quickly how one has to watch out and negotiate in the assignments process. During my first assignment meeting, the counselor said, "We're going to make you a principal officer." I could not believe that as a new officer I would be a principal officer. I said, "Where?" And he said, "Bukavu," in the Congo, a consulate, a one man consulate and I would be principal officer. I looked at him and said, "Do you know I have a pregnant wife?" He said, "That's why you're perfect. There's no school problem." So I learned very quickly to be careful of what assignment counselors try to sell. I held out and in the end was offered a rotational assignment in Ottawa, Canada. This wasn't the most exotic place to go but I concluded that with a child on the way and still trying to finish a dissertation, it made a lot of practical sense. Certainly more so than Bukavu. The consequence was that in our first two years in the Foreign Service, the furthest we got from Washington was on home leave to California. But we were in fact very fortunate. Ottawa turned out to be a very interesting and pleasant place to live. And very significant in our lives because both of our daughters, Kaja or Katherine and Alexandra, were born there about 17 months apart. I even finished my dissertation.

Q: Let's go back to the class again. What was the composition in terms of ethnicity, gender and so on?

PERINA: It was a mixed group but an impressive group. There were, as I recall, a fair number of women in the class. It surely wasn't 50-50 but I would say it was about a third women. Racially, there were one or two African-Americans, one Hispanic, but as I recall no Asians. It was certainly an impressive group and very collegial. In fact, the spouses of the group gave my wife a shower in Arlington Towers, a baby shower, which was an introduction to the sense of community in the Foreign Service which we came very much to value.

Q: Were you able to parlay your doctorate into anything?

PERINA: No, I quickly found out that Ph.D.'s were neither rare nor particularly valued. Academic degrees were not really taken into account very much. I finished my dissertation mainly out of principle and as an insurance policy if I left the Foreign Service, but it never helped me much in the bureaucracy. Later I found out that education levels were actually hidden from promotion boards. What I did get credit for were the languages I knew. I tested and received step increases for Czech, German and French. That put me at the top of my pay grade so I started out at about $13,000 a year, which we were very happy with. I had the highest salary in my class.

Q: Ten years before I started out at about $3,500. That wasn't bad. $10,000 was the top government salary. So you were in Ottawa from 1975 to 1977?

PERINA: 1975 to late 1976. We arrived in Ottawa in February 1975 after I had taken the A-100 and the consular course. This was a rotational assignment so I did both consular work and political/economic work, but primarily it was consular. Canadians, of course, do not need visas but there were a lot of third-country applicants in Ottawa and also a lot of complex citizenship cases, plus imprisoned Americans. I worked on all of these. It was the only consular work I have done in my career but it left memories of some very interesting experiences.

Q: Do you recall any of them?

PERINA: Well, I recall one in particular that was when I gave the first visa to the United States to Alexander Solzhenitsyn who had just been expelled from the Soviet Union a few months earlier. He was invited to Canada before he was invited to the United States. He came to Canada and while there he got an invitation from the AFL/CIO to speak in Washington at some convention they were holding. He decided to accept and we received word that he was going to come to apply for a visa. Somebody from the AFL/CIO tipped us off that this was going to happen. I was the junior officer and my boss was a more experienced consular officer so we sat down and we thought about this for a minute. Right away we realized that he would need a waiver for Communist Party membership, which applied to anyone who had ever been in the Communist Party, as Solzhenitsyn had been in his youth. We thought, well, this is Solzhenitsyn, a renowned writer and dissident and very much of a hero to the Western world. We phoned Washington to ask if we could get around the waiver requirement in some way, and the answer was no. We had to go through the whole process of him filling out all the applications, sending these to Washington, and getting approval for the visa issuance.

I remember my boss was very worried about how Solzhenitsyn would take this. Solzhenitsyn had a reputation of standing up to bureaucrats, and we could imagine him getting fed up with the forms, walking out of the Embassy and denouncing American bureaucrats as no better than Soviet ones. Well, Solzhenitsyn came in with his wife Marina, who was his second wife, and was very polite and friendly. I did most of the talking with him even though I didn't know Russian at the time but I did know German. He spoke German quite well, and that is how we communicated. I explained to him that he had to fill out these forms, and his reaction was the opposite of what my boss had feared. Solzhenitsyn took the process more seriously than almost any other applicant I had processed. He sat down with these forms and began filling them out meticulously. There was one standard question asking for a list of all places where the applicant had lived for more than six months since the age of 18. He started filling this out and then he turned to me and said, "Do I have to fill in all the labor camps?" And I said, "No, you don't have to. Just cover the period. You don't have to fill in all the labor camps." He was immensely conscientious about the entire process. I thought about it afterwards and concluded that his behavior actually made a lot of sense, given his experiences. If you spend your life fighting a bureaucracy, your first thought is not to make a mistake in an official document that the bureaucracy can use against you. So he took the matter very seriously. We obtained the waiver from Washington overnight, and he came back the next day to pick up the visas. I know the exact date, which was May 21, 1975, because he also autographed and dated a first edition, in Russian, of the Gulag Archipelago for me. That was the date of his first visa to the United States, although he subsequently came many times.

Q: He eventually settled in Vermont, I think.

PERINA: Yes. He eventually settled there but then returned to Moscow after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Q: In that period of the '70s and during our involvement in Vietnam there were a significant number of young Americans males who entered Canada to avoid the draft. Did that affect you at all?

PERINA: Not in general, but there was this amazing coincidence where I met a classmate from the University of Chicago on the street in Ottawa. He was in Canada because he had gone AWOL (absent without leave) from the army before deployment to Vietnam. He was not a draft evader because he was beyond the draft. It was a very strange feeling at first because there we met and he was in a sense running from the United States and I was representing the United States. But after a while it really did not influence our personal relationship. We became good friends and still are. He is an attorney in Ottawa but was amnestied many years ago and can visit the U.S. without problem.

Q: How about the Canadians you met? I have been told by some people the one thing that binds Canadians together is that they are not Americans and of course, sometimes being an American diplomat there means bearing the brunt of hearing why they're Canadians.

PERINA: Right. Well, it is a dilemma because you have to be sensitive to their desire to have a separate identity despite the fact that so much of the culture and the economy is dominated by U.S. influence, as they are the first to recognize. It's always tricky because when Canadians ask you, "Well, how do you like it here?" you don't want to say, "Well, it's just like home," even though in many respects it is. But in fact we found the Canadians very hospitable. We had two daughters born in Ottawa, both delivered by the same doctor who delivered Margaret Trudeau's children, so for that and other reasons it will always be a special place for us. We made Canadian friends with whom we stay in touch to the present day.

Q: Did you find any sort of hostility? I think of Quï¿½bec and the English-French issue. Did you get caught up in that in any way?

PERINA: Well, there was some resentment of the U.S., of course. Not so much as a result of the French issue but rather because of our enormous influence and the Canadian wish to develop a separate identity. Unfortunately, some Canadians felt that a Canadian identity could not develop unless U.S. influence was restricted and closed off. I did a little bit of work in the political and economic sections of the Embassy. In the economic section, the main problems were Canadian efforts to restrict American TV broadcasts, to somehow limit American content in books and magazines, and so on. We argued that it would not work, as for the most part it did not. Many Canadians enjoyed American TV programs more than CBC programs. It is very hard to legislate a cultural identity, as some people tried to do. At the same time, I think Canadians are genuinely different from Americans in many respects and do have their own identity. One of my jobs in the political section was to attend question period in the Canadian Parliament. The Prime Minister at the time was Pierre Trudeau, and he was a master of debate. Watching him and Diefenbaker spar in parliament was a pleasure. It was a very civilized political culture.

Q: Who was our ambassador at the time?

PERINA: I was there with two ambassadors. When I first arrived, the ambassador was William Porter, with whom I overlapped only a bit, and he was then replaced by Thomas Enders.

Q: During the Vietnam War, there was quite a bit of tension between Trudeau and Lyndon Johnson. Did you get any sense of that during your time there?

PERINA: By the time I got to Ottawa the Vietnam War was basically over. It was no longer as controversial as in years past. So no, I did not get any sense of that. But of course Trudeau was a strong leader, intelligent and unafraid to speak out when he felt like it, so I have no doubt he made some in Washington nervous.

Q: Well, then you left Ottawa in late '76 or so?

PERINA: Exactly, we left in the winter of 1976 with two young daughters in tow. I got a job here in Washington. Everyone was telling me that that was the smart thing to do early-on in a career, to learn how the bureaucracy works. It was a little frustrating because I had joined the Foreign Service to see the world but had not seen much of it yet. But I received what was considered a very good assignment in EUR/RPM, or the regional political-military office of the European Bureau. It was essentially the NATO desk in the State Department. It was a desk for NATO but also for what was then the CSCE, later to become OSCE, which I became very involved in.

Q: Can you elaborate?

PERINA: Well, the CSCE was the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, a process created by the Helsinki Final Act which was signed in 1975 by 33 European countries plus the U.S. and Canada. The document had a lot of human rights-related provisions, the famous Basket III, and Congress became very interested in their implementation. A joint legislative-executive Helsinki Commission was in fact created on the Hill, and Congress asked for semiannual reports from the President on how Helsinki Final Act provisions were being implemented. My job turned out to be drafting those reports. A friend of mine, Jon Greenwald, drafted the first one, and I drafted the subsequent four. These were actually quite lengthy reports. They ranged from 70 to 100 pages and were basically a tabulation of events in the Eastern bloc related to CSCE implementation, things like treatment of dissidents, human rights violations, freedom of the press, freedom of movement and so on.

There was a lot of interest in these reports, and they were attacked by the Eastern bloc countries as soon as they were published, so it was important to be accurate. It was actually a heady experience for a second-tour junior officer to be drafting these long documents that were then released in the name of the President. One interesting tidbit was that the first report I drafted was under Jimmy Carter, who was inaugurated just as I returned to Washington. We had to send the report to the NSC for clearance, and, amazingly, when it came back there were these pencil notations in the margins that we were told came from the President himself. Jimmy Carter had personally read the 70 or so page report. No one could believe it, and I am sure it was a fluke only because he was new to the job. He did not read subsequent reports because his staffers were more experienced and did not pass stuff like this to him. But it was consistent with what we heard about Jimmy Carter-that he was very hands-on, meticulous, and would study in detail anything that people put in front of him.

The most interesting thing in this period was that I attended part of the first CSCE follow-up meeting in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. This was in late 1977 and early 1978. In the Helsinki Final Act it said that periodically there would be follow-up meetings to see how the document was being implemented. The first such meeting was held in Belgrade, and the head of our delegation was Arthur Goldberg, a very prominent and senior figure. The Soviet ambassador was Yuri Vorontsov, who later became a deputy foreign minister and ambassador to Washington and had the reputation of being a very tough guy. With the personalities of Goldberg and Vorontsov, and the prominence of human rights in Jimmy Carter's foreign policy, Belgrade had all the ingredients for a clash between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. This in fact happened.

I wasn't on the delegation the whole time but I was there for probably about half of the conference in 1978. There was a debate within our delegation and later within the NATO caucus on whether Western delegations should name names of dissidents in the Soviet Union. The Soviets considered just the subject of human rights to be interference in internal affairs, and naming names of specific dissidents like Natan Sharansky or Yuri Orlov was unprecedented and seen by some of our allies as too provocative. Many of our European friends were concerned that the Soviets might use it as an excuse to walk out of the conference and thus kill the entire CSCE process. Goldberg mulled the issue over and decided that he would name names. We prepared a speech where he referred to several prominent dissidents, including Sharansky and Orlov, whose names were known in the West. I remember when he delivered the speech in the plenary how everyone held their breath on how the Soviets would react. Well, they denounced the speech but did not walk out of the meeting. They stayed but maintained their argument that this was not a legitimate discussion topic and that it was interference in the internal affairs of the Soviet Union. Of course, when Goldberg read his statement, the Soviets knew of it in advance and Vorontsov himself didn't attend. He sent his deputy.

These Basket III issues dominated the whole meeting. There were also many less prominent names, particularly of refuseniks, which we were asked by Congress and others to raise with the Soviets. We had a list of several hundred names which we could not raise orally in the meeting. So we attached the names to a diplomatic note which we sent to the Soviet delegation. The lists came back to us seemingly unread with the notation that they were not an appropriate topic for discussion between the United States and the Soviet Union. Basically, the argument the Soviets tried at that time and for many years thereafter was to say that this was not the business of the United States or any other country-that we were interfering in their internal affairs. This was a very weak, legalistic-type of argument which predictably did not work or deter the United States.

Q: The Helsinki Accord did also have a provision on interference in internal affairs, no?

PERINA: Yes, it did have such a provision. The Helsinki Final Act was a consensus document, and thus it had a lot of internal contradictions, or at least provisions open to very different interpretations. The thing to remember is that it was a political document, and the entire review process was likewise very political. We focused on certain principles, and the Soviets focused on others. They would have wanted to use the CSCE gradually to weaken NATO and to create a new European security system. We wanted to use the process to advance human rights and overcome the division of Europe, weaken the Iron Curtain if you will. It was a political debate, and the Soviets could not stop it with legalistic arguments. They were in a much weaker position because the document put these human rights issue on the diplomatic agenda, and they could not put the genie back in the bottle. They could refuse to talk about these provisions, but they could not stop others from talking about them.

In subsequent years, one of my bosses, Jack Maresca, who worked on negotiation of the Helsinki Final Act and wrote a book about the CSCE, said that the Soviets considered walking out of the process a number of times but could not figure out how to do it because of one provision in the so-called Blue Book, which contained the rules of procedure of CSCE and was adopted with the Final Act. This provision in the Blue Book said that no follow-up meeting would end until it had determined the date and place of the next follow-up meeting. Thus if the Soviets walked out, the meeting would technically never conclude and would be a constant problem for them on the international agenda. It could go into recess but then be called back whenever the West wanted to give Basket III issues prominence again. So it was sort of a Catch 22. It in fact guaranteed the CSCE perpetual life unless there was a new consensus to change the Blue Book rule.

Q: Could you explain what a refusenik was.

PERINA: Well, a refusenik was basically someone who was being refused a visa to emigrate from the Soviet Union, and by and large at that time it was primarily Jewish emigrants who were trying to leave. There were also others, however, like the Baptists who took refuge in the basement of our Moscow embassy for several years and whom I met during my later tour there.

Q: So what years did you work in this office?

PERINA: I was in EUR/RPM from the winter of 1976 to the summer of 1978.

Q: Did you get any feel for things happening in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union at this time that would later lead to the Velvet Revolution, the fall of the Berlin wall and the events of 1989? Did you sense anything cooking there or was all of this still below the surface?

PERINA: I certainly did not expect the fall of communism ten years later, or even in my lifetime. The 1989 events were anticipated by very few experts. But there certainly were signs of growing dissent and dissatisfaction in Eastern bloc countries. The Final Act was a perfect example. When it was adopted, the signing countries all agreed that they would make efforts to publish and disseminate the text to their publics. The Soviets did in fact publish it widely, probably thinking that the Basket III provisions would get no more attention than human rights agreements within the UN and elsewhere. But then suddenly, all of these Helsinki monitoring groups began appearing in the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries, much to the surprise of the governments. In fact, Western governments were also surprised by this; no one expected such a reaction. Partly, the timing worked well with the advent of Jimmy Carter's presidency and his emphasis on human rights, but it also showed a much higher level of frustration in Eastern bloc countries than many realized, and also a higher level of readiness by dissidents to challenge authority and vent this frustration. I found the developments fascinating, and, of course, they did play into my interests from academia and my dissertation. So I latched onto CSCE and stayed with it, on and off, for the next 25 years.

Q: For a relatively new officer this frankly must have been a hell of a lot of fun.

PERINA: It was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed that assignment. Ironically, it was the only State Department assignment that I had for about the next 20 years. My subsequent Department of State assignment was as Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary in 1996 because I spent so much of my career overseas and then in Washington in the NSC (National Security Council) or just on training assignments. But I made a lot of good contacts in that first State Department job. I found out rather quickly that contacts are key to a career in the State Department, that indeed it is a little bit like what Dick Holbrooke jokingly said in later years in a commencement address: "Remember that what is important in life is not who you know, it's whom you know." I made contacts in that first Washington job that got me through at least the next 20 years of my career.

Q: So what happens next in 1978?

PERINA: In 1978 I left RPM and went into a year of Russian training because I was assigned to Moscow, to the political section in Embassy Moscow.

Q: I imagine this came from your European Bureau contacts because Moscow was a hard club to get into.

PERINA: Yes. It was going to the center of the action at that time. China was just emerging, it was becoming a desirable assignment, but Moscow was still the place to go. Ironically, I didn't know Russian. I had a lot of other languages but I didn't have Russian so I had to go into a year of Russian training. Then in the summer of '79 I went out to Moscow to work in what was called at the time the External Political Section which followed Soviet foreign policy.

Q: With your Czech and your German, how did Russian go?

PERINA: With my Czech I had an advantage in Russian. At the beginning it's a little confusing. If you're weak in one Slavic language it can really confuse you to learn another Slavic language. But my Czech was strong enough that I was able to keep them separate, and there are a lot of cognates. I did well in the language training and had pretty good Russian by the time I went to Moscow.

Q: So you were there from 1979?

PERINA: From the summer of 1979 to the summer of 1981.

Q: What was the situation in the Soviet Union in 1979 when you got out there?

PERINA: Well, this was pre-Afghanistan so our relations were still pretty good. Jimmy Carter was the president and he put a great emphasis on human rights issues, but in our overall relations with Moscow there was a lot of interaction, a lot of exchanges and growing commercial relations. The invasion of Czechoslovakia had been forgotten, and the effort to build dï¿½tente was underway. So it was an expanding bilateral relationship.

Q: Our Ambassador was Thomas Watson?

PERINA: I had three chiefs of mission. When I just got there it was still Mack Toon for about six months. Then he was replaced by Thomas Watson, the IBM president. But then he left after about a year and was replaced by Jack Matlock, who came not as ambassador but as Chargï¿½ d'Affaires between ambassadors. The most significant event during my tour is obvious. I got there around September 1979, and three months later the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. I do have a story about that. The invasion came at Christmas time, and it so happened that everybody was on leave for the holidays, even the DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) was gone and the Political Counselor, Bob German, was in charge of the Embassy. It was the same thing in the Russian Foreign Ministry, or so they claimed. They told us after the invasion that the Foreign Minister was out of town but I doubt it. He just did not want to meet. So the Deputy Foreign Minister was in charge.

In any case, we received word a few days before Christmas that Washington had noticed these strange military movements along the Soviet border with Afghanistan, and we were instructed to go in with a demarche to try to find out what was happening. Bob German delivered the demarche because everybody else was on vacation, and he took me along as the note taker because I had the best Russian in the Political Section. I'll always remember that session. We met with Georgiy Korniyenko, who was First Deputy Foreign Minister. Bob German was a very polite fellow and in a very friendly way he said that we had noticed these apparent military movements on the border, and what is going on? And I remember Korniyenko saying, "There's absolutely nothing going on, and if there were something going on, it should be no subject of concern to the United States." In other words, he was saying that if something were happening, it was none of our business. So we got this complete brick wall. I wrote up the telegram, and then I think it may have been the next morning or no later than two days after that suddenly we saw in the morning that Afghanistan had been invaded. The Soviets were also justifying it all as helping Afghanistan stave off a coup attempt engineered by the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). So it clearly did concern the United States, contrary to what Korniyenko had told us, because there was this effort to implicate us and in fact blame us for the whole thing. It amazed me at how blatantly and unabashedly Korniyenko had lied to Bob German. There was not the slightest effort by the Kremlin to reconcile what they told us before the invasion and what they said publicly after the invasion. Both things were totally in contradiction, and both were lies. It showed me for the first time how unashamedly people can lie in diplomacy.

Q: What was our initial analysis of this? I have never been fully satisfied by explanations of why the Soviets invaded another Communist country. It caused all sorts of developments which are still with us today. One of the explanations I've heard is that it was a bunch of old men in the Politburo who didn't know what they were doing. What was coming from our Embassy at the time?

PERINA: Well, the Soviets felt that Afghanistan was slipping away from them. The invasion was a fundamental miscalculation and not a rational move from any viewpoint. This in part explains why we ourselves were so surprised and caught off guard by it. The best explanation is that the Soviets just totally miscalculated at how difficult it would be to control the country. We couldn't figure it out even with the reputation that by then the Soviets had. They were willing to go into Hungary, they were willing to go into Czechoslovakia but nobody anticipated that they would really go into Afghanistan. And I think that really doubled the shock and then the desire to retaliate against them.

Q: So what happened in the Embassy after the invasion? Did all the doors shut on you or did you shut all the doors?

PERINA: Well, we were the ones who shut the doors, and it was a very intentional response. Our Ambassador by then was Thomas Watson, and we junior officers rotated sitting in on the morning Country Team meetings. I remember one dramatic staff meeting just a few days after the invasion when Watson came in and said, "We are going to retaliate. We are going to react very, very strongly to this Soviet action. I want from each section chief and agency head a list of things that we can do to the Soviets to show them how outraged we are." This was at the Country Team meeting. Then he asked right there for people around the table to give him examples of what could be done to retaliate against the Soviets. It was a very tense meeting because he then did call on people around the table. He would go, for example, to the Cultural Attachï¿½, to the USIA person. That person would say, "Well, you know we have a lot of exchanges with the Soviets. We have student exchanges, we have professional exchanges, and so on. We could stop all these but it wouldn't be in our interest to do so because it took us a long time to develop these programs. We would just be punishing the people who are going to have greater exposure to the West. So I would not recommend that we do this." Then Watson went to the Economics Officer who said, "Well, we're selling a lot of wheat now to the Soviet Union and we could stop selling that. However, there is a lot of Congressional support for these sales. Farm interests want to continue selling wheat. We will get a lot of flack if we stop wheat sales so I recommend against it." And he went predictably from counselor to counselor and almost everyone told him things that could be done but recommended against doing them. But of course, ultimately, we ended up doing almost all of those things. However, nobody even at that staff meeting suggested boycotting the Moscow Olympics. Nobody thought it would go that far.

I will always remember that staff meeting because it was so predictable how everyone tried to protect his or her bureaucratic turf. However, it was all for naught because the reaction from Jimmy Carter was very, very strong and we ended up doing all of those things and more. When it became clear that this was inevitable then of course certain people in the embassy became tougher than ever on the Soviets. I remember at a later staff meeting, after the decision had been made to boycott the Olympics, one person even suggested that the Embassy staff be instructed not to watch the games on TV. This of course was rejected by Watson as unenforceable and privately ridiculed throughout the Embassy. But it illustrated the mood that developed. The interesting thing was that for the rest of my time in Moscow, even though there were very bad bilateral relations in public, the Soviets never retaliated against the Embassy by shutting doors or cutting off our access. In fact, they always tried to show their desire for getting back to business as usual in private contacts. It was their way of showing that they hoped we would forgive and forget the Afghanistan matter and get back to building dï¿½tente, which of course they very much wanted.

Q: Let's go back just a bit. Before this you were dealing with Soviet policies in Africa and Latin America, Cuba, other places. How did we view Soviet policy? Was it seen as aggressive?

PERINA: Well, that's a very good question because my responsibility in the external political section was in fact for Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and parts of Eastern Europe. We had other people for Asia, Western Europe, arms control and international economic issues but basically I did the rest of the world. This was the developing world, or Third World as some called it at the time, and our relations with the Soviets there were very competitive. We were always watching what they did, and they watched us. There was one curious incident that happened during my tour even before Afghanistan that I think probably a lot of people don't even remember. It was the issue of a Soviet brigade in Cuba. Do you remember the Soviet brigade in Cuba?

Q: I do but give us the background.

PERINA: Well, in the fall of 1979 there were suddenly intelligence reports that the Soviet Union had stationed a brigade of Soviet troops in Cuba- not missiles, not nuclear weapons or anything like that but just that there was a Soviet brigade in Cuba. It became public and there was a big outcry, particularly in Congress. The Embassy was asked to do a demarche on this and to find out what was going on. Again, it was Bob German, the Political Counselor, who delivered the demarche, and again he took me along as the note taker. As I recall, we met with Viktor Komplektov, who was a senior figure, the head of the Americas Department in the Foreign Ministry. The demarche again hit a complete stonewall, except this time the Soviets at least did not lie-they just would not answer. Their position was that what the Soviets had in Cuba was their business and not ours. They did not deny that there was a brigade, but neither did they admit it. Then when Bob German kept pushing, Komplektov asked, "Are you saying that we do not have the right to put Soviet troops into Cuba? Are you denying the Soviet right to do this? " Bob very effectively dodged the question but after the meeting we had a long discussion in the Political Section which revealed that we really were not sure of the answer. The problem was that we did not really know what deals were struck during and after the Cuban missile crisis about what could and couldn't be done in Cuba by the Soviets. In fact, even the desk in the State Department could not give us a straight answer. Some people were saying that there were agreements made by Kissinger years after the Cuban missile crisis that were very closely held, and no one seemed to be sure what they entailed. We never did get a clear answer from Washington, and I am not certain that our Soviet interlocutor knew the answer. Komplektov may have been bluffing with his rhetorical question and betting that we would be uncertain of our answer.

Q: I've been told that actually the Soviet brigade was the sum of all the support troops that had already been there. Somebody had added them up and said this represents a brigade but it really hadn't been an introduction of a new force. It had been there all along but people were surprised by the term brigade and this led to the crisis.

PERINA: Right. It all fizzled out in a few months. It was never resolved, and then it got overtaken by the much larger issue of Afghanistan and people forgot about the Soviet brigade. What was interesting again to me was dealing with issues and agreements where you just didn't have all the facts. You didn't know what really had been agreed because the agreements were oral and not properly recorded, or at least not known even by the Embassy in Moscow.

Q: And you can't know if they hadn't been recorded or maybe never agreed to.

PERINA: Kissinger was known for this kind of secret diplomacy, and subsequently others whom I worked with were known for this. They purposely didn't record things. A major problem with these oral agreements was that very different interpretations could be taken by different sides because there would be no written texts to refer to.

Q: How did we view the Soviet presence in Africa at that time? The Soviets put quite a bit of effort and money into Africa but it was pretty hard to figure out what was in it for them. Or for us.

PERINA: There was continual sparring between us and the Soviets but it seemed to bring little benefit to the people of Africa. We supported regimes because they were on our side and the Soviets supported their side but this perpetuated the general bad governance on the African continent. But I do not recall any specific crisis in Africa during my time. Everything was overshadowed by Afghanistan.

Q: Did you at all pick up from your seniors that the reaction to Afghanistan was largely shaped by Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was the NSC adviser? Carter had come in with the idea of getting nice with the Soviets. One reason why Tom Watson was sent out there was to boost the commercial ties. Then Afghanistan happened and Brzezinski's position prevailed.

PERINA: Clearly, Brzezinski had a lot of input on this. The U.S. reaction to Afghanistan was very tough. We did suspend the wheat sales, we basically stopped almost all exchanges, and almost everything in the relationship was affected. And we even did what very few people anticipated and that was the boycott of the Olympics. That showed how really angry Washington was, and I think it even surprised the Soviets. They anticipated a negative reaction to Afghanistan and knew there was going to be fallout but I think they were really shocked by the boycott of the Olympics. As you know, there was a big debate even in the U.S. about this.

Q: The Olympics were a big event for Moscow, I assume.

PERINA: They were a huge event for the Soviets. They had rebuilt the airport and tried to refurbish the whole city. There were even rumors circulating in Moscow that the Soviets were planning to seed rain clouds approaching the city so there would be no rain in that 10-day period. I think this was an urban legend but would not put it past the Soviets to try. They really wanted the games to be a showcase, and we spoiled the whole thing for them. The games will always be remembered as the Olympics that the U.S. boycotted. It wasn't then just the U.S.; it was a fairly large number of countries but we were the organizers. We tried to create an alternate Olympics because our athletes were so unhappy that they couldn't compete. We created the Liberty Bell Classic in Philadelphia. A friend of mine, Nelson Ledsky, was in charge of organizing that. It was not much of a hit either, however. Carter's decision was much debated but I concluded in later years that it had been the right thing to do. It got to the Soviets in a way they could not hide from their people, and it put the Afghanistan invasion into a chapter of the history book where the Soviets did not want it to be. Of course, it was unfortunate for the athletes. And then, of course, the Soviets had to retaliate so they didn't go to Los Angeles which was the next Olympics four years later, even though by then our relationship was much improved. So you had two Olympic games in a row that were damaged but I think it sent the message to the Kremlin that international anger was genuine and deep, and it did so in a way they could not hide from their own public.

Q: Let's talk about working and living in Moscow during that time: in the first place, getting out, seeing people both on the official and on the personal level. How difficult was this?

PERINA: Well, on the official level I never had problems with access to people in the Foreign Ministry and elsewhere. Of course, these were generally junior people like myself but even on senior levels, I did not detect a problem of access. What never or very rarely worked was to have them over for dinner or other social events in our homes. Only a limited number of individuals on the Soviet side were authorized to have social contact with Westerners. Most of the people at my level were on a very short leash in interacting with foreigners. Even at higher levels, Soviet officials sometimes accepted but then did not show up for events. After Afghanistan, the Embassy set limits and restrictions on entertaining Soviet officials as part of our own refusal to have business as usual. Basically, no purely social events were allowed. Only "working" lunches and dinners could be held and had to be justified. So there was very little social interaction, and it was limited to chatting with Soviet officials at third country receptions and so on.

One interesting thing at the time was the on-going Sino-Soviet split. The Chinese had an Embassy that was reputed to have the best food in Moscow for receptions and so on. Everybody in the U.S. Embassy wanted to go for the great food. The Chinese knew this and whenever they had an event they would invite virtually the entire U.S. Embassy. This was just to irritate the Soviets because they monitored this and they would see the entire U.S. Embassy going over to the Chinese Embassy. It actually got so bad and provocative that Ambassador Toon issued a directive that for any Chinese events he personally had to approve who would attend so that there would not be too large a crowd of Americans. The Chinese were very clever in things like this.

Otherwise, I did do some travel in the Soviet Union but never found myself harassed in any serious way, although it was during trips outside of Moscow that I first detected surveillance. I am sure it happened in Moscow as well but I was just not aware of it. In the provinces the KGB was not as sophisticated, and the surveillance was really obvious and sometimes intense, particularly in the Muslim regions of the Soviet Union. Once on a trip with Steve Coffey, who was also in the Political Section, we went to Baku in the Azerbaijan Soviet Republic and detected probably about a dozen people taking turns following us, especially when we went to visit a mosque. The Soviets were very worried about their Muslim population and our interest in it.

There were, of course, certain people in the Embassy who did get a lot of harassment from the Soviets. I was never among them. It was primarily the people who dealt with human rights, who met with the refuseniks, dissidents, human rights activists and so on. They were often harassed seriously. People at our consulate in Leningrad had a particularly difficult time because the city had a very hard-line mayor named Romanov at the time. Several of our officers there who dealt with dissidents were beaten up by KGB thugs. The people in our Embassy who dealt with dissidents were also harassed, though for the most part not violently. Things could happen to their property, apartments and so on. In one instance, the freezer of an officer who dealt with human rights issues was unplugged while the family was away on vacation. This was actually quite serious because most of our food was still imported from Helsinki, and a family could incur hundreds of dollars of damage when something like that happened.

But what I found most interesting, from a psychological viewpoint, were the things the Soviets did just to remind Embassy officers of their vulnerability. This would often consist of totally innocuous things happening in one's apartment like, for example, something that was always on one side of the room suddenly appearing on the other side. Things would be moved or changed in such a way as to leave no doubt that someone had been in the apartment, but no damage was done. This was very clever on the part of the KGB because they knew that people would not lodge official complaints or protests about such things. The Embassy would not protest to the Foreign Ministry that somebody had moved a lamp from one table to another or eaten something and left a dirty plate on the kitchen counter. Half the time people didn't even go to the RSO (Regional Security Officer) because it seemed so petty. Or sometimes you actually weren't even sure if maybe, in fact, you had put the thing on that table rather than on another. But the bottom line was that a person was made to feel very insecure and vulnerable because it was fairly obvious that someone had been in the apartment. The implied message was: be careful, your behavior is being watched, and next time something far more serious can happen.

I found this a very interesting form of psychological harassment, and, while it never bothered me or my family particularly, it did lead to paranoia among some people. In some cases, I think, it led to people accusing the Soviets of doing things whenever anything went wrong, even if perhaps the Soviets were not actually at fault. You know, if the coffeemaker broke down people would assume, "Well, the KGB did this." Sometimes the Soviets may have done it but at times they didn't and people just blamed them. But in a sense that also served the KGB purpose because it underlined the insecurity and vulnerability, which is what the KGB wanted. So people's paranoia would start working to the benefit of the KGB. We did experience such harassment a number of times-once when one of my wife's coats disappeared for several months and then suddenly reappeared hanging in the closet. But how can someone protest that to the Foreign Ministry? That was the beauty of the KGB scheme.

Q: Was there a problem of radiation at that time?

PERINA: There was but we didn't know about it. We found out subsequently that this was the period when the building was being microwaved. There was some real anger about this toward the Department in later years because many people felt that the Department had an obligation to tell employees about something that could have negative health effects. The Department, of course, claimed there was no evidence of negative health effects but many people are not convinced and believe that the rates of cancer and miscarriages in particular have been higher among employees who served in Moscow in those years.

Q: Well the technical people knew about the microwaves, and the Ambassador must have been told. You can't disguise that sort of thing from people who have the technical capabilities to monitor it but do not tell their own.

PERINA: No, we weren't told. The later government argument was that it was below the level that can be damaging but as I understand nobody quite knows what that level is. A similar thing at the time was the so-called "angel dust" that the KGB put on steering wheels and door knobs of some employees to trace their movements and so on. Again, as I understand, people weren't told about that but it came out in later years. There, however, it is unclear if our government knew about it, but they certainly knew about the microwaves and did not tell us. The reason, as I have been told, is that we were doing the same thing to their Embassy in Washington so neither side wanted to make an issue of it.

Q: How about leisure time for you and your family. Could you get around, see things, do things, or was it difficult? How was life?

PERINA: Life could be difficult. For example, we lived in a diplomatic housing compound run by the Soviets which was luxurious by Soviet standards but not at all up to Western standards. We only had outdoor parking, and I remember that on very cold days in winter-and it did get to 30 below- I had to remove the car battery from our Plymouth Duster each evening and bring it up to the apartment and then install it again in the morning. Otherwise the car would not start. The incident I most remember is once dropping the battery and cracking it while taking it inside. It was impossible to get a replacement in Moscow and ordering it from Helsinki was very expensive. We ended buying one during a previously-planned trip to Berlin and bringing it back on the train. We were also hit once by an intoxicated Russian and had a badly damaged fender on our Plymouth Duster. We managed to get it fixed by some skilled Russian workers for a carton of cigarettes but it was still nerve-wracking. There were other things. We had to bring a nanny from the United States, import fresh fruits and vegetables from Helsinki, and so on. One also felt quite isolated. Phone calls to the West had to be ordered a day in advance. There was no outside source of news. I remember once how the Soviet TV announced that President Reagan had been shot but then waited several hours to say whether he was alive or dead. There was no CNN, no internet, no communication with the outside world. It is difficult to imagine nowadays.

But for the most part life was more normal than one would assume. By Soviet standards, we lived in very privileged circumstances. We did take some trips as a family. We went to Leningrad, Kiev and Odessa with the kids, and we had to go through all the hoops and get all the permission but it was possible to do. We went to the opera, to the Moscow circus, and our daughters even had ballet lessons at a school run by the Bolshoi ballet. My father came to visit us-his first trip to a Communist country since escaping from Czechoslovakia, and he spoke of the visit with fascination for the rest of his life. All in all, it was a remarkable place to be, with much to see and do. In subsequent years, we came to see Moscow as perhaps the most interesting and memorable of our assignments. It was a very cohesive Embassy community, and some of our most enduring friends are from that period. It was an adventure.

Q: What about the developments with Solidarnosc in Poland?

PERINA: Yes, I was going to say that this was the other big crisis during my tour in Moscow, coming right after Afghanistan which had done such damage to our relationship. Solidarnosc then appeared on the horizon, and the big question was whether the Soviets would also invade Poland. By then Jack Matlock had come out as the Chargï¿½ d'Affaires of the Embassy after Watson left, and we had many sessions trying to analyze Soviet intentions and likely actions. I was always skeptical that an invasion would come because the Soviets had their hands full in Afghanistan. They knew that Poland would not be an easy place to invade, and also I think our tough reaction to Afghanistan played a role by making them all the more worried about how we would react to a Polish invasion. In this respect, I think President Carter was proven correct in his tough reaction to Afghanistan, and the Soviets were right that a Polish invasion would have had even more serious consequences. But also I think the Soviets chose not to invade because of the difficulties Solidarnosc itself was having. The actions of Solidarnosc at that time did not appear as a success for Poland, or something that other Warsaw Pact countries would want to emulate. The danger of infection, which the Kremlin feared greatly, was not there. The Polish economy was nose-diving from all of the strikes and unrest. Poland was going more and more into debt and economic chaos. As long as this appeared to be the trend, the Soviets were basically hoping that the example of Poland was negative rather than positive to the rest of the bloc, and that Solidarnosc would collapse as a result of its own actions. This was very different from Prague in 1968, which the Kremlin clearly feared would be an example that others tried to emulate. But we spent a lot of time watching the situation in Poland, knowing that the Soviets did not always think rationally and that hot rather than cool heads could prevail.

Q: Were you able to talk to people at the Polish Embassy about this?

PERINA: We were, and they were totally out of the loop, frankly. Nobody was talking to them. They were very isolated. We as an Embassy tended to know far more than they did about Soviet attitudes. It was interesting because the Soviets always tried to maintain a good relationship with us. They knew relations were already damaged because of Afghanistan but their approach was to try to preserve as much of the relationship as possible. The poor Poles, however, were clearly ostracized despite being a Warsaw Pact ally.

Q: Could you go to the Soviets and say, "Hey, what's going on in Poland?"

PERINA: We did. We had numerous demarches about Solidarnosc. I was not specifically involved in those because there were others who were specifically following Poland but we certainly did raise Polish events with them. We tried to keep up a dialogue, and the Soviets would engage to some degree on this.

Q: What about the institutes like the USA and Canada Institute?

PERINA: That was Georgiy Arbatov's institute. It put itself forward as an independent think tank, and it was the closest thing to a think tank in the Soviet Union so that is the reason why many Westerners flocked to it. It was, of course, hardly independent, and Arbatov was a very clever apologist for the Kremlin who knew how to give the appearance of independence to Western audiences. He saw himself as very skilled in dealing with Westerners and would occasionally be critical of Soviet actions to try to maintain credibility but in the end almost invariably supported Soviet actions. He was primarily useful as another voice of the government, but sometimes a more sophisticated voice than what we heard in the Foreign Ministry or read in the press. So he did serve a role, though a very disingenuous one.

Q: You went to Berlin in 1981?

PERINA: Yes. In 1981 we moved from Moscow to Berlin.

Q: What was the Berlin situation in 1981 because this was always a city of tension between East and West?

PERINA: The situation calmed considerably after the Quadripartite Agreement of 1971, which to a large degree stabilized the way the four allies interacted. There were still big differences in our interpretations of the Agreement and the status of Berlin, however. The whole theology of Berlin was extremely complicated. For example, we considered East Berlin still the Soviet zone of occupied Berlin. However, the Soviets had accepted it as part of the GDR (German Democratic Republic) and the capital of East Germany. So we had completely different views on the status of East Berlin, which had real consequences for actions in many areas. For example, when we traveled to East Berlin, we always insisted on being checked by Soviet officials, not by East German officials, because we did not recognize East German sovereignty in East Berlin. If we had any problems in East Berlin, we complained to the Soviets and not to the East Germans. The GDR officials, on the other hand, wanted to make the point that this was now their capital, the capital of the GDR. So a complicated procedure was developed as a type of modus vivendi for dealing with all these differing viewpoints. Thus, when we crossed from West to East Berlin via Checkpoint Charlie, we would have these cards that we would show through the car window to GDR guards, but we would always keep the windows closed and not speak with the guards. If there were any problems, we complained to the Soviets. The East Germans came to accept this but were always pushing the envelope in one way or another. These kinds of practical arrangements were developed to cope in practical ways with all the contradictions of the situation. Berlin was full of this kind of theology.

There were similarly complex procedures related to road corridors to West Germany and the air corridors for air traffic. But by and large, the major crises of Berlin had passed by 1981. It was still probably the city with more espionage going on per square mile than in any other city in Europe simply because it was so easy for each of the four occupying powers-the U.S., the Soviet Union, the UK and France-as well as the East and West Germans to spy on one another. Each of the occupying powers had virtual sovereignty in their sector so they could do anything: control the police, control the phone network, build radio towers, etc. They were basically the law. So there was a lot of eavesdropping, everybody listening to everybody else and so on. But overall, the situation was stable compared to years past.

Q: You were there from 1981 to 1985?

PERINA: Yes, for four years. I had two different jobs in that period. The first was called the Protocol Officer job but it was actually the job of being the liaison with the Soviets on Berlin matters. This made sense because I had just come from Moscow, knew Russian and so on. I had a counterpart in the Soviet Embassy in East Berlin who dealt with me on Berlin matters. But I did not deal with the East Germans in any way because we had by that time opened a U.S. Embassy in East Berlin. Since we saw East Berlin as the Soviet sector of occupied Berlin and not as the capital of the GDR, the phrase we used was to say that our Embassy was "to the GDR but not in the GDR." Obviously, there was a lot of convoluted theology here but it brought stability to the city and to the relationship between the two Germanys. And it was not just the U.S. that compromised but the Soviets and East Germans had to as well. A lot of their practical actions were also inconsistent with the positions of principle they espoused.

Q: What sorts of issues did you talk about with the Soviets?

PERINA: We would talk about all issues that came up related to Berlin. The Soviets really had an inconsistency to deal with because they wanted to have their cake and eat it also. They wanted to support the position of their ally the GDR but also still be regarded as one of four occupying powers of Berlin that had special privileges in West Berlin, such as access, a role in quadripartite discussions and so on. So they supported the GDR publicly but not always privately. A lot of things I talked about with my Soviet counterpart consisted of problems caused by the GDR-impeding our access to East Berlin via Checkpoint Charlie, causing problems through new restrictions on the air or road corridors to West Berlin and so on. The Soviets would usually say that it was none of their business and that we had to talk to the GDR, but then they would go ahead and help resolve the problem by bringing the East Germans into line. It was a continual tug of war. There was also another category of problems I dealt with, and those were problems caused by the Soviets in West Berlin. We recognized privileged Soviet access to West Berlin because this stemmed from our interpretation of Berlin's status and we wanted the same privileges in East Berlin but of course we kept a close watch on them when they came. The problems that arose varied from drunken Soviet soldiers getting into bar fights to clear cases of attempted espionage by Soviet personnel from East Berlin. I remember one instance where I had to call my counterpart in the middle of the night, and we expelled two Soviet military officers for attempted espionage. They were caught red-handed trying to buy information from U.S. military personnel. In these cases, we would turn them over to Soviet authorities with a protest, and the Soviets would give a pro forma protest in return. We would not arrest them because we did recognize a type of diplomatic immunity for all occupying powers in all of Berlin, so we just kicked them out of the Western sectors. Toward the end of my time, we had another kind of incident-Polish hijackings of aircraft to West Berlin. They became a favorite way for Poles to escape from Poland, and we must have had six or seven toward the end of my Berlin tour.

Q: Was this a result of martial law in Poland?

PERINA: Yes, the country was moving toward martial law, and a lot of Poles were trying to get out because they saw a big crackdown coming. One of the favorite ways to escape was to hijack a plane and fly to West Berlin where they would land at Tempelhof airport and become our responsibility because it was in the U.S. sector. The distance from Poland to West Berlin was very short, and for Poles it was the closest thing to reaching American custody and protection. We had a number of these, mostly commercial airliners from LOT but also private planes, crop dusters and so on. We soon had a set routine of dealing with them. We would hold the crew and passengers overnight and question them, giving everyone the option of staying in the West or returning to Poland. We made a point of always punishing the hijacker or hijackers because we didn't want to condone hijacking, but they were handed over to German courts and often received fairly light sentences, though these did usually include imprisonment. There was an internal debate we had after the first hijacking on whether the hijackers should be tried by us, by the Americans, in courts that we establish. This was consistent with our position on the rights of the occupying powers but in practice promised to be extremely complicated. We would have had to set up a court, fly in judges, and so on. In the end, we decided it was easier to hand the hijackers over to the Germans for punishment. But the punishment was light enough that hijackers kept coming, and the Polish authorities were very frustrated by their inability to stop this. They started putting undercover air marshals on LOT flights, sometimes several on a flight, and usually the air marshals themselves were very tempted to stay in the West, if only because they were in big trouble for allowing the hijacking to happen.

There were many emotional experiences at these all-night sessions with people who suddenly found themselves in the West and faced the unexpected decision of whether to stay or go back to Poland. These were ordinary Poles who happened to be on the airplane but once they were in our sector, they knew that if they chose to stay we would allow them to do so. Sometimes you could see families debating through the night what to do because it was clearly a momentous life decision. Quite a few chose to stay, though I do not have the statistics. This was primarily on the commercial flights that came in. We also had some hijackings by people who would take crop dusters or similar small aircraft and just fly out. One fellow got an old plane somewhere, painted red stars on it so that it wouldn't be shot down, and used a roadmap to find Berlin, flying just several hundred feet above the road. The ingenuity was amazing.

One interesting thing in my dealings with the Soviets that I forgot to mention consisted of visits to their Embassy in East Berlin. The Embassy was and remains still this huge building on the famous avenue Unter den Linden. Once my Soviet counterpart gave me a tour of the building, starting with an enormous marble staircase in the lobby. He asked me: "Do you know where that marble comes from?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, that is marble that Hitler was taking to Moscow to build a monument celebrating his victory over the Soviet Union. We brought it back here and made it into the staircase of the Soviet Embassy in Berlin." I don't know if that's an apocryphal story or not. It sounds apocryphal, but it's also very Soviet. There was also a chair in a reception room on the second floor where some visitors were taken. It was an old leather chair, and he told me to sit in it and asked, "Do you know what chair that is?" And I said, "No." He said, "Well, that was Hitler's favorite chair from the Reichskanzlei." I mean, a lot of people would not be proud to have Hitler's chair or to put you into Hitler's chair but clearly the Soviets took pride in this, an ever present reminder of how they had beaten the Nazis.

Q: Did you get any sense from the diplomats you dealt with that things were beginning to loosen up in the Soviet Union?

PERINA: Not really, and the developments in Poland suggested the opposite. But one thing that I began to perceive and that really became apparent in my next assignment at NATO was how very scared the Soviets were becoming of American technological know-how, and particularly of SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative). This was about the time that SDI was coming into the news as part of Reagan's plan to make nuclear weapons obsolete. It was, of course, very controversial, with much debate on whether it was really possible to build a shield against nuclear attack that would take away the threat of nuclear war. But I can tell you that the Soviets I dealt with took it very seriously and seemed very concerned about getting into a high-tech competition with the United States. The glory of the Sputnik was long past, the computer age was beginning, and the Soviets sensed that they were very far behind. They also realized that their strength as a world power came from possession of nuclear weapons, and not from their GDP or anything else. Without the clout of nuclear weapons, they would be in big trouble, and they realized this. Already in Berlin my Soviet counterpart would turn social conversations to SDI and try to argue why the U.S. should abandon the effort. Since neither of us had any responsibility for this issue, it was clear to me that his comments came from generic talking points that all Soviet diplomats had been instructed to use whenever possible.

This was, of course, within the context of the big debate in Germany about NATO deployment of intermediate range nuclear weapons (INF) to counter the SS-20 missiles deployed by the Soviets. It was a huge controversy during my time in Germany because there was much European opposition. When President Reagan visited Berlin while I was there, we had huge demonstrations against him by Germans opposed to INF deployment. So these nuclear issues were very much on the table during this period, and while East-West relations were stable in Berlin, there was a lot of tension in the broader U.S.-Soviet relationship.

Q: Did you have problems with American soldiers getting loose in the Eastern zone and getting into trouble?

PERINA: Well there were incidents like this, but fewer than one would imagine because of fairly strict regulations on U.S. soldiers going to East Berlin. I don't recall any specific protests from the Soviets of this nature. By and large, our military was quite disciplined and responsible, and there were far more opportunities to get into trouble in West Berlin without the need to cross into the East.

Q: Who was the American Ambassador at this time?

PERINA: It was Arthur Burns, our Ambassador in Bonn. He had two hats. He was our Ambassador to the FRG in Bonn, but he was also the head of the U.S. Mission to West Berlin. So he also had two Soviet counterparts-the Soviet Ambassador in Bonn and the Soviet Ambassador in East Berlin on Berlin issues. There was a tradition that every six months there was a lunch on Berlin issues between the U.S. Ambassador and the Soviet Ambassador. Because I was the working-level liaison to the Soviets on these issues, and because I knew Russian, I was asked shortly after my arrival to serve as the U.S. interpreter at one such lunch, and I ended up doing it for my entire time in Berlin. In fact, once I was even asked to fly to Bonn and interpret at a lunch that Ambassador Burns had with his Russian counterpart in Bonn. But usually I interpreted at the Berlin lunches, which alternated between East and West Berlin. The way it worked was that both Ambassadors brought an interpreter, and the Russian fellow interpreted English into Russian and I did Russian into English. This was easiest for both of us because neither I nor the Russian, I think, were professional interpreters. But it worked well and allowed me to participate at all the lunches.

The first Soviet Ambassador for whom I interpreted was Piotr Abrassimov, who was a Berlin institution. He was a very senior Soviet Ambassador, an expert on Berlin who had negotiated the 1971 Quadripartite Agreement. After he departed, he was replaced in East Berlin by Vyacheslav Kochemasov, a less influential Ambassador for whom I also interpreted at these lunches. The lunches were fun to do, although I learned that interpreters rarely get a chance to eat and should not even try. The amazing thing about the lunches, however, was how little substance was actually discussed between the two Ambassadors. To be sure, there were always a few points that we wanted Arthur Burns to raise, and the Soviets would have their counterpoints if we raised our points, but by and large the lunches were social events. This was perhaps a reflection of how stable the situation around Berlin had become.

Q: Were you picking up any feel about East Germany from the place where you sat, any sense that the East German government was having a hard time trying to control the internal situation in the GDR?

PERINA: We didn't really sense that for the simple reason that we tried to avoid dealing with the East Germans. That was the job of our Embassy in East Berlin, and we tried to stick to dealing with the Soviets and with the West Germans. We dealt with the West Germans because we recognized that Berlin was a German city and the occupation would someday end, but technically we had sovereignty in West Berlin and only delegated the governing of the city to the Germans. My second job in Berlin, during the last two years of my tour, was in fact what was called the "Senate Liaison Officer." This was the liaison to the West Berlin government. I had an office and permanent staff in the West Berlin city hall, as did my French and British counterparts. The German city government had to regularly inform us of developments, and we-that is the Allies-had to concur with legislation passed by the Berlin senate. Of course, for the most part we did, and a lot of this had become routinized but it was still a unique situation for a diplomat.

Another example of this was that as Protocol Officer I and my French and British counterparts always went to the airport to greet the West German President whenever he came to Berlin and to say good-bye when he was leaving. This was to make the point that he was visiting somewhere that was not a part of West Germany, and that we the Allies were in fact the hosts in Berlin. The Presidents, who in my time were Richard von Weizsacker and Karl Carstens, were always very polite and cordial as we shook hands but they must have hated this ritualistic reminder that Berlin was not a part of their country. Actually, the Protocol Officers hated it as well as a real nuisance, but it was a Berlin tradition.

But the Bonn government of course played a very large role in Berlin and was the de facto government. One interesting aspect of this was the great rivalry in Berlin between the two Germanys-East and West. The West Germans put a huge amount of money into Berlin to keep the city prosperous, deter people from leaving and build this Western showcase in the middle of the GDR. Much of the city and its cultural life were subsidized by Bonn. This included everything from the universities to the opera, theater and museums. Even in the private sector, this magnificent department store, the Kaufhaus des Westens or KaDeWe as it was called, with its food section that included thousands of different cheeses and sausages, was a political statement designed to show the difference between East and West. The West German government also paid for all the operating expenses of the three Western powers in Berlin, including things like housing and furniture. Of course, in return West Germans were getting the defense of West Berlin so it was still a pretty good deal for them.

Q: We talked about the Soviets. What about the French and the British? They had their own sectors and did you get involved with them?

PERINA: We coordinated very closely with the French and the British. As a matter of fact, we even had our own telegraphic network in Berlin that connected the British, the French and the U.S. Missions in West Berlin so we could very quickly send confidential messages to one another. You have to remember that this was before the internet. It was another unique aspect of Berlin that I had not seen elsewhere. This was a classified network, just like the State Department's classified telegraphic system. The rule on the system was that messages could be sent in either English or French. Of course, the French always sent us messages in French whereas we and the British always sent messages in English. Once on April 1 the U.S. Minister, Nelson Ledsky, a man with a good sense of humor, sent out a message I drafted to the French and the British saying that we had received new instructions from Washington and were no longer allowed to receive messages in French because of the delay in translating them during possible crises. The French fell for it and got very upset before realizing it was April 1. But on your question, the coordination was very good among the three Western allies, and we had very few disagreements.

Q: What about relations with our Embassy in East Berlin? Did you have much contact with it?

PERINA: Not particularly but we coordinated as colleagues. The U.S. Ambassador in East Berlin during my time was Roz Ridgway who later became Assistant Secretary for European Affairs. As happens bureaucratically, there was an element of rivalry between the Mission in West Berlin and the Embassy in East Berlin, especially in reporting to Washington. If it was a Berlin issue, we were supposed to report it. If it was an East German issue, the Embassy was supposed to report it. Clearly, there was sometimes overlap on specific issues and disagreement over who had action. But it was rarely serious and perhaps contributed to a healthy competition that improved overall reporting.

Q: Did you feel under any menace or threat during your time in Berlin as a result of East-West relations?

PERINA: Not really. If you had asked me, I and I think most others would have answered that the Berlin situation was very stable and likely to continue unchanged for a long time into the future. We didn't feel any menace in the Cold War context. Nobody seriously thought that there was going to be a World War III or an invasion of Berlin by the Warsaw Pact. Where we felt a certain degree of menace was from radical West German groups.

Q: The Baader-Meinhof gang?

PERINA: Exactly. The Baader-Meinhof gang and its off-shoots and imitators. There had long been attacks against West German political figures and businessman, and a number had taken place in Berlin. Although it had seemed that Americans were not targeted, the 1980's brought a significant rise in anti-Americanism as a result of the INF deployment debate. Berlin also had a reputation as a haven for West German radicals because students and young people living there were exempt from the draft. We had growing concerns about terrorist attacks against U.S. interests from such groups, although nothing serious happened during my time.

Q: Well, you left Berlin in 1986?

PERINA: 1985.

Q: I assume you knew that there would only be four more years of the Berlin Wall and then the entire Cold War would come to a screeching end.

PERINA: Well, on the contrary, I thought that what I had learned about the theology of Berlin would guarantee me employment for the rest of my career in the State Department. There were not many people who knew the ins and outs of Berlinery, the rules of the corridors and so on. I thought this was valuable knowledge that would always serve me well and make me a permanent expert on Berlin. Of course, within five years it was totally worthless except to the historians.

Q: So from 1985 until 1987 you were at the NATO Mission in Brussels. What did you do there?

PERINA: I was a political officer and the Deputy U.S. Representative to the Political Committee of NATO. I had a number of other portfolios, among which were the nuclear and space talks in Geneva. President Reagan started this negotiation. The talks were basically three simultaneous negotiations on START, INF and SDI, headed by Max Kampelman on our side. Kampelman was the overall delegation head and did the SDI talks, Mike Glitman headed the INF discussions, and Senator John Tower headed the START team. It was intended as a comprehensive arms control discussion between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Because the talks were bilateral but related directly to NATO policies, the three negotiators regularly came up to Brussels from Geneva to brief the North Atlantic Council. At the beginning, they came every month or two, though the pace slackened as the talks started bogging down. Nonetheless, I was always the control officer for these visits, as well as for a number of visits by President Reagan, who came to NATO several times for summit-level meetings of the Council.

As I said earlier, this is where I saw further evidence of what an important issue SDI was to the Soviet Union. Everything that Max Kampelman and the negotiators reported to NATO bore this out. The Soviets were very afraid of SDI and wanted desperately to find ways of stopping or restricting it. But it was something that Reagan-rightly or wrongly-believed in very strongly and would not negotiate away.

Q: I recall that at one point Reagan made a proposal to share the technology with the Soviets so that we could each stop the other's missiles.

PERINA: Right. But the Soviets were convinced it was a trick. They could not believe that we would really share such technology with them, since they would never share it with us if tables were turned.

Q: Were you getting the sense that the advent of the computer age and high tech was playing into this?

PERINA: This is exactly what I was going to say. You have to put this in the context of the revolution that was taking place in the United States and in the West, with average people starting to acquire personal computers, and kids growing up at home and in school with computer skills. The Soviets saw all this, and they were terrified. Their own kids were still working with an abacus in most of their schools. They saw themselves falling behind technologically in a way that would be qualitative and devastating. They never expressed it that way but one could sense it in talks with them. I was not an expert on SDI. I didn't know if it would or would not work. But I saw it as a useful ploy to motivate the Soviets to change to a freer, more open system that could keep pace with Western technological development. Their closed, authoritarian system just could not do that. In conversations, they always tried to pick up on Western skepticism and say "Well, SDI won't work and even your own experts say it won't work." But I would answer something like "Well, you know, if you can build a missile that can fly 5000 miles and hit a square block, don't you think it would be easier to find some way to throw that missile off course?" They were very scared that this was indeed true and we would beat them to doing it.

Q: What was your impression of the NATO apparatus? You had been working with two other allies in Berlin but this was now the entire Alliance trying to work in tandem.

PERINA: My overwhelming impression from NATO was that this was basically a U.S. run organization. One could really sense that. Most of the Allies were quite deferential to the United States, the French always being a certain exception. In fact, most of the delegates at NATO tended to be even more pro-American than their governments, or at least they tried to give us that impression. In my time, we never had a really heated discussion at NATO, even though I think many Allies were skeptical of some of our policies such as INF deployment and SDI. Whenever Kampelman and his colleagues came up, the questions were invariably softball in nature. NATO was a club and largely our club. It was a very friendly environment for the U.S.

Q: What was your impression at the time of how much chance the nuclear and space talks had of succeeding?

PERINA: The talks never got very far. The Soviets could not stop either SDI or INF deployment. The major obstacle to INF was Western European resistance, not Moscow. Eventually arms control talks were all overtaken by events when the Warsaw Pact and later the Soviet Union came apart. It was a whole new ballgame.

Q: From your vantage point, how did you view Reagan and his presidency?

PERINA: When I was at NATO I didn't know that my next assignment would be the National Security Council where I would work with him much more closely. At NATO, I had mixed views. He certainly came into office with very hardline, conservative views that gave me concern. The Iran Contra scandal, which happened while I was at NATO, was likewise cause for worry about his presidency. But I also felt that some of his ideas, like SDI, were quite astute tactically, whether or not they could actually be implemented. So it was a mixed picture, and I had mixed views. But I did not feel I really knew him well until I worked on the National Security Council staff, to which I was recruited from NATO in 1987.

Q: So you were on the NSC staff from 1987 to 1989. What were your responsibilities there?

PERINA: I came in partly as a result of Iran Contra. There was a big purge at the NSC, and many people left. It was not just Ollie North, Fawn Hall and those linked to Iran Contra but others as well. There was a new National Security Advisor, Frank Carlucci, and a sense that he should have a new team. He brought in Colin Powell as his deputy, and Powell interviewed me for the job. Later, Powell was replaced by John Negroponte, whom I also got to know well.

Q: Did you have contacts on the NSC staff or how were you chosen to work there?

PERINA: Well, as is often the case in this business, it did come from contacts. The new Senior NSC Director for Soviet and European affairs was a think tank Soviet expert named Fritz Ermarth. He chose as his deputy an FSO named Nelson Ledsky, who had been the Minister and my boss in Berlin for four years. Nelson called me at NATO and asked me to come and work on the staff on Soviet and East European issues. I flew back to Washington to interview with Colin Powell and got the job, which required me to curtail at NATO after only two years.

Within a few months I was working at the NSC, and one of the first issues that came up was the visit of President Reagan to Berlin. This was the visit when he made the "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate; Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall" speech. We were working on the speech during my first week in the NSC and got into a terrible fight with the State Department. The Department was very much opposed to this passage in the speech, and Tom Simons as Deputy Assistant Secretary in the European Bureau spearheaded the effort to have it deleted. The State Department's objection was not to the phrases "Open this gate, tear down this wall." Rather, the Department objected to saying "Mr. Gorbachev." They did not want to personalize the words to Gorbachev in fear that this would be a direct challenge and target him in front of all the Kremlin hardliners. Generally, we in the NSC thought the State Department was being unduly cautious, as is often its reputation. Ultimately, the issue went to President Reagan, and he decided to keep "Mr. Gorbachev." The world did not come to an end, and, as you know, the speech is now one of Reagan's most famous ones. But I quickly learned how working on the NSC could put me at odds with colleagues in the State Department.

Q: After the Iran Contra affair, was there a feeling in the NSC that things had to be done differently than before? Was there a sense that we really got into a mess and cannot let this happen again?

PERINA: There was a sense of a new beginning because of the many personnel changes and the new leadership of Frank Carlucci and Colin Powell. It was really a very different institution from the one before, and it was assumed that the Poindexter/Ollie North era was past. I think we were fortunate in that a very good team came in. Carlucci was a good administrator, and Colin Powell was, I think, an outstanding leader. It confirmed my view that the military does much better than the State Department in teaching leadership and management skills. In part, this is because most FSO's have very little opportunity to manage and supervise others until at least the mid-career level, whereas in the military one is both subordinate and supervisor almost from the beginning. Even in the military, of course, Powell was far above the norm and an outstanding leader. He knew how to keep up morale and supervise without micromanaging. So I think even the people who were holdovers from the Poindexter era recognized that this was a new NSC that would be run differently. In the job I took I replaced Paula Dobriansky, a political appointee who went on to senior jobs in the State Department.

Q: You had the Soviet portfolio on the staff?

PERINA: Basically, yes. The Senior Director of the office when I arrived was also a Soviet expert, Fritz Ermarth, but I did the working-level issues of which there were many concerning the Soviet Union. Ermarth left after about a year and was replaced by his deputy, Nelson Ledsky, who was not a trained Soviet expert. So I took on more of the portfolio in the office and became the primary Soviet person.

Q: Let's take it when you arrived. You had been away from the Soviet Union since 1981. You had been on the periphery of Soviet issues but now you were directly involved again. How did you see the Soviet Union when you arrived at the NSC in 1987, as opposed to when you left Moscow?

PERINA: When I arrived at the NSC there was a big ongoing debate within the government on trying to interpret Gorbachev, trying to understand if he was a genuine reformer or just playing a very sophisticated game. The opinion was divided. Some people thought he was a genuine reformer, while others thought he was playing us and we had to be very wary of the guy.

Q: Speaking of intelligence, we had spent millions of dollars getting intelligence about the Soviet Union and yet we did not seem to be able to predict the complete collapse of the system. Was there anybody you knew who was saying that the Soviet Union would collapse?

PERINA: No. Nobody that I knew at this time suspected that the Soviet Union was going to collapse. It seemed so out of the realm of the possible that it was not even part of any discussion. There was one person whom I knew at this time who told me that the Soviet Union might come apart, and his name was Paul Goble. He was an expert on Soviet nationalities and ethnic groups. He was sort of an advisor and think tank person who was in and out of government but he was probably the greatest expert in the U.S. on nationality groups within the Soviet Union. He told me that there was a rise of nationalism among all Soviet ethnic groups and a chance that this could lead to the Soviet Union splitting apart in the not-too-distant future. Very frankly, nobody believed it, and Paul got little attention from the government. We were all watching the top, the Kremlin, and could not imagine that this empire would crack from below.

In retrospect, of course, the Soviet Union came apart from both the top and the bottom, but we did not pay enough attention to the internal situation, and particularly to the nationality issues. We focused on Kremlinology, security issues, the economy and so on, but we clearly missed something vital that was happening within the country and that made it so vulnerable to the changes Gorbachev initiated. The Soviet dissidents were more aware of this, but no one took them seriously. After all, Adam Amalrik published his book Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984? already in 1970, but we did not see a collapse coming even in the late 1980's. Of course, in fairness, this is how history usually works. If we had seen the collapse coming, the Politburo would have seen it also and would have tried to so something about it. The collapse was not inevitable at this particular time in history. To some degree, all momentous events are unpredictable because otherwise there are always those who would try to stop or alter them before they become certain.

Q: Where did you find yourself on the Gorbachev debate? Did you see him as a reformist, a con man or what?

PERINA: My views developed over time. At first, I though he was something in between a reformer and a con man. The two are not mutually exclusive. But I did not anticipate that he would do the kinds of things that he did do. I did not think he would set in train events that would make the Soviet Union come apart. Of course, he did not expect to do those things also. But when the time came, he allowed them to happen and made the right decisions. That is what counts. In retrospect, I think he's an enormously important historical figure, among the most important of our time.

Q: What about the views of Ronald Reagan on the subject? They seem to have evolved as well.

PERINA: Yes, they did. Jumping ahead a little, toward the end of my tour in the NSC, I accompanied Reagan to Moscow, to the 1988 Moscow summit which was Reagan's only visit to Moscow as president. I in fact was one of the two note takers in the one-on-one sessions between Reagan and Gorbachev in Moscow. They call them one-on-one sessions but in reality they are four on four sessions because every president has an interpreter and two note takers so there are three people on each side plus the president. I was one of the note takers together with Tom Simons who was Deputy Assistant Secretary in the European Bureau. I raise these meetings because they were the direct opportunity I had to see Reagan and Gorbachev interact. Even at the Moscow summit, which was late in Reagan's presidency, there was a lot of tension between the two men. Gorbachev did play games and he did try to trick Reagan in certain ways. One was the old Soviet trick of trying to get agreement on broad and vague declarations that sounded very innocent and innocuous, all motherhood and apple pie, and when you read them you would say, how could anyone oppose something like this? But then you could see that if you signed them the Soviets would find interpretations for the various declaratory statements and come back and try to circumscribe and limit specific policy options on the grounds that they went counter to the broad principles. Basically, this related to the different negotiating styles of the Soviets and the US. The Soviets had a deductive style of negotiation. They would want to agree on a broad principle and then go down and see how it applied to concrete action. The U.S. generally had an inductive style of negotiation. We would look at specific problems and practical things and say what broad agreement does this require or what principle do we need to regulate this? You could see this difference in negotiating patterns in Moscow because Gorbachev in the one-on-one sessions did try to get Reagan to agree to such broad declaratory language. In the first session, he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and tried to get Reagan's concurrence on the spot. The paper was essentially a set of broad declarations that appeared innocent. But it was all based on this tactic that you try to get agreement on principles, and then you use those principles to limit your opponent, limit the scope of action of what your opponent can do.

Gorbachev tried this in Moscow, and he clearly felt intellectually superior to Reagan. He would sometimes look at us, the note takers, after making a point with this expression that seemed to say: Wasn't that a good point? See how smart I am! But by the time of the Moscow summit Reagan had learned that Gorbachev tried to do these kinds of things, and he would not agree to any of these declarations without his advisors present. He would politely resist, even though it was difficult for him. Reagan was actually a real gentleman who felt very uneasy in becoming adversarial or saying no to someone. He was very polite. But by the time of the Moscow summit, when his relationship with Gorbachev was much better than in the early years, he still did not trust the man and he knew his own limits-that he should not agree to any document without the advice of his staff.

Q: Did you sense concern on the part of the staff that Reagan would agree to things he should not? Did they give him warnings before he went into meetings and so on?

PERINA: There was an incident earlier in Reagan's presidency when he was tricked like this by Gorbachev, and by the time of the Moscow summit he had learned to be wary of these tactics. But of course there was always some concern among all of us that he might be tricked again in these one-on-one sessions. Reagan had good instincts but he clearly did not have the grasp of substance that Gorbachev had. He was also vulnerable because he was basically a nice guy who hated to say no. One of his strengths, however, was that he knew his limitations. For the most part, he listened to and followed his advisors. It was probably why he was misled in the Iran-Contra affair, but it also prevented him from getting into trouble on many occasions. Reagan was a great person to work for because he did use the talking points prepared for him. He used these 3 x 5 cards but those were his lines and he read his lines. I mean, he was an actor. He was trained to deliver his lines. It was a fascinating experience because I used to write these lines and, whereas with many people you never knew if they were going to be used and probably nine times out of ten they were not used, with President Reagan there was a very good chance that what you put on that 3 x 5 card is exactly what he would say. I was in a lot of the Oval Office meetings, and sometimes you could see that if there was something critical or negative in Reagan's talking points, he really hated to say it, but in the end he usually did. He would say it because it was on his card and because he knew he was expected to say it. In that respect he was a pleasure to work for, especially to a mid-level officer who was writing the President's lines.

This was, of course, very different from my experience working with most other senior people. For example, I worked for the first Bush, for George Bush and he was quite the opposite. You could write a briefing book for him and you would never know if he would look at it or not because he felt he knew the issues, and he very rarely used the talking points that were given to him. Reagan learned his lines because he knew his limitations on substance and details. But Reagan, at least in my view, had pretty good instincts on larger issues, like SDI or the Soviet Union. And these came from Reagan himself, not from his advisors, who were often flustered by them.

Q: I interviewed somebody who was at the White House who talked about how nervous some of his handlers would be when he was alone with either Brian Mulroney or Margaret Thatcher. No one knew what he would be saying.

PERINA: That may be true with Margaret Thatcher because they were such friends. He trusted her and did not feel obliged to stick to his lines. But in most instances I think Reagan could be trusted more than a real expert on foreign policy like Henry Kissinger. Kissinger felt he needed no one. With him, you never really knew what would be done or agreed to behind closed doors. And you would probably never find out, unless you trusted his memoirs.

Q: Advisors always tend to be nervous when principals get together. What are they saying and what are they doing?

PERINA: They were certainly worried in Moscow at those on-on-one sessions. During that Moscow summit there were two one-on-one sessions and then there were two plenary sessions. The plenary sessions involved the whole delegation, including the Secretary of State, the National Security Adviser, and so on. It was a dozen people or so. Those plenary sessions I actually wasn't involved in. I was in the small one-on-one meetings where Gorbachev did try to get these broad declarations. But Reagan resisted. In the end, the sessions became largely non-substantive discussions, and I can't say that any dramatic things were agreed or disagreed.

Q: Well, during this time what were you picking up from your colleagues about Gorbachev? Was it becoming clearer who he who he was and what he was up to?

PERINA: There was a growing sense that he was something quite significant and that there were important ways in which he really wanted to change things. But certainly no one, including Gorbachev, expected the Soviet Union to fall apart. And this was in 1988, quite near to the end of the Soviet empire. People believed that Gorbachev knew the Soviet Union was in trouble economically and technologically and could not compete with the U.S. and thus he was trying to buy time so that the Soviet Union could be strengthened again. I think that was the dominant view of Gorbachev. But there was still a lot of debate on this. The CIA even hired a psychologist to study Gorbachev's physical gestures and body language to try to get insight into his personality. I spoke with the man, who knew no Russian, but had studied hours of silent films of Gorbachev to try to figure him out. As I recall, he did not come up with any particularly revealing insights.

Q: Well, let's go back to the NSC at the time. In earlier years, under Nixon and then under Carter, you had Henry Kissinger and Brzezinski who both had strong opinions and were very strong operators. By the time you got there you have Frank Carlucci and Colin Powell. This is quite a different NSC.

PERINA: Yes, I think that's true, and that's more like it should be. The NSC was not dominating over the State Department as it was in the Kissinger years. There was a good relationship with George Schultz who I think was an excellent Secretary of State.

Q: Did you get any feel about the influence of the Pentagon? Casper Weinberger was still there. Did you find that there was a pressure there to overplay the Soviet menace to keep up defense budgets and so on?

PERINA: I wouldn't single out the Pentagon because I think in all the departments, as well as in the CIA, there was a conservative side of the house that was still arguing, look, we can't let our guard down. Gorbachev is one man and he can't change the Soviet system. The missiles are still all there, the generals are still all there. We have to keep our guard up. My first boss in the NSC, Fritz Ermarth, was sympathetic to this view. Before the Moscow Summit, we made a lot of effort to try to prepare Reagan for this trip, even to the point that we asked the CIA to make a film for him about Moscow and about the sites he would be visiting. We thought he could particularly relate to a movie. The CIA did make a film under NSC bidding, albeit reluctantly because they seemed to feel it was not part of their mission, and the film was actually pretty disappointing. It was a bunch of clips from travelogues. I remember this because I organized it. I also organized a lunch for him with Soviet experts from all over the United States, academics and outside people ranging from Jim Billington to Richard Pipes. We got them to the White House for lunch with the President. The reason I raise this is because even at this lunch he got a very wide range of interpretations of Gorbachev and his objectives. So it was not surprising that the government also had diverging views.

The lunch and the film were interesting, however, because they showed how excited Reagan was about his trip to Moscow, and how extensively he wanted to prepare for it. He did somehow see it as a culmination of his presidency. One little anecdote. The first one-on-one meeting at the summit was held in the Kremlin, and it was the first meeting in Moscow between Reagan and Gorbachev as well as between Nancy Reagan and Raisa Gorbachev. The scenario was that the two couples would meet together and then the presidents and first ladies would split up for separate meetings. Tom Simons and I had to follow behind Reagan because we were going to be the note takers in the meeting of the presidents. The Soviets always had a way to add drama to these events, and when we arrived at the Kremlin, there was a very high narrow staircase that Reagan and Nancy were supposed to climb in order to meet Gorbachev and Raisa at the top. You could see the Soviet psychology behind it: the U.S. President starts at the bottom and has to walk up to meet Gorbachev. In any case, Reagan and Nancy were walking up the staircase and Tom and I were about 30 feet behind. It was a closed off staircase so I am not sure that Reagan and Nancy were aware that anyone was watching them. In the middle of the staircase they stopped and looked at one another, and then Reagan took Nancy's hand and they walked up the rest of the way holding hands. It was a minor thing but actually very touching because one could sense that they both felt that this was a very special moment for them.

Q: But when you talked about the one-on-one, you said there wasn't very much substance.

PERINA: That is true. I wrote most of the talking points for Reagan, and we tried to prepare him to raise issues that he could handle and that would not give openings to Gorbachev to play mischief. So we wanted him to raise the more philosophical issues, particularly freedom of religion, which he liked as an issue and understood. This was still a time when there were church problems in the Soviet Union, persecution of believers and so on. So I wrote a number of talking points for him on freedom of religion, and I remember one passage that said, "A person's love for his religion and for his country is like a person's love for his children and his parents. They are different and complement each other and need not be in conflict." The idea was, of course, that the state should not feel threatened by the church and by people's devotion to the church. Well, Reagan did raise freedom of religion and there was a brief discussion of it although the above line was never used. This is the kind of general discussion Reagan wanted to have, whereas Gorbachev quickly pulled the declaration of principles out of his pocket and wanted to get agreement on the document. This was the range of the one-on-one meetings.

Q: This is not to denigrate these meetings because it is important just to have the two leaders talking to one another.

PERINA: That is exactly right. The meetings are important. Indeed, by the time of the Moscow summit I think Reagan had changed his view of the Soviet Union as an evil empire primarily because of his meetings with Gorbachev. He gave a speech in Moscow in which he tried to nuance the evil empire phrase and explain that he had really been speaking about the system and not the people. So leaders getting to know one another and developing their views is very important, even if no substance is discussed.

Q: Did you have any contact with the note takers or the handlers on the other side?

PERINA: No. They were probably some NSC equivalents, and under the circumstances we just didn't have a chance to interact at all. The interpreters knew one another because they were the same at almost all of the meetings.

Q: How did you feel overall about this summit?

PERINA: I think it was a useful summit and important symbolically. In the perception of people, it did a lot to reduce the sense of confrontation from Reagan's first term. It influenced Reagan, and I think it influenced Russians about Reagan. He did a lot of things on the trip. He went to a university there, he went to churches, he strolled through Red Square with Gorbachev, he made a lot of speeches and appearances, and I think it did change the dynamics of the relationship and made the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union less dangerous for everyone.

Q: Is there anything else we should talk about from your NSC days?

PERINA: Perhaps just one thing. One of my portfolios at the NSC was also Eastern Europe. I made a trip to Poland with then Vice President George Bush, and I also visited the region in early 1988 with Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead, who had been given a special brief by George Shultz to follow events there. We made stops that included Sofia, Bucharest, Budapest, Bratislava and Prague. The most interesting of these was the stop in Romania where we took away MFN (Most-Favored Nation Tariff Status) from Ceausescu. Of course, Ceausescu knew what was coming and actually renounced MFN about an hour before meeting with Whitehead, so we could not actually take it away. But I will never forget what a desperate place Romania was under his leadership in those years. There was no heat, no electricity and hardly anything in food shops. People in the Foreign Ministry wore overcoats in their offices. I wandered into a bookshop and almost the only books available were those written by Ceausescu or his wife Elena. Most striking was the fear that everyone so clearly had in their eyes, from people on the street up to officials around Ceausescu. Even we were aggressively followed everywhere by secret police who made no effort to hide their presence. I think it was the closest experience I have had to what it must have been like to live under Stalin in his last years when he went a bit insane and instituted a cult of personality and reign of terror. We were only there about two days but the experience was unforgettable. I have never seen anything equally depressing.

Q: You left the NSC when?

PERINA: I left in the spring of 1989. After George Bush came in I was still at the NSC for a couple of months and then I left.

Q: Was there any sense in the NSC that the change from a president to his vice president would bring any big changes in policy?

PERINA: Not really, except that we all thought that the Vice President coming in after the President would result in a friendly takeover of the NSC. That did not become the case. I guess it showed the frustration of the vice presidency. George Bush was pretty marginalized as Vice President, and he and Brent Scowcroft did pretty much of a clean sweep in changing the NSC.

Q: I remember the story about the transition team at the State Department which was full of people who helped Bush in the election campaign. When Alexander Haig came in as Secretary of State there was a reception for them in the Department and Haig said, "Thank you very much and good luck," and someone else said "You and you and you stay and the rest of you leave."

PERINA: Politics is a tough game. But Reagan really was a gentleman. A one minute story about what sort of a person he was. The first time I met him I was going into the Oval Office as a note taker with a delegation, and I had learned that as a note taker you stay out of the way. You are not in the receiving line and you sneak into a chair at the back and sit down and take notes. So that's what I did. We all sat down and Reagan looked around and realized that I hadn't been in the reception line and that he hadn't shaken my hand. He got up and went across the room to me to shake my hand. Of course, as a mid-level FSO, I was pretty startled that the President got up and went across the room to shake my hand. Probably he did not realize that I was the note taker, but it was still indicative of the kind of person he was. Whether one agreed or disagreed with his policies, he was a gentleman.

Q: So in 1989 after George Bush took office, where did you go?

PERINA: Well, I did two short assignments for CSCE and then one long one. The short ones were that I was the deputy head of the U.S. delegations to the London Information Forum and then to the Paris Conference on the Human Dimension. Both of these were about month-long meetings, what were called "experts' meetings" in the CSCE. The London one was headed by Leonard Marks, former director of USIA, and the Paris one was headed by Morris Abrams, the well-known human rights lawyer. I was the deputy to both men. This was in the spring of 1989. Then in the fall we moved to Vienna for three years, where I was the deputy head of the delegation to the CSCE conference on Confidence and Security-Building Measures in Europe, or CSBM. This all gets a bit technical, and I know these are a lot of acronyms. The interesting part about Vienna was that this is the vantage point we had when the Cold War ended.

Q: OK, in 1989 you're going to the CSCE in Vienna. Can you explain what that was and what you were doing there?

PERINA: We discussed the CSCE earlier because I had worked on that during my first tour in Washington. Since I had this experience, I was chosen by Jack Maresca to be his deputy for the CSBM talks in Vienna. He was the Ambassador, and I was the deputy with the title of Representative. He had been one of the original negotiators of the Helsinki Final Act and was really an expert on the document. And the CSBM talks were a parallel negotiation to the CFE talks in Vienna, which were under the CSCE umbrella but involved only the members of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Have I lost you completely by now?

Q: No, but explain what the CFE was.

PERINA: CFE stood for the negotiations on Conventional Forces in Europe, and that was a negotiation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact to reduce conventional forces on the continent. It developed from the old Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction Talks or MBFR that had hit a dead end. At the same time, the CSBM talks were intended to be for all 35 CSCE countries, including the neutral and non-aligned countries, in pursuing confidence-building military measures. The talks had to be separated because the participants were different and also the CFE concerned reductions whereas CSBM talks were largely confidence-building. The head of the U.S. delegation to the CFE talks was Jim Woolsey, later to be CIA Director.

I was in Vienna three years with Jack Maresca, and we negotiated a CSBM agreement but also then initiated the talks on transforming the CSCE after the end of the Cold War into the OSCE or Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Before it had been the Conference and then it became the Organization. This was actually an important development because the U.S. had long resisted any institutionalization of CSCE. We had always feared that if it became institutionalized it would become like the UN, a big bureaucracy. We wanted it to have more of a political impact from periodic conferences, high visibility conferences rather than permanent sessions which after a while nobody pays attention to. Also, a permanent organization could have been more of a competitor to NATO, as the Soviets originally intended. So we had resisted institutionalization but the Europeans always wanted it to promote detente and the Soviets wanted it as well. Once the Cold War ended, we relented and the whole process was transformed into an organization with a permanent secretariat and seat in Vienna. Our delegation was tasked with negotiating this transformation. So while we negotiated CSBM's we also in the last year negotiated the whole initial architecture of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the various institutions and the bodies and how it would function and so on. Many of these meetings took place in Prague, so we were often going back and forth between Vienna and Prague.

Q: When you arrived in Vienna shortly before the Berlin Wall came down, how would you describe the Soviet attitude and the East German attitude? Were they playing their normal game?

PERINA: I would say in the CSCE they were playing the normal game. None of the Eastern delegations suspected that the collapse of the Warsaw Pact was coming. No one expected it. The Soviets were a little easier to deal with because of Gorbachev and perestroika but the East Germans, for example, were very hard-line. The Hungarians were the easiest to deal with, and the Poles were mixed. No one sensed that anything significant was imminent.

Q: The Czechs were pretty hard-line, weren't they?

PERINA: Oh, yes. They were quite hard-line. But the worst were the East Germans. One story on the many ironies of this period. We had a rotating chairmanship in the CSCE at that time. Different delegations would take turns chairing every meeting of the Permanent Council. By coincidence, I was the acting head of the U.S. delegation and in the chair on the day that the two Germanys merged. This is jumping ahead a little bit. It was toward the end of my assignment in Vienna but on the day that we took the GDR nameplate off the table and East Germany disappeared and West Germany took over. It was remarkable because on the same day the East German Ambassador, or rather former Ambassador, since the country no longer existed, asked to meet with me. He knew I had worked in West Berlin, and he asked if there was any chance of getting employment with the U.S. Mission in Berlin as an expert on East Germany and on a reintegration process. This was the man who for the previous two years had always been the harshest critic of the U.S., the West and West Germany. But clearly he was desperate. German Foreign Minister Genscher, as you know, made the decision that every East German diplomat would be fired. There was not a single one that was integrated into the West German Foreign Ministry, and they were all out of work. But knowing what this Ambassador had been saying about us and the West Germans over the previous two years, it was hard to feel sorry for him.

Q: Were you dealing with issues like freedom of movement, freedom of the press and that sort of thing during your time in Vienna?

PERINA: Not in the CSBM negotiations, which were pretty technical and concerned things like observation of military maneuvers and so on, but certainly that was the case in the CSCE and OSCE. Toward the end of my tour, our delegation really had two parallel negotiations going, and the broader CSCE/OSCE ones were the more interesting and productive. Ironically, the CFE talks, which had been Washington's primary focus when I arrived in Vienna, really found themselves in a lot of confusion when the Warsaw Pact came apart because they had been premised on negotiations between the two military blocs. Many things were just turned upside down in those three years. But you are right that in the OSCE context we became very much involved in human rights issues. I remember dealing with the overthrow of Ceausescu in Romania, the beginning of the Yugoslav crisis, all of these things started bubbling up.

Q: How was the working relationship with the Western Europeans?

PERINA: This was an issue because of the growing role of the European Union within the OSCE. When I first started working in the CSCE, there was the NATO caucus and that was it. There would be a meeting of the NATO countries prior to CSCE sessions, they would decide on strategy and approach, and that was the limit of Western coordination. Gradually, however, the EU countries decided that they should be meeting as well, and an EU caucus developed parallel to the NATO caucus. By the end of my tour, there was a clear rivalry beginning to develop between the two and an institutional problem as well. The problem was this: the EU caucus would usually meet prior to the NATO caucus and try to develop a common strategy among EU countries. Sometimes this was a grueling process that took many hours. At the end, they would emerge with a fragile consensus and go to the NATO caucus and not be in a position to be very flexible. In effect, the U.S. would get a fait accompli in whatever the EU had decided. The U.S. would not necessarily accept the EU conclusions, and then there would be a standoff between the EU and the non-EU countries, primarily the U.S., within the NATO caucus. There was steadily growing tension between the EU and the U.S. because of this problem.

Q: How did you feel the role of France in particular but also of Germany in this dynamic?

PERINA: France was always France, and France was always difficult to deal with in the OSCE. They had some good ambassadors there but still they took the French position of generally trying to diminish the U.S. role and to increase the profile of the Europeans. They were the moving force, I think, in getting the European Union to play a more independent role through its caucus. The Germans at that time were still very much dependent on the United States. This was, after all, the time when the negotiations on reunification of Germany were beginning, very sensitive negotiations in which the U.S. played a central role. So the Germans often tried to bridge differences between the U.S. and the EU.

Q: What about the role of the Turks and the Greeks?

PERINA: It was very predictable that at almost every CSCE meeting there would be a confrontation between Turkey and Greece as well as Cyprus regarding the Cypriot question. Very often, Cyprus would threaten to withhold consensus on a document because of this issue, but at the end it always relented. It was a periodic ritual that the delegations had to go through, and it always prolonged meetings though usually it did not disrupt them. Most other delegates went for coffee breaks when these three delegations started to speak.

Toward the end of my time in Vienna, after the Soviet Union actually disintegrated, there was another interesting dynamic in the OSCE, and that was deciding whether all of the former republics of the USSR should become members of the organization. The OSCE was by definition a European and trans-Atlantic organization, and many of the newly-independent states, particularly the "stans," were in Asia. There was a certain debate within the U.S. Government about whether all these Asian states should be admitted. In the end the decision was affirmative, primarily because OSCE was seen as an organization that could draw them to the West and help them to develop democratic institutions. This was how a new, post-Cold War role started to be developed for the OSCE. But of course during the time I was there none of these countries or very few of them were prepared to send delegations to Vienna. They didn't have the personnel, experience, anything. So for the most part their chairs were empty but at times they asked the Russians to represent them for important votes and so on. I remember once that a poor fellow from the Russian delegation ran from chair to chair around the conference room representing each of the countries as we went around the table on an issue. He represented Kazakhstan, and then changed seats to represent Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and so on, giving the consensus of each country. There were some incredibly bizarre things happening in those years.

Q: Let's go back to early on when the Warsaw Pact started falling apart. How was this being viewed by the U.S. delegation?

PERINA: Well, we were all intensely following the news, initially from Hungary, where there was this build-up of East German refugees who were being allowed to go to the West by the Hungarians. Then, of course, the demonstrations started in East Berlin, and shortly thereafter the wall came down. I remember the next day the East German Ambassador was just as white as a sheet when he came in, and it was clear that he could not believe that this had happened. None of us could believe it had happened, although we still did not realize the full impact- that it would lead to the end of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. However, events moved very quickly. We had the Velvet Revolution in Prague and so on. Interestingly enough, no one seemed to fear that the Soviet Union would intervene and try to stop or reverse developments. It was clear that something fundamental had changed that could not be reversed. The Brezhnev Doctrine was dead. At the same time, nobody seriously thought at the time that in the next few years we would achieve the reunification of Germany with a united Germany remaining in NATO. Many people thought the more likely scenario was that Germany would leave NATO in order to achieve reunification, if that was the price that Moscow insisted on.

Q: This was always that fear for a number of years.

PERINA: Right. The fear was that the Germans would be lured out of NATO with the promise of reunification. Very few people thought that we could attain reunification with the new Germany remaining in NATO. James Baker did pull it off. It was a remarkable achievement.

Q: Were you instructed or knew instinctively to be very careful and not indulge in what is sometimes called triumphalism? In other words, here you are sitting in negotiations between supposedly equal powers including the very mighty Soviet Union and the other side is collapsing. This is a tricky time.

PERINA: Well, it was a tricky time and, of course, we did try not to become as you say "triumphalist". At the same time it was the highpoint during my career of America's position in Europe, and really the world. Everyone recognized what had happened. We had won the Cold War and the Soviet Union had lost. Then it merged with other things like the first Iraq War which also happened at that time. This showed America's ability to project military power. We were clearly seen as the one great power in the world and a very important country, a very important delegation. Strange to say, but other delegations did treat us differently, almost immediately. They recognized that there had been a strategic shift in the world.

Q: You see a power such as Poland which is a major country in Eastern Europe. Did you see it begin to exert itself more while you were there?

PERINA: I think it was too early. That happened a little bit later. What I saw in my time was the delegations of these countries begin to change. Initially, the delegations were still composed of the same Communist personalities because non-Communist diplomats were not ready to take over. But gradually the delegations began shifting to new ambassadors. Interestingly, however, even the old Communist diplomats very quickly changed their tune. Almost as soon as the Berlin wall fell, it was hard to find a real Communist defender around. By the end of my tour, you could see the advent of ambassadors who came from the ranks of the dissidents in previous years. Then you could clearly see a difference of perspective among the East European diplomats, and it often manifested itself as a very strong anti-Russian attitude.

Q: What about the Russian delegation? How did their delegation respond during this difficult time?

PERINA: I think they were all conflicted. I mean, they put the best face on it. They were among the ones who quickly changed their tune and started saying that this was all good, that they wanted more democracy, that they supported the changes and so on, but you could tell that for the older ones it was very difficult to accept. It was a hundred and eighty degree shift in their world. I think they realized that to survive they had to change as much as they could, and I'm sure for some of them the change was sincere. But then the real shocker for them was the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which no one still expected at this point. Most of them were in shell shock when it came.

Q: How did you find your instructions from Washington? Was it sort of a confused period?

PERINA: On the issues we were dealing with, our instructions were generally okay. The State Department bureaucracy did continue functioning. Jack Maresca was in any case the type of ambassador who didn't really care for instructions very much and relied on his own judgment. So I think we managed fairly well. Of course, it was a difficult time just to keep up with events because they moved so quickly and brought so many surprises.

Q: Well, was there a point when somebody pushed the button and said, "Okay, let's have a permanent OSCE organization?" How did this happen?

PERINA: This happened a little more gradually. The Europeans had long been pressing for a permanent OSCE, and we went along gradually. We were still brought along kicking and screaming on some issues. We were always arguing for the minimal amount of institutionalization: the fewest meetings, the least bureaucracy and so on. I think Washington figured "Look, we just won the Cold War. We don't have to be worried about competition to NATO." I think also there was the beginning of finding a new role for the OSCE. The CSCE, as such, had really become a Cold War institution, a tool that the West used to advance human rights issues in the Soviet bloc. Now people started thinking that an organization would be more useful as a tool for integrating Europe and strengthening democracy in the newly-independent states. A more permanent, empowered institution was necessary for that.

Q: You're thinking of democratizing the Soviet Union?

PERINA: Well, all the successor states of the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union. The former at least had the structures of independent states but the latter didn't even have that. The OSCE came to be seen as an organization that could help build institutions, democracy, civil society, civilian control of militaries, respect for human rights, all of the things that the CSCE had advocated. So we started coming up with various mechanisms for this. One was to establish OSCE missions in a number of these countries, missions that would monitor human rights problems and minority problems, particularly in the countries that had large ethnic minorities and potential for conflict, of which there were many. Another task was to help organize elections and monitor elections in all of these countries. And of course, there was the former Yugoslavia that had also splintered and the same forms of assistance were required by the newly-created states there.

Q: But was there still concern about excess bureaucratization in this process?

PERINA: There was always such concern. The bad model was the UN. In Vienna there was a big UN mission with all of the duty-free shops and fancy cafeterias and huge bureaucracies and that was what people really wanted to avoid. But also the business of passing resolutions that nobody paid attention to- that was also something we wanted to avoid. We wanted the OSCE to be lean, flexible and practical in its work. I think to a large degree we succeeded. To this day, the OSCE is leaner than the UN or EU bureaucracies. NATO is difficult to compare because of the military component.

Q: I'm always interested in French diplomacy. As things were changing, did the French show any different face or not?

PERINA: A lot of that played out within the EU caucus and wasn't always visible to us. I think that French policy objectives remained unchanged in the sense of limiting U.S. influence and strengthening European institutions. But it was harder for them to implement this because the U.S. position had been so strengthened by the end of the Cold War. We had a whole new set of allies within the OSCE in the Central European countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary who saw us as their liberators from Soviet domination. They had historic distrust of Western Europe and really looked to the United States as their new ally. So all of this made it difficult for the French to be too assertive in trying to limit U.S. influence.

Q: Did you have good moles within the European caucus?

PERINA: Yes. We did. We had a lot of good moles and that helped us in dealing with the EU. As I mentioned earlier, we had these scenarios where the European Union would come out of its caucus and say that it took them 5 hours of negotiations to reach agreement on some text, and if we changed a single dot it would all come apart. Well, then of course, we changed the dot. And then the whole thing came apart and then there was a new negotiation where we could be genuine players and not just recipients of what the EU had devised. Generally the Europeans were too tired to go back into another EU caucus so we just thrashed it out in the NATO caucus.

Q: While you were doing this was it becoming apparent that the new newly-independent states would at some point come into NATO and the EU? Was that on your minds at all?

PERINA: That came a little bit later. As I said, in our time we were just amazed that Germany was able to reunify and remain in NATO but it was too difficult to envision at the time that the other states would be coming into NATO and the EU in the near future. In fairness, I think thought was being given to this at NATO fairly quickly because these NATO partnership programs for the newly-independent states began appearing. In some circles, this again led to the unfortunate view that there was some sort of competition between NATO and the OSCE. This perception has plagued OSCE from the very beginning.

Q: Was there concern among other European delegations about Germany unifying and again becoming a threat to its neighbors?

PERINA: I think there was a little concern among some delegations like the Poles but it was not significant. I think most people felt that the U.S. presence in Europe and Germany's integration into NATO and the EU really mitigated any German threat to the continent. A much greater fear of these countries remained Russia. It was not seen as a democratic country, it still had a lot of military power, and the danger of its resurgence was perceived as the real threat by the Central and Eastern Europeans.

Q: Did Austria play a special role as the host of the OSCE?

PERINA: The Austrians were good hosts but did not have an exceptional diplomatic role in this period. What Austria did provide just thanks to its location was the first glimpse of the West for many East Europeans. In the first few weeks after the borders opened, it was fascinating to see on weekends these convoys of hundreds of buses bringing Hungarians and Czechs to Vienna just to stroll for the day. The buses would park in stadiums because there were so many of them and literally thousands of these people would walk up and down Mariahilferstrasse and other streets looking at the shops, and I mean just looking because they did not have money to really buy much. It was a very direct reminder of the end of the Cold War.

Q: Did you ever make any contact during this period with relatives in Czechoslovakia?

PERINA: Oh yes, I had been in steady contact with them, and my uncle and a number of cousins and their families came down to Vienna for short visits. I, of course, had been traveling to Prague regularly, both on private visits and for OSCE meetings. My parents also came from the U.S. to visit us in Vienna and made visits to Czechoslovakia-in my father's case, his first visit since he left over 40 years earlier.

Q: Did the Italians, the Spanish, the Portuguese play any particular role?

PERINA: I can't tell you that I recall any particular role by these delegations. It probably played out within the EU caucus. The two countries that were consistently very helpful as coordinators were the Dutch and the Norwegians. Both had very skilled diplomats with a lot of OSCE experience. The Dutch were also particularly helpful on human rights issues.

Q: Their diplomatic corps is remarkable.

PERINA: It really is. They played way above their weight in CSCE and also in providing developmental assistance.

Q: Well, I think this is a good time to move on to your next assignment in 1992?

PERINA: 1993. I had a year in the Senior Seminar from 1992 to 1993.

Q: How did you find the Senior Seminar?

PERINA: I was ready to decompress for a year, and I had always heard good things about the Senior Seminar. It was a great year.

Q: It is focused on getting to know the United States. Did you find any parts of your travel or study particularly interesting to you?

PERINA: It was all interesting and, as you say, it focused on the United States. We visited Mexico City and Canada but did not make any overseas trips. The whole idea was to acquaint diplomats with the United States and current issues within the United States so that we could better represent the country overseas. We did things like visiting Alaska and flying the length of the oil pipeline, visiting the New York stock exchange, patrolling the Texas-Mexican border with border police, cruising with police patrols in Baltimore, visiting Boeing in Seattle, Coca Cola in Atlanta, an aircraft carrier and nuclear submarine, a missile silo, you name it. We saw every part of the United States and criss-crossed the country several times. It was an excellent program which unfortunately no longer exists.

Q: That was my impression as well when I took it. Anyway, where did you go after the Seminar?

PERINA: The Seminar ended in the summer of 1993, and I went to Belgrade.

Q: Who was the Ambassador?

PERINA: There was no Ambassador. Warren Zimmermann had left the year before, and he had left the DCM, Bob Rackmales, as Chargï¿½. The war was underway. Yugoslavia had broken up. We had broken off diplomatic relations with Serbia Montenegro, although we had an Embassy there. Bob Rackmales had negotiated that the Embassy and staff would continue to have diplomatic rights and privileges but in a legal sense we did not have diplomatic relations because we did not recognize Serbia-Montenegro as the successor state to Yugoslavia. It was a very strange and unique relationship. Bob Rackmales was Chargï¿½ d'Affaires but had been assigned originally to the DCM position, and I was initially assigned to the DCM slot as his replacement. However, I went to post to be the Chargï¿½ d'Affaires and was reassigned after my first year to be the Chief of Mission as a permanent Chargï¿½, so that the DCM slot could be vacated and filled. By then it was clear that we would not have normal diplomatic relations, and an accredited ambassador, for a long time. When I was assigned to the job, I was told in Washington by my personnel counselor that there was a 50-50 chance that I would be closing the Embassy, that is to say that we would completely break off relations with Belgrade. This was one of the reasons that there weren't too many people anxious to go. The country was under UN sanctions. One could not even fly in because all international flights were cut off as part of the sanctions. I had to fly into Budapest and proceed to Belgrade by car. It was a very, very strange situation. The Embassy itself had been downsized by about 50% when Warren Zimmermann left so it had a much smaller staff than previously. I knew I would be working under very difficult conditions, under the threat of closing down the Embassy on short notice, and with a staff that was greatly downsized. There were also security concerns and plans for military evacuation of the Embassy if necessary. I had several special security people on the staff whose only job was to prepare for such an evacuation and be there to help carry it out. They had videotaped and mapped the residence and entire compound inside and out, identified landing areas for helicopters and so on.

Q: You were there from when to when?

PERINA: I was there from 1993 to the early spring of 1996. I ended up being there about two and a half years.

Q: Before you went, what was your impression of the situation in the former Yugoslavia? What was our policy?

PERINA: This was a time when the Bosnian War was going full force and all the reports of atrocities were hitting the Western media. These included the reports on the concentration camps, the mass rapes, the use of rape as an instrument of war, the sniper killings in Sarajevo, and so on. All of these reports were coming out and arousing public opinion, generally in an anti-Serb direction because most of the publicized atrocities seemed to be committed against Muslims by Serbs. This was the time when three or four State Department desk officers in a row resigned from the Department to protest that the U.S. was not taking stronger action against Serbia. There was a feeling that the U.S. should be doing more to stop these atrocities, that it should intervene against the Serbs. It was a horrible time and horrible things were happening. The U.S. had started reacting to this, and military action by NATO was not ruled out. This was one of the reasons I was told there was a 50-50 chance of closing the Embassy.

There was also continuing tension over Kosovo. In December 1992, six months before I went out, Deputy Secretary Eagleburger gave Milosevic what came to be known as the "Christmas warning" that we would take action against Serbia proper in retaliation for any move against Kosovo. So U.S.-Serb relations were very bad, as you can imagine, and the State Department increasingly felt under pressure to do more to stop the killing in Bosnia. Our initial approach had been to try to stay out and let the Europeans take the lead. We felt that this was a good example of a regional conflict that the European Union should try to handle. But the European Union was not doing very much, and pressure was mounting on the U.S. by domestic public opinion to do something.

Q: I just finished interviewing Ron Neitzke. He served in Belgrade before but he was in Zagreb as Consul General at this time and then made Chargï¿½ for a year. He was saying that he very much felt unhappiness from the Department of State that he was reporting too many of these atrocities because the U.S. Government didn't want to get involved. He said he also felt he was up against what he called the Belgrade mafia, which was Eagleburger, Scowcroft and others with Yugoslav experience who had served there and felt close to the Serbs. Did you encounter any of this?

PERINA: It was ironic because there were a lot of Yugoslav experts at the top levels of the U.S. Government. But I did not feel such pressure. Of course, I was reporting from Serbia and most of the atrocities were happening in Bosnia. So I was not in a position to report on them. From Belgrade, we did follow developments in Kosovo and kept Washington informed on all reports of atrocities there. I did not get any signals that such information should not be reported. On the contrary, there was a lot of interest in Kosovo in our Congress so it was important for the Department to be fully up to speed.

Q: Oh, yes. This is where everything was happening. Were you given any special instructions when you went out?

PERINA: Apart from the possible need to close the Embassy, the instructions were just to survive. The UN sanctions were among the toughest possible. There were no airplane flights, nothing was supposedly allowed in. Now, of course, it was a porous border and you could buy a lot of stuff, but for the average person it was very difficult. For example, you couldn't buy gasoline. People had to go to Budapest and bring back gasoline in milk cartons, which they then often sold at roadside stands. There was also this rampant inflation going on as a result of the sanctions. When I arrived, the staff took me to a welcoming dinner in a restaurant and I couldn't believe how it was paid for. The economic counselor opened an attachï¿½ case that was just filled with stacks of bills, and he paid for the dinner with all of these bills. He just put them on the table, and we had to wait about 15 minutes while the waiters counted them. This inflation continued through my tenure because of the sanctions. Currency was continuously being devalued and reprinted in higher and higher denominations. The largest single bill that was issued in my time there was 500 billion dinars, that's billion and not million. I have never yet seen a single bill of a higher denomination, even from the German inflation after World War I. When this bill was issued it was worth about $10. Within a week it was worth a dollar and within about 10 days it was worth a nickel. I have a stack of them which I kept as souvenirs. Basically, Yugoslav money became meaningless. Initially, of course, some people also profited by paying off debts and mortgages in worthless currency. There were rumors that Milosevic had paid off the mortgage on his personal house for a few hundred dollars.

Q: How did people survive?

PERINA: There was a black market primarily in German marks and to some degree in dollars. Most shop owners wanted to be paid in marks. If a person only had Yugoslav dinars, it was very difficult. A barter economy developed where people from the countryside paid with produce for manufactured goods and so on. There continued to be a stream of Western currency coming into the country from the many Serb guest workers in Western Europe, and especially Germany, who sent money back to their families. This basically sustained an entire black economy in hard currency. When I came back to the Department on consultations a couple of times, I brought back examples of the Serb currency-the bills denominated in millions and billions of dinars. People loved them, and Warren Christopher even passed some around at one of his morning staff meetings, as evidence of how the sanctions were working. But there was a flip side to the story. The sanctions destroyed the currency but the economy continued to function in some remarkable ways. For example, there continued to be a McDonalds's in Belgrade through the entire sanction period. It was no longer under franchise and had to procure the ingredients for their products locally, but one could not taste a difference from any other McDonald's hamburger. If one had hard currency, it was still possible to buy almost anything, including new Mercedes automobiles smuggled into the country. There were, of course, many criminal elements who soon figured out how to make such a system profitable for themselves through smuggling and similar activity. The sanctions thus contributed to a real criminalization of the society. Gangsters and criminals became wealthy and rose to the top, while average people suffered.

Q: How did the people eat and procure basic necessities?

PERINA: I think a lot of people relied on communities, on social contacts, on family. People in the countryside could raise their own food and were relatively self sufficient. They were less affected by the sanctions. Many city dwellers had come within one or two generations from villages where they still had relatives who could help them get food. Others relied on remittances from abroad for hard currency. Serbs are also very inventive and clever. They are survivors, like everyone else in the Balkans. In most cases, they found ways to beat the system, though it was hard.

The Embassy people were, of course, in a very privileged position. We had the hard currency, we had the ability to bring in gasoline, food and other commodities for Embassy use, so we did not really suffer. But some things were difficult. For example, we could not use the banking system for Embassy transactions because Serb banks were also under sanctions and thus had no links to foreign banks. Everything was on a cash basis. Even salaries of our local employees were paid in cash. About every two weeks, we sent a car to Budapest that would bring back tens of thousands of dollars in cash, sometimes over a hundred thousand dollars. The cars were driven by Serb employees of the Embassy and had an American on board but no guards. They thus aroused no suspicion or interest. The whole system was based on secrecy. Otherwise, of course, local criminal warlords like the infamous Arkan would quickly have targeted these cars, and probably no number of guards could have protected them. At one point we had to put a new roof on the Embassy residence because it was leaking. This was a major repair and cost over a hundred thousand dollars. A car came from Budapest with the cash in a suitcase, and we paid for it that way. I remember telling Dick Holbrooke this story when I first met him in Budapest after he was nominated to be Assistant Secretary. He thought it was fascinating and already then took a special interest in the Yugoslav conflict. I spent an hour telling him stories from Belgrade, and that was how we first got to know one another. I just happened to be passing through Budapest when he was there with his wife, and I asked to meet with him.

Q: The Embassy was still in the same old compound?

PERINA: It was that same building, covering an entire block. We still used the main chancery but there were a lot of empty apartments in the other wings because the staff had been so downsized. The commissary was still active as well as the large cafeteria. In my first year, I was there without my wife so that my younger daughter, Alexandra, could finish high school in Virginia. I lived in the DCM residence because the main residence was under repair. That was the most difficult and bleakest year. In the second year, my wife joined me, and we moved to the main Embassy residence, which as you know is a beautiful building with a huge pool, tennis courts, a wonderful property. It was without a doubt the nicest residence we lived in through my entire career.

Q: What sort of a staff did you have? Did you have the equivalent of a DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission)?

PERINA: By and large, there was an excellent staff of very committed people. My first year I did not have a formal DCM because I was in the DCM position but I asked Jim Swigert, the head of the economic and political Section, to serve as the acting DCM. He was outstanding and helped me immensely because he had been there the previous year and provided continuity. When I moved into the chief of mission position as a permanent Chargï¿½ d'Affaires, I did recruit a DCM who was Larry Butler.

Q: How were you received by the Serbs when you got to Belgrade?

PERINA: Within a week or so of my arrival, I received my first instruction to deliver a demarche to Milosevic. I had never met him. We did not recognize him as president of Yugoslavia since we did not recognize Serbia-Montenegro as the successor state to former Yugoslavia. We did accept him as President of Serbia, and in that sense were allowed to call him "President." I was not an ambassador, and he knew that was done intentionally so as not to recognize him as a head of state with any presentation of credentials. I think Bob Rackmales had not seen him for quite a while before he left. So Milosevic really had not met with an American diplomat for some time. I put in a request to see him in order to deliver the message from Washington. Later in the same day, we received a response that Milosevic would not receive me and that we should just send over the message in written form. I knew if I did that, it would set a precedent and make it difficult for me to ever get a meeting with him. I decided that we wouldn't send the message in written form. Instead, we sent back word that since I had been instructed to deliver the message personally to him, I would have to report his refusal to see me back to Washington and ask for new instructions. This was a bluff, of course, because Washington had not instructed me personally to deliver the message and would have accepted delivery of the message to him in any form. And I would have hated to tell the Department that I delayed delivering the first message assigned to me. But I decided just to tell Milosevic this and to wait 24 hours before sending the demarche in written form.

Well, the bluff worked. About three hours after we said that I would not deliver the message in writing, word came back that he would receive me that afternoon. I went over and I had my first meeting with Milosevic. Jim Swigert came along as the note taker. I delivered the demarche orally and also left a non-paper with the talking points to make sure he got the exact wording from Washington. This was the pattern I followed with all subsequent demarches. In fact, this first meeting ended with him telling me that he would receive me whenever I asked to see him. I never again had difficulty getting a meeting with him. He clearly wanted to engage with the United States and concluded that he could do so through me.

I cannot remember the exact content of that first demarche but it was along the same vein as numerous other messages I delivered that first year-basically all warning him against interference in Bosnia and sometimes warning him very bluntly that the U.S. would take action if Serbia continued to support the Bosnian Serbs militarily. I probably had well over a dozen meetings with him that first year. On the first few, I took Jim Swigert along but then I started seeing him one-on-one because he spoke more openly. His English was fluent so there was no need for interpreters. As I got to know him, the bizarre thing was that he was actually rather engaging. I think Dick Holbrooke found this later as well. It was quite intentional on Milosevic's part. He wanted to engage the U.S. because he knew that we were key to Western policy in the region. Dealing with him was very informal and completely unlike dealing with some stuffy head of state. In the meetings, he loved to drink Johnny Walker Black just straight on the rocks. He was a chain smoker and smoked these cigarillos, not cigarettes but sort of small cigars. For a few months that first year, he tried to quite smoking and complained of how difficult it was. He later started the habit again and smoked quite a bit by the time I was leaving Belgrade.

It took a while for someone to really see evidence of how strange he was. He was very skilled in ole playing. At first he would try to impress visitors with what a regular guy he was-drinking, smoking, and being very informal. He would stress his background as a banker and his contacts with American bankers when he visited the United States. He would drop names of New York bankers he allegedly knew and ask how they were. But then gradually, one could see that he was very strange. He rarely showed any emotion, even when discussing immense human suffering and tragedy. This was not only in relation to discussion of Muslims or Croats, but also to Serbs. I remember seeing him at the time the Serbs were expelled from the Krajina in Croatia, and there were these caravans coming into Belgrade of displaced Serbs with all their possessions on wagons and no place to go. I remember meeting with him, and he did not appear particularly concerned about them. There was no emotion about the tragedy and enormity of the conflict going on next door. In part, he wanted to show that he was very tough. But there was a genuine lack of compassion that was truly frightening and that Warren Zimmermann also described in his book.

The other unusual thing that I soon learned about him was that he never flinched. Some of the demarches that I had to deliver during that first year were very, very tough as compared to normal diplomatic exchanges. In most countries I would probably have been expelled if I said those kinds of things to a president. The gist of some of these messages was that we think you are a war criminal and we're going to bomb the hell out of you unless you stop doing so and so. I am of course exaggerating, and they obviously did not use that language, but that was the unmistakable gist of the messages, particularly as Washington got more and more frustrated and angered with Milosevic. And I always delivered the full and exact text of the demarche. I summarized it orally and then gave him the written text, which he always read before responding. No matter how tough or threatening the message was, he would always just look up after reading it and say calmly "Well, you know, this is not true," and begin discussing it as though we were discussing the weather. He would never flinch and never get angry or show emotion. I think the intent again was to give the impression of being tough and unafraid himself. He would also look directly into your eyes when speaking or listening, and lean forward very close to give the impression of listening intently. It was a fairly intense look, and his eyes never wandered, but it was not a threatening or angry look but rather a type of "I am not afraid" look.

Q: You could almost say he was a psychopath.

PERINA: Well I am not a psychiatrist but he was certainly strange and unlike any other person I have ever dealt with. There were a couple of other strange things that later on became even more apparent. There was never any staff that you could see around him. I would come to his office, and the only people I ever saw were his bodyguards and one assistant named Goran Milinovic. I never saw anyone else-not a secretary, a receptionist, or any staffer other than Goran. Goran was this large muscular fellow with a beard, and he functioned as everything, including note taker. He would take copious notes at every meeting but he wrote so quickly that I cannot imagine they were legible. I think it was all for show. I don't believe Milosevic wanted notes of most of his meetings. When I came alone, then Goran did not sit-in on the meetings, and they were only one-on-one. This did change a bit later when Bob Frasure, our Deputy Assistant Secretary from Washington, started coming. In those meetings sometimes Milan Milutinovic, the Foreign Minister, and Chris Spiro who was an American advisor of Milosevic, would join. But the whole atmosphere of these sessions was very strange. Most heads-of-state want entourages to show their importance. With Milosevic, it was just the reverse.

The most bizarre episode I recall with Milosevic came one evening when he called up and asked me to join him for dinner. It was very strange to be invited like this by him, and to this day I do not know what he was trying to achieve other than to get closer to the United States and show how he wanted to work with us. This was in the period when Bob Frasure had started making visits to Belgrade, and the U.S. was starting to engage as the primary mediator of the Yugoslav conflict, replacing the Europeans. So Milosevic knew that the U.S. had become the key player on what happens in Yugoslavia. He called up, even though Bob Frasure was not in town at the time, and asked me to come over to one of the country houses and have dinner with him. We were having dinner, and he was his usual, chatty self, giving the appearance of a perfectly normal person. And then in the middle of the conversation he said, "Did you know that Warren Zimmermann tried to have me assassinated?" I was stunned. I could not believe he said that and thought that he was perhaps testing me in some way. I answered "Mr. President, I know Warren Zimmermann. I know American policy. I don't want you to believe that. It isn't true." He said, "No, no. It's absolutely true. I have evidence that Warren Zimmermann was plotting with Vuk Draskovic to have me assassinated and we have tapes to prove this." Vuk Draskovic was probably the most prominent dissident in Serbia at that time, and I am sure Warren Zimmermann met with him, but the assassination charges were of course absurd and indicative of Milosevic's paranoia. From that time on I realized that he was in a completely different world. But it took a while, and incidents like this, to really understand how he saw the world and how paranoid he was because he was generally so good at being able to cover it up. I think he genuinely believed the Zimmermann story, though I have no idea what kinds of tapes he was talking about. I never got around to telling Warren Zimmermann that story. I'm sure he would have been amused by it.

Q: If he was so out of it, did Milosevic really understand what was happening in Bosnia?

PERINA: That I think he did, although of course he always tried to give the reverse impression- that he was an outsider looking in, just like all the rest of us. I remember that when I raised Srebrenica with him, the position that he took was roughly: "Why are you coming to me? Why do you think I am responsible? I'm doing my best to try to calm Mladic but Bosnia is not my country. The United States itself says this is a separate country now, an independent country. Why do you come to me?" This was his basic response. The difficulty there was that we did not actually have a smoking gun to tie him to the events in Bosnia. Even later at the Hague Tribunal they had the problem of proving that he was linked to these events because they never found the smoking gun. When Milosevic did agree to take some action, he would portray it as almost a favor to us and a demonstration of how he also wanted to end the fighting in Bosnia. Again, during one of the Srebrenica demarches after the city fell, he said he would do his best to prevent any reprisals and that he would call Mladic. He picked up the phone and asked somebody to get Mladic for him. I remember he left the room for about ten minutes and then came back and said, "I talked to Mladic. He's crazy but I conveyed your warning to him." This was typical. For the most part, he didn't defend Mladic or the other Bosnian Serbs. He would tell me Mladic was crazy but that he tried to convince him to stay calm and not overreact. During Srebrenica, he said that Mladic promised him that he would not harm the people of Srebrenica. But whether he actually called Mladic or did not call Mladic, I have no idea. I suspect he did not. It was probably all political theater to appease us and make himself look like a good guy who shared our concerns. Unfortunately, we now know that Mladic did do terrible things to the people of Srebrenica.

Q: Did we ever answer, "Well, okay. If you have no control, these aren't your people, then you obviously have no objection to our going in and bombing the hell out of them?"

PERINA: I don't think we ever put it in those terms but it was certainly implied that we would use military force if needed. But we did not want to let Milosevic off the hook by accepting his argument that he wasn't responsible. Part of the difficulty with our policy, and why it was a difficult line to maintain, was that we were trying to maintain that Bosnia was a fully independent country in which Serbia had no right to intervene and yet at the same time asking Milosevic to intervene by restraining Mladic and the Bosnian Serbs. There is a bit of a contradiction there, not a full contradiction but a bit. He exploited this a lot with this position of "Why do you come to me?"

Q: When you got back to the Embassy and sat with your colleagues, did you feel Milosevic was really running the show in Bosnia or did you think that he was perhaps complicit but not in control of the Bosnian Serbs?

PERINA: To be very honest, I did not know. I don't think Washington really knew but our best guess was that it was a mixture of the two. In certain ways Milosevic was certainly helping the Bosnian Serbs. Serbia provided military support, financial support, logistical support and so on. Some of this came through government channels but also a lot came from private groups and militias that sprang up, like Arkan's "Tigers." So how much influence this gave Milosevic over the Bosnian Serbs, or how long they could have continued to fight without Serbian support, is very difficult to gauge. Milosevic was complicit but can one say he was responsible for specific actions, like the slaughter of the Muslim men after the fall of Srebrenica? Did he know about that? Did he concur with that? I don't know. We don't know. Very frankly even later when he was on trial in The Hague and I was interviewed in The Hague by the prosecutors, it was clear that they also did not have a smoking gun on this. Certainly Milosevic bears much responsibility for the war as a whole because of his actions in starting the conflict but to what degree he exercised control over specific actions after the conflict started is a very difficult question.

Part of the reason that we didn't have a smoking gun was this incredibly strange way that he operated. I mentioned earlier how there was never a staff one could see in his offices in Belgrade. I visited dozens of times and never saw any infrastructure there. It was like sitting in a deserted building. This was even the case later during my tour when Bob Frasure, the Deputy Assistant Secretary responsible for Yugoslavia, started coming to Belgrade, and to a large degree also when Holbrooke started coming. Bob Frasure and I often discussed how bizarre this was. In one instance, Milosevic invited Frasure and me to a country house outside of Belgrade for discussions. We put together a draft list of some points and wanted to make a copy. We asked if there was a copying machine we could use. Milosevic answered "I don't have a copying machine here." This was in the country residence of the President. There was no staff and he claimed there wasn't a copier. He said, "I have a FAX" and in the end we made a copy of it by faxing it to ourselves. When Bob and I were leaving, we commented to each other on how incredible this was. This was the President of the country in one of his residences, and there was not a copying machine in the house. This again shows why it was difficult later to find a smoking gun. Milosevic greatly limited the number of people he kept around himself, and he really avoided paper. He did not like paper. He always claimed he did things by phone or that he talked to people, that he talked to Mladic or something like that. At least in our presence you never saw any paper that he had on his desk or anywhere.

And of course participation in meetings with him was very restricted. When Bob Frasure made visits, Milosevic would at most have three other people in the room: his assistant Goran Milinovic, whom I mentioned; his Foreign Minister Milan Milutinovic, and then for a while this strange person Chris Spiro. He was a Greek American. He was an activist in the Democratic Party from New Hampshire who had at one time served in the New Hampshire state legislature. He was somehow engaged by Milosevic as an advisor. I always assumed it was part of Milosevic's effort to try to find ways to relate to the Americans better, and he thought that having an American citizen on his side would help him achieve this.

Q: What was purpose of these meetings?

PERINA: I have to give a little background here. It started when Holbrooke became the Assistant Secretary for Europe and recognized that our policy of isolating Milosevic and just delivering threatening demarches to him was not working. A decision was made to send out Bob Frasure to engage with Milosevic as an envoy from Washington and to try to elicit his help in ending the conflict. Initially, there was not a specific agenda to these meetings. They were exploratory and designed to show Milosevic that the U.S. might engage with him in a more positive way if he really proved helpful on Bosnia. We did, with Bob, eventually work out a set of broad principles on how to end the conflict, which in fact became the basis of the Dayton Agreement. These principles were very broad initially and primarily designed to draw Milosevic into a process and get him engaged.

Q: This was still a period when the Europeans were trying to play a role in resolving the conflict. What were they doing?

PERINA: Well, the Europeans were still talking about finding a solution but in fact they were doing very little. The whole European Union effort largely collapsed. One of the reasons, however, was that Milosevic did not really want to deal with the Europeans. He on occasion saw the British Chargï¿½ d'Affaires Ivar Roberts, but otherwise he made no effort to engage with the Europeans. He told us that he wanted to resolve the conflict with the Americans because only we were objective toward all the parties and did not have favorites, in the way that, for example, the Germans favored the Croats. He said that only we were fair and could be trusted. There was, of course, a lot of flattery in this. I think Milosevic also assumed that if he made a deal with the Americans, the Europeans would all follow, and he was correct in this. An interesting side point is how he denigrated the Russians in discussions with us. He did have meetings with the Russian Ambassador, and the Russians were the most vocal international supporters of Serbia. That is why they had an ambassador and not a chargï¿½ d'affaires-they had no qualms in giving Serbia diplomatic recognition. But when I asked Milosevic about his dealings with the Russians, he would say, "The Russians are useless. They've got their own problems. They're not doing anything. They can't help in this."

The Russian position was also interesting. I met a few times with the Russian Ambassador, who was not a particularly friendly fellow and did not have much contact with the rest of the diplomatic corps. Clearly, the Russians had some agenda in the region but they were very weak and had just lost their empire. They could not be expected to play a powerful role. But what was interesting was how they often misread the situation in the Balkans. Putting their money on almost full support of Milosevic was not a way to gain influence in the region. And later, the Russians completely misread and underestimated the problem of Kosovo, though many other Europeans did that as well.

Q: Was there much contact between your Embassy in Belgrade and the U.S. Embassy in Zagreb?

PERINA: Not very much, frankly. We read each other's cables but did not coordinate in any special fashion. I did communicate on occasion with Peter Galbraith when he became the Ambassador to Croatia. We met at one of the Department's chief of mission meetings, and I in fact invited him to visit Belgrade, which he did and he met Milosevic. Then we were together quite a bit in Dayton. I think he did a very good job in Zagreb and respect him for holding the Croats to account for the expulsion of the Serbs from Krajina. It took courage to do that, and Peter did do it.

Q: Did you ever run across Mrs. Milosevic who was a power in her own way?

PERINA: She certainly was, and she was much talked about for her alleged influence over Milosevic. She was also joked about as a bit of a kook and dragon lady combined. I never in my two and one half years there met her. I don't think I even saw her. But I did get the sense that Milosevic was really close to her, and that she really did have a lot of influence over him. He had pictures of her in his office. They stood out in what was otherwise almost a barren room.One of the more interesting people I did meet in Belgrade was Milovan Djilas, who was still alive when I arrived though he died about a year later.

Q: Was he looked up to because he was a great figure at one time, a world figure?

PERINA: He had been a world figure, and I had studied about him in graduate school so I wanted to meet him. He was living in a modest Belgrade apartment, just like any other Serb. He had no influence and was not at all in the public spotlight. Many Serbs just considered him an old Communist. It was hard to imagine when you met him that this was the person who had had numerous meetings with Stalin and lived through so much. He was still intellectually very alert but not engaged in a serious way in contemporary politics. When I asked him what he thought U.S. policy toward Serbia should be, he responded that we should just bomb Milosevic, whom he described as a terrible man. He criticized the sanctions for punishing the wrong people.

Q: What about Jovanka Tito? Was she a figure at all?

PERINA: I never met her, and she was not talked about very much.

Q: Were there any other political figures who amounted to much or was Milosevic the name of the game?

PERINA: Milosevic was the name of the game. All of the other people whom I met there- his ministers, generals, and so on- were total cronies as far as I could see. I dealt almost exclusively with Milosevic. I had the access and could see him or call him whenever needed. On occasion I dealt with the Foreign Minister, Milan Milutinovic, but really just on secondary issues.

I should mention, however, that when I first arrived in Belgrade I was also responsible for Macedonia. Even though it had already declared independence from Serbia, we had not yet opened an Embassy there, and it was still being covered by the Embassy in Belgrade. So I made a trip down to Skopje and met with the President, Kiro Gligorov. He struck me as an impressive person who was doing his best to act responsibly and with restraint to continued border provocations by Serbia. We suspected that Milosevic was trying to foment a conflict that would allow him to intervene in Macedonia and bring it back under Serbia's fold. Gligorov was in a very tough position because Macedonia was so weak in comparison to Serbia but he kept steady nerves and never overreacted. I have often said that in my view Rugova in Kosovo and Gligorov in Macedonia were the two most responsible and impressive leaders in all of former Yugoslavia at that time.

Q: What about some of the Serb society in which you as a diplomat were moving? What were you getting from them?

PERINA: You know, it was hard to come into contact with what you would call the average Serb. I dealt primarily with two opposing communities-on the one hand the government consisting largely of just Milosevic, and on the other hand the dissident and opposition community. This consisted of opposition party leaders, NGO leaders, reformist intellectuals, representatives of the very limited independent media that existed, and so on. These were the people I had most often as guests in the residence. Some of the human rights activists in particular, like Sonia Biserko or Natasha Kandic, were very courageous people but they had little influence on the larger political scene. Their influence came much later, after Milosevic's downfall.

Q: What about Vuk Draskovic? He was quite a name at the time.

PERINA: He was probably the best-known dissident in the West. Milosevic contributed to that by having thugs beat him up very seriously shortly before my arrival. I knew Vuk well but considered him a little out of his element as a political leader. He did not really understand politics and came up with very strange ideas and suggestions. He was a writer and a poet, and not a serious political thinker. The most impressive opposition political leader I knew was Zoran Djindjic. He had been an exchange student in Germany and seemed to me to be the most astute of the opposition figures. We had him at our house many times. He in fact became Prime Minister in the post-Milosevic era and was very instrumental in shipping Milosevic off to the Hague. Then he was assassinated by Serb nationalists, which was a big loss for Serbia.

Shortly after I arrived, I also met Vojislav Kostunica, another opposition leader at that time who subsequently became both Prime Minister and President of post-Milosevic Serbia. At the time I knew him, he was completely without influence or power. We met once, and it was not a good meeting. He was a strong Serb nationalist who did not hide that he disliked American policy toward Serbia. He was a very frustrated and angry person. He did not have any constituency or much influence during my entire time in Belgrade.

I also went a couple of times to see Patriarch Pavle, who was the head of the Serbian Orthodox church. He was a very frail, elderly man but very influential in the country. We wanted him to condemn some of the things happening in Bosnia, the sniper shootings of civilians and so on. He listened to my arguments but would not say anything remotely critical of the Bosnian Serb forces.

Q: What about Montenegro?

PERINA: Montenegro was interesting because amidst all the other developments at the time, it was always toying with the idea of breaking away from Serbia and becoming independent. There was this tension between Belgrade and Podgorica, the Montenegrin capital, always in the background. The fact is that Montenegrins were split on the issue of independence almost 50-50. Contrary to what some believe, U.S. policy was not repeat not to support Montenegrin independence. We felt this could lead to yet another war in the region. I visited Montenegro several times to talk to local politicians and get a sense of the mood. Fortunately, no serious problem with Montenegro erupted in my time. The situation became much more serious in later years.

Q: So what was happening with Kosovo in your time?

PERINA: Kosovo was a whole other story. The entire diplomatic corps in Belgrade talked a lot about Kosovo but the U.S. took it most seriously. We were always worried about Kosovo. The conventional wisdom was that it would blow up someday, but no one knew when. The fact that it had not blown up, however, invariably led to it being relegated to the back burner. People were just too focused on Bosnia, where an actual war was going on, to focus on someplace where a potential war might take place. But we still did take it more seriously than other countries, in part also because of the interest in the U.S. Congress. The Albanian lobby in the U.S. was very effective. Probably only the Israeli and Armenian lobbies were better.

I do not mean to imply that the Kosovo problem was somehow an artificial one, however. It was a very real problem, and very bad things were happening in Kosovo. The Serb approach was basically a colonial one. The Kosovar Albanians were treated brutally. They saw the U.S. as their major protector and often showed me photographs of the abuse: terrible pictures of people beaten, women raped, and so on. They were very good in documenting all of this and taking their case to the international community. On the other hand, in fairness one must say that many Serbs in Kosovo were also beaten up by Albanians when opportunities presented themselves for this. The gulf and the hatred between Serbs and Albanians were enormous.

I haven't started talking about the Holbrooke visits yet but one of the things that I tried to do with Holbrooke was to get him more interested in Kosovo. I met a number of times with IbrahimRugova, the Kosovar Albanian leader who was elected President in elections that the Serbs did not recognize. He was a very moderate, reasonable and impressive person who did much to try to avoid an explosion in Kosovo because he knew, rightly, that the Albanians would pay an enormous price for it. He promoted peaceful resistance to Serbia and did so very effectively. Rugova almost never came to Belgrade but he told me that he would be willing to come if he had an opportunity to meet Holbrooke. I tried to interest Holbrooke in this but he turned it down. His position, both in Serbia and later during the Dayton talks, was that one had to resolve Bosnia first, that if the two issues became intertwined they would create a Gordian knot much more difficult to untangle. So he wanted to stay completely away from the Kosovo issues until Bosnia was resolved. He felt if he ever met with Rugova, even once, he would not be able to get away from it.

Q: I think he had a point there. They were two quite different issues.

PERINA: I think he was right but it was hard explaining this to the Albanians, which became my job both in Belgrade and during the Dayton talks. While we were in Dayton, there was a demonstration outside the base of several hundred Albanian-Americans who came from all over the country to ask that Kosovo be put on the Dayton agenda. It was the only demonstration during the Dayton talks, and I was assigned to go out and meet with the leaders. They were a very peaceful and reasonable group, headed by an Albanian-American physician from Texas. I told them very honestly that Kosovo was not on the table in Dayton because this was a meeting about the war in Bosnia but I assured them that the U.S. had not forgotten Kosovo and would deal with the issue at the right time. They were disappointed, of course, but seemed to accept the argument.

It was true that we had not forgotten the issue but there was just too much on the Yugoslav agenda at the time. Back in Belgrade, however, I raised Kosovo regularly in my meetings with Milosevic. I tried to convince him that Belgrade's policy would lead to another explosion and violent conflict in the region if it remained unchanged. His standard response was that we were taken in by Kosovar Albanian propaganda, that most Albanians in Kosovo were quite happy, and that only a few troublemakers were fomenting discontent. I am not certain if he really believed this and was so totally misinformed about the situation in Kosovo, or if he just believed that he could keep a lid on the problem indefinitely. I suspect it was a combination of both.

Q: But it was also a nationalistic issue throughout Serb society.

PERINA: Absolutely. Even the pro-Western, pro-democracy Serbs we knew had very little sympathy for the Kosovar Albanians. There were a few exceptions to this but they were very rare. The gulf even between moderate and reasonable Serbs and Albanians was enormous. To me it was clear that the situation was untenable and would lead to a crisis at some point. What we tried to do in the interim was to urge both sides toward moderation and non-violence. In the case of the Albanians, we had Embassy officers specifically assigned to visit Kosovo on a weekly basis to maintain contact with the Albanians and show them that their plight had not been forgotten by the United States. These officers stayed in local hotels and spent a lot of time going back and forth. After the Holbrooke visits to Belgrade started and Milosevic was trying to demonstrate what a reasonable person he was, I had the idea of asking him whether the Embassy could open a permanent office in Pristina, the Kosovo capital, as a permanent base for our visits. This was actually a big request since everyone knew the sensitivity of Kosovo, and we still lacked formal diplomatic relations for even an Embassy, much less an Embassy branch office. But I persuaded Holbrooke to ask the question, which was one of the few times he agreed to engage on Kosovo. Milosevic was caught off guard and responded in a cavalier way " Sure. If you want to do this, why not." I think he regretted this answer the minute he gave it, and the Foreign Ministry certainly regretted it when it came to working out the details. But we did open an office in Pristina, and I think it was one of the more significant accomplishments of my tour. The Kosovar Albanians were so delighted that they actually found a building for us to use free of charge. They saw it as a big step forward in getting international recognition for the entire Kosovo problem. It was also seen as a victory for Rugova and his non-violent policies. It helped defuse the tension, at least for a while.

Q: We have people who were brought out of retirement to go to Kosovo. I recently interviewed one of them.

PERINA: During my time, we sent people from the Embassy but alternated them. One of our political officers, Liz Bonkowski, spent a lot of time in Kosovo. The Kosovar Albanians were very anxious to have Western diplomats, particularly American diplomats, in Kosovo because they believed it inhibited the Serbs and offered the Albanians some protection. So having a permanent Embassy office down there was a big step forward. The fact is the situation in Kosovo was extremely tense. I always believed that Kosovo would prove more difficult to resolve than Bosnia. In Bosnia, the Serbs, Muslims and Croats basically spoke the same language, intermarried, and could often not be distinguished except by their last names. And still they slaughtered one another. In Kosovo, the gulf was much wider. The Kosovar Albanians had created their own parallel society that excluded everything Serb. They boycotted Serb schools and set up their own school system so that a whole generation of Albanians already existed that could not speak or even understand Serbian. It was clear that the situation was untenable and a disaster was coming.

Q: How were the Europeans dealing with this situation?

PERINA: Well, everyone would wring their hands when Kosovo was mentioned, but the Europeans by and large did not know what to do. One got the impression they were secretly hoping that in fact the Serbs would keep the Albanians in line so that there would not be an explosion. Some Europeans were reminded of ethnic minority problems in their own countries and had a lot of sympathy with the Serbs. The most active European diplomat was the British Chargï¿½, Ivar Roberts. As far as I know, he was the only other diplomat in Belgrade other than myself and the Russian Ambassador who on occasion had meetings with Milosevic. But even he underestimated the Kosovo problem. We were the most engaged Embassy on Kosovo, though even with us it was a secondary issue in comparison to Bosnia.

The real difference in approach to Kosovo between us and the Europeans was shown after the Dayton Agreement. Here I have to jump ahead a little. Basically, Milosevic made the Dayton Agreement possible. He was the key person who forced the Serb delegation to accept the agreement. Even Holbrooke recognized this. Milosevic did this because he was not a Serb nationalist but rather a self-serving opportunist. He believed that if he helped Dayton succeed, he would be seen in the world as a peacemaker and given legitimacy and respect, the sanctions on Serbia would be lifted, and his role in starting the whole Yugoslav conflict would be forgotten and forgiven. This is what he most wanted and why he helped Dayton succeed. The problem was, however, that we were committed to our promise to the Albanians that we would not forget Kosovo. So after Dayton we did not lift all of the sanctions but rather stated that an outer wall of sanctions would remain until the Kosovo issue was resolved. In effect, the economic sanctions were lifted but the political sanctions, such as non-recognition of Serbia-Montenegro, remained. Milosevic was furious when he learned that some sanctions would remain. He felt that he had been tricked, and it was the beginning of his falling out with Holbrooke.

But also-and this is where the Europeans come in-most of them did not support the U.S. on the outer wall of sanctions policy. They did not believe that Kosovo should be a reason for further sanctions on Serbia. Most of them started recognizing Serbia-Montenegro and elevating their Chargï¿½s to Ambassadors. By the time I left Belgrade, I was one of the few remaining Chargï¿½ d'Affaires. This European rush to normalize relations with Serbia and overlook the Kosovo issue was of course the biggest dread of the Kosovar Albanians. I think it was partly because of this development that the Albanians gave up hope that the international community would help them and moved toward developing the Kosovo Liberation Army, which suddenly appeared on the scene about two years later. This was when I was serving as the Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Department, and it took the entire international community by surprise. Suddenly, the Kosovar Albanians had an army which they had largely secretly put together. It was an amazing feat but also reflected how bad our intelligence was on Kosovo because we were still focusing almost exclusively on Bosnia. But I think I am getting too far ahead. I am sure we will come back to Kosovo later.

Q: OK, so let's go back to Bosnia pre-Dayton. What was the process of getting to Dayton? How did the talks evolve?

PERINA: Well, we have to go back to the visits by Bob Frasure, the Deputy Assistant Secretary who was handling Yugoslavia and whom I already mentioned. Bob started coming out when it became clear that the policy of just delivering threatening demarches to Milosevic was not working, and when Holbrooke became Assistant Secretary for European Affairs and wanted to get more involved in resolving the conflict. Frasure came out as sort of an advance party to meet with Milosevic and explore if there was any common ground for negotiations that Holbrooke would then take over. He made several visits, and in the end we drew up a broad list of principles by which we thought the conflict could be resolved. The bottom line of these principles was that Bosnia had to remain as a single federalist state, albeit Republika Srpska, a Serb entity with considerable autonomy, could continue to exist within Bosnia. Milosevic agreed to this, and it was the cue for Holbrooke to come in. Milosevic knew this. We had told him that if talks at the Frasure level succeeded, then a higher level representative-understood to be Holbrooke-would come to Belgrade. It was an incentive for Milosevic because he wanted to get the U.S. involved, and he wanted to deal with the highest-level American possible.

He was also at this time trying to clean up his image in other ways. For example, we had a long-standing child custody dispute with Belgrade. An American mother was trying to get her children back from a Serbian father who had absconded with them to Serbia after he lost custody in U.S. divorce proceedings. For about five years the mother with the Embassy's help had been trying to get the children back, with the Serbs always claiming that they did not know their whereabouts. One day shortly before Dayton, out of the blue, Milosevic called me to say that the children had been found and could be returned to the mother. We immediately picked them up and kept them in the Embassy until the mother arrived, about 24 hours later, for a very dramatic and emotional reunion, since they hardly had memory of her. I have no doubt that the Serbs had known for a long time where the children were but Milosevic finally made the decision to return them when he felt it would most bolster his image with the Americans.

I remember Holbrooke's first visit to Belgrade. He stayed at the Ambassador's residence, where I was by that time living. He came with Bob Frasure and it was the first of about 20 visits by Holbrooke during my time, though I did not keep exact count. At least it seemed like 20, if not more. It was a get-acquainted session but basically he hit it off with Milosevic. Then with each subsequent visit he got more and more involved. He started coming out with the interagency team he put together that included NSC, DOD and JCS reps. The JCS rep was a fellow named Wes Clark, who at the time I think was a one star general. It was this group of about a half dozen people, including Holbrooke, Bob Frasure, Chris Hill, Wes Clark as the JCS rep and an OSD rep, that formed the key negotiating team.

This group changed shortly thereafter, however, because of the tragic road accident outside Sarajevo in which Bob Frasure, the NSC rep Nelson Drew, and the DOD rep Joseph Kruzel were killed. This happened on August 19, 1995. The whole delegation was traveling from Belgrade to Sarajevo and had been at my house for dinner the night before. Bob Frasure made his last phone call to his wife from our residence. It was an enormous tragedy. My whole family had gotten to know Bob well from his many previous visits when he stayed with us. We were all devastated, including our daughters. I subsequently flew back to Washington for the memorial service and funeral. I remember telephoning Milosevic that Saturday afternoon to tell him about the accident. I left word with his assistant, and Milosevic called back in about two minutes. He did sound genuinely shocked by the news. He had gotten to know Bob well and I think liked him. He later invited Bob's wife and daughters to visit Belgrade and see where Bob had spent his last days. Bob was replaced on the delegation by Chris Hill, who then came on all of Holbrooke's subsequent visits.

Q: What was Holbrooke's initial impression of Milosevic and how did the talks proceed?

PERINA: Holbrooke had been briefed on Milosevic by Bob Frasure and me and knew a little of what to expect. I think both Milosevic and Holbrooke found each other interesting as personalities and had an incentive to engage one another. Milosevic saw a deal with the U.S. as the path to lifting sanctions and gaining respectability in the international community, and Holbrooke rightly saw Milosevic as the key person to resolving the Bosnian conflict. Holbrooke was the right person for dealing with Milosevic. For one thing, he could simply outlast Milosevic. These negotiating sessions sometimes went late into the night, sometimes until three o'clock in the morning and start again at six o'clock. I think one session went all night. Holbrooke really had the energy to do this. I think Holbrooke also found Milosevic an interesting person. You could engage with him more easily than with (Bosnian President) Izetbegovic or (Croatian President) Tudjman. For one thing, he spoke English so well. You did not need the formality of interpreters. It makes a big difference in discussions. Of course, that does not mean Holbrooke liked Milosevic. I think we all recognized that this was an unsavory man with a lot of blood on his hands. Perhaps because of this, there was a real challenge in dealing with him.

Q: Were you getting much out of Sarajevo and what was happening there?

PERINA: We saw the cables, and we followed all of the press reports. I knew the Ambassador, John Menzies. But until we were together at Dayton, we did not have much direct interaction. The link between all three capitals-Belgrade, Sarajevo and Zagreb-was Holbrooke and his traveling entourage. And one of the interesting things about Holbrooke, which I am sure frustrated a lot of people in Washington, was that he never reported on his meetings through cables. In the 20 or so visits by him to Belgrade, we never did a single reporting cable.

Q: This was deliberate?

PERINA: Absolutely. He always said- and he was right in this- that the more you report, the more Washington starts interfering in the negotiations. Interagency groups are set up, instructions drafted and circulated, a lot of people who want to get in on the action start appearing, and generally they are not helpful. What Holbrooke did was to call Warren Christopher periodically and brief him orally on the talks. Than, if anyone wanted a telegram, he would just say that he had already briefed the Secretary and that was that. And he got away with this as far as the State Department was concerned. It was a little tougher with the other agencies, particularly the Defense Department, because they did not trust the State Department, either Holbrooke or Christopher. That is why there were so many DOD representatives on the delegation whom Holbrooke had been obliged to accept as part of the initial decision to launch talks. These people were all doing their own reports back to their agencies in Washington. In particular Wes Clark, as the representative of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, would run off after every meeting to send a report back to his people in the Pentagon. Holbrooke knew this, and it irritated him, but there was nothing he could do about it except-later in the process- start having some very private, one-on-one meetings with Milosevic to which the agency reps were not invited.

Q: As the talks started, was it almost implicit that we had the option of bombing the Bosnian Serbs if the talks did not succeed? Did Milosevic understand this?

PERINA: Yes. That option was always there, and Milosevic did understand it because in fact before Dayton it happened. We did bomb the Serbs in Bosnia briefly, and there was a huge demonstration, several thousand people, in front of the Embassy. It was one of the few times I was really frightened about things getting out of hand but there was an element of orchestration in the demonstration so that Milosevic did not let it get out of hand. It looked very threatening but remained peaceful. All of this was very ironical because the Embassy had twice been evacuated before the Holbrooke talks when we were threatening the Bosnian Serbs with military action. In each of these cases, all dependents and non-essential personnel were evacuated to Budapest in advance of possible bombing. In each case, the bombing did not happen, and people returned to Belgrade after several days in the Kempinski Hotel in Budapest. After the second time, it became silly, and the Serbs started making fun of it. They photographed the automobile convoy on the way to Budapest and made jokes about it. So then when we finally did take military action shortly before Dayton, the whole Embassy was there and no one had been evacuated. I cannot now remember what finally triggered the bombing but the point was primarily to show the Serbs prior to Dayton that we were serious. Holbrooke wanted to show that there were teeth in the threats after all. But it all happened on short notice and no one had time to evacuate the Embassy when we finally might have needed to do so.

Q: During this time was Croatia brought into the game?

PERINA: Sure. There was another team working with Croatia to try to set up a Muslim-Croatian federation in Bosnia to balance off the Serbs in the negotiations. I was not directly involved in this but it was seen as one of the elements needed to make the Dayton structure work.

Q: Was this structure worked out with Milosevic?

PERINA: The basic elements agreed with Milosevic were that Bosnia would remain as a single, unified state consisting of two entities, the Serb Republic or Republika Srpska as the Serbs called it, and the Muslim-Croat Federation. The two entities would have a lot of autonomy, including their own parliaments, but there would be a central Bosnian parliament and governmental structure, a central judiciary and so on. There was a rough outline of the division of powers among these entities and the key institutions that would be created but otherwise all the details were worked out at Dayton. That is where we had the real experts, the lawyers and others to put flesh on the bones.

Q: How did Holbrooke get the Bosnian Serbs to agree to this?

PERINA: Well, Holbrooke rightly did not deal with the Bosnian Serb leaders Karadzic and Mladic. They were simply too tainted by the atrocities committed. That is why he dealt with Milosevic, and why Milosevic was key to the negotiations. One of the fundamental problems through the talks was that we needed to negotiate with the Bosnian Serbs but could not do so directly but only through Milosevic. Milosevic thus knew how important he was to the whole process and hoped to redeem himself and his entire career by helping to make Dayton succeed. There was the one episode that Holbrooke describes in his book when Milosevic persuaded us to have a meeting with Karadzic and Mladic. He organized it at a house on the outskirts of Belgrade. It was the only time that I also met with Karadzic and Mladic because, of course, they were not invited to the Dayton talks. They impressed me as rather sullen and unfriendly. They were, of course, very unhappy with the position they had gotten themselves into. Through their actions in Bosnia, they had become politically radioactive, and thus Milosevic held all the cards in the negotiations, and they as well as Holbrooke were dependent on him as an intermediary.

Q: How did the Dayton meeting come about?

PERINA: Well, once the Serbs, basically Milosevic, agreed to the basic principles and structures of a settlement, it was understood that there would have to be a meeting of everyone involved to flesh out the agreement and sign it. You must remember that all of this took place before Milosevic, Izetbegovic and Tudjman had even gotten together in one room. There were actually many key issues still left hanging before we ever got to Dayton. Dayton was not just a paper exercise of filling in the blanks. We knew that there would be high-level talks as well as much detail to work out. Many people had to be brought together. For a while, there was talk of doing this in Europe, but Holbrooke wanted to retain control of it in the United States. Interestingly, Milosevic also wanted the meeting to be in the U.S. I am not sure how in the end the decision was made for Dayton but it made sense to do it on a military base where facilities would be available and access could be controlled. I heard subsequently that Dayton was chosen because it was Strobe Talbott's home town and he suggested it.

Q: What was your role in Dayton?

PERINA: I was Milosevic's keeper at Dayton. Each of the three chiefs of mission came out with their head of state-Peter Galbraith accompanied Tudjman from Zagreb, John Menzies from Sarajevo accompanied Izetbegovic, and I came with Milosevic. The job was to get them to Dayton and be a contact point in dealings with them. I received permission from the Department to fly to Dayton with Milosevic in the private plane that carried the entire Serb delegation. There were some Serbs who came separately from Bosnia, from Sarajevo, but not Mladic or Karadzic who wanted to come but were told they could not. So the Serb delegation from Belgrade was basically Milosevic and Milutinovic and then some military people and intelligence types. For some reason, Milosevic also took this American advisor Chris Spiro to Dayton. During the talks, I participated in most of the meetings involving Milosevic, though not all because there were a few meetings just exclusively between him and Holbrooke. As the talks got more detailed, they broke down into working groups of experts in which Milosevic did not participate. I spent a lot of time trying to keep an eye on Milosevic and the Serb delegation, and there was a lot of down time as is usual in these types of negotiations when people just mingled and chatted in the restaurant or coffee bar.

Milosevic and the other Serbs of course got a little antsy by being restricted to the air force base, Wright-Patterson. They were always coming to us and asking for permission to leave the base and go into town. We let them do so only once when I accompanied them to a shopping mall in Dayton. It was only about a dozen Serbs, but we had to have a lot of security from the U.S. so the entourage was very noticeable. The Serbs walked around looking at the stores and buying things. Some of the lower-level people bought quite a bit of stuff and were excited by all the stores. I remember that Victoria's Secret caused a stir and a lot of jokes. Milosevic, as I recall, bought a pair of shoes in a department store. I am sure he did not need a pair of shoes but he probably wanted to make the point that he had been off the base and allowed to buy what he wanted. These were, after all, people who for years had been under sanctions. There was thus something symbolic for them in getting off the base and buying things-it documented what they saw as the end of sanctions and of being international pariahs. And of course, there were Serb journalists and TV crews there to report on this. This was the only time we let Milosevic off the base. The Serbs wanted to make excursions a number of other times, but we told them that they could not because of security concerns.

Q: And this was not an idle comment.

PERINA: True. And we also did not want them wandering all around Dayton. That was the whole point of conducting the talks on a military base. But we did forget about one thing-the PX. We learned that the Serbs had started visiting the PX and buying things there, including U.S. military gear and uniforms in fairly large quantities. We had not thought of this, and the image came of Serb troops outfitted in U.S. gear that the Serbs had procured in Dayton. Holbrooke got really upset, and we had to tell the Serbs that they could not do any more shopping at the PX.

Q. Were the Europeans present at Dayton?

PERINA: The key ally and contact group countries were there but with a very symbolic presence. Most countries had just one person to report on events. These people were largely observers-they were not involved in the negotiations, and generally they were out of the loop. Of course, most people continued to be out of the loop because that was still Holbrooke's negotiating style. On the big issues, he would report to Warren Christopher and through him to the President but try to keep as much of a close hold on information as possible. The Europeans were allowed to be there symbolically because we all knew that in the end we would need the Europeans. NATO would have a post-Dayton role, a vast amount of reconstruction assistance would be required, and so on. But by and large, Dayton was a U.S. show, and really Holbrooke's show. I think Holbrooke deserves a lot of credit for what was accomplished in Dayton. Certainly the agreement did not bring love and everlasting peace to the Balkans, but it did stop the fighting and the bloodshed, and that in and of itself is a very significant accomplishment.

Now I also think-and I believe Holbrooke would agree with this-that Milosevic did a lot to make Dayton possible. This does not absolve him of his complicity in starting the whole conflict but it is a reality that should be understood. Milosevic operated much like Holbrooke in keeping a lot of information to himself and not sharing it. He cut the final deal in Dayton with Holbrooke, making an agreement possible. Many members of the Serb delegation did not know what was in the agreement until shortly before it was signed. In fact, there was a rumor that I cannot confirm that at least one member of the Serb delegation, a person from Sarajevo, passed out when he saw the final text. There was a lot of unhappiness with parts of the agreement that Milosevic had agreed to but none of the other Serbs could do anything about it.

Q: What essentially were the parts that made the Serbs unhappy?

PERINA: Well, there was a lot that made them unhappy, including the basic fact that Republika Srpska would not become independent but remain a part of Bosnia. But this was not a surprise to anyone, and all the Serbs knew this was coming. What really upset them were some of the more detailed provisions on return of refugees, property rights and restitution of property. Basically, the agreement said that all of the Muslims who had been ethnically cleansed could go back to their homes and reclaim their property. This would reverse all of the results of the ethnic cleansing that the Serbs had perpetrated. But then in addition, many of the Serbs were shocked to see how the boundaries were drawn between the Serb and the Federation portions of Bosnia, and also of Sarajevo which was divided into sectors. In effect, some Serbs found that they would be living in Muslim-controlled areas. The person who reportedly passed out was a rather affluent Bosnian Serb who suddenly learned that his entire estate would be in a Muslim rather than Serb part of Sarajevo. As I mentioned before, Milosevic could agree to such terms because he was not really a Serb nationalist. He did not care that much about Serbs. He cared about Milosevic. He thought that by helping to conclude an agreement at Dayton his past actions would be forgotten and he would gain legitimacy and respect. But he was wrong. Kosovo was still outstanding, and it would prove to be his downfall.

Q: Was he still afraid at Dayton that Serbs might be bombed by the U.S.? Was that also a motivation?

PERINA: Perhaps it was. Certainly bombing was never off the table. But this reminds me of another anecdote about the technical support we had at Dayton from the military, which was really impressive. The process of deciding the borders between Republika Srpska and the Federation was one of the hardest parts of the negotiation. It amounted to sitting down and dividing a country on maps, deciding which side gets this village and that road. Numerous disputes came up. In one example, the disposition of a country road depended on whether it was passable in the winter or not, and there was an argument on how wide it actually was. Well, the U.S. had developed a wonderful way to deal with these disputes. We had virtually all of Bosnia on aerial film. There was a room set up at Dayton with several very large TV screens. In the case of this road, for example, we could go to this room, ask the technicians to find the road, and literally fly over it, even changing altitude within a certain range. The delegations that saw this technology were really amazed. One day, Holbrooke found a pretext to take Milosevic into this room and show him how it worked. Milosevic was also amazed. But, of course, the film had not been put together for the purpose of helping the Dayton negotiations. It had been put together by our military for the purpose of possible air strikes within Bosnia. Holbrooke knew this, and he intentionally wanted to remind Milosevic of it. I am confident Milosevic understood and got the message. It was in fact very impressive technology for its time. Nowadays, of course, it might not be any more impressive than Google Earth.

Q: Did you find yourself getting sympathetic to the Serbs after all the time you spent with them? You understood their concerns and viewpoints, after all.

PERINA: I found Milosevic very interesting but I would not say I grew more sympathetic to him. On the contrary, as we discussed earlier, the more I knew him the more I recognized how strange he was and what a perverse view of the world he had. With him, the first impression was better than subsequent ones. But I would say that over my entire tour in Belgrade I grew more sympathetic to the Serb people. They had acquired an extremely negative image in the West as almost a nation of rapists and war criminals. This was unfair. I came to know many, many good and courageous Serbs who were as opposed to Milosevic, Mladic and Karadzic as anyone in the West. They were paying the price for having a very bad leadership which allowed the worst elements of society to come to the foreground. I don't think that Serbs are inherently any better or worse than other nationalities in the Balkans. But they have to this day acquired a very negative image in the minds of most people in the West.

Q: Well, Germany is still working its way out from under Hitler's time.

PERINA: True. But I just don't believe in the concept of collective guilt. I think making everyone guilty lets everyone off the hook. I believe in individual accountability. But the reality is that nations do pay the price for the actions of leaders. I understand how it happens, though it is not fair.

Q: What was your impression of (Croatian President) Tudjman and (Bosnian President) Izetbegovic?

PERINA: It is difficult for me to say because I really did not interact with them directly. I met them once or twice and observed them at meetings but do not have any deep impression. Certainly their demeanor was very different from Milosevic's. They were much more formal. Dealing with them was very different, if only because of the language barrier.

Q: What was your impression of the Milosevic- Holbrooke dialogue at Dayton? Were there shouting matches between them and the like?

PERINA: I never witnessed a shouting match. That was not Holbrooke's style, nor Milosevic's style. Milosevic wanted always to show how unflappable he was. And Holbrooke's real strength was his persistence. He would never give up, even when somebody else might say this is impossible and walk away. It was often just a matter of physical duration and energy. Holbrooke could go on very little sleep at night. I saw this already in his visits to Belgrade. He could go on two hours of sleep at night. Then in the car on the way to the airport he would say "I have to rest for 10 minutes." He would close his eyes in the car and wake up ten minutes later and be all energetic again. Both Milosevic and Holbrooke were like that. But toward the end of the Dayton talks, Holbrooke did put on this big bluff that he would declare the conference a failure unless all three presidents signed on. We in the U.S. delegation were actually instructed to pack our bags and put them on the sidewalk in preparation for pick-up. He wanted it to really look like he was ending the conference and would declare it a failure.

Q: What would have been the consequences? Was there an implied consequence like bombing the Bosnian Serbs again if the conference failed?

PERINA: I never heard Holbrooke say directly we're going to bomb if this doesn't work. But as far as the Serbs were concerned, certainly there was an implication that the sanctions would get worse, the isolation would get worse, and we would under no circumstances allow Republika Srpska to secede from Bosnia. In other words, no matter what the Bosnian Serbs did, they would not achieve their main objective of breaking off from Bosnia. We would make sure of that, not through direct military intervention but rather by supporting the Muslim-Croat Federation and changing the military balance within Bosnia if the fighting continued. So logically, the best deal for the Serbs was what they could get in Dayton.

Q: What was the feeling when the Dayton Accords were signed?

PERINA: They were actually signed twice. There was a signing ceremony at the end of the Dayton Conference in November, and then there was a formal signing ceremony in Paris in December which the French very much wanted. Holbrooke agreed to this because we needed the Europeans to help implement the agreement and also because the Paris ceremony was pretty much deja vu. The really significant event was when the three presidents signed the agreement in Dayton. Many of the Serbs in the delegation, as I mentioned, were devastated. They saw the Agreement as a total sell-out. But for Milosevic, it was a real moment of triumph. Here he had moved from being a sanctioned pariah to being a peacemaker on television screens around the world. Congratulations to the three presidents came from everywhere, including from President Clinton at the White House. I really think Milosevic believed at that moment that he had managed to change his image and shed his pariah status. But we had not forgotten about Kosovo, and Kosovo was yet to be his undoing.

Q: So what happened to you after Dayton?

PERINA: I returned to Belgrade and shortly before Christmas I got a call from (Deputy Secretary of State) Strobe Talbott asking me to come back to Washington and be Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary in the European Bureau. What happened was that Holbrooke resigned shortly after Dayton to go back to the private sector and he was replaced by John Kornblum, whom I had known for many years and worked for when I was doing CSCE issues. John had been the senior deputy to Holbrooke and now wanted me to be his senior deputy.

Q: In the two months when you were back in Belgrade, how did the Dayton accords go over?

PERINA: Much better with most of the Serbs in Serbia than one would think. They were for the most part relieved that the war was over and that the sanctions might be lifted. I think the Bosnian Serbs were much less happy. The average Serb in Serbia was less supportive of the Bosnian Serbs than many people understand. Sure, there was a sense that Serbs have to support their own against Muslims and Croats. But there was also a real exasperation with the war and a sense that Serbia was paying the price for the likes of Karadzic and Mladic. Most Serbs wanted the war to end and considered Dayton an acceptable and fair conclusion.

Q: Were you seeing a significant exodus of bright young Serbs out of Serbia?

PERINA: Certainly during the period of the sanctions there was an enormous desire among young people to leave the country. There were no opportunities in Serbia. There was not even a functioning economy. But not that many Serbs managed to leave because it was very difficult. Countries clamped down on granting visas, and Serbia was very isolated. There were not even international flights from Belgrade. Getting out was a real challenge, even for non-Serbs.

Q: How soon were the sanctions lifted after Dayton?

PERINA: The process of lifting sanctions started right away but it took some time. Lifting economic sanctions is actually not an easy task. In the U.S., it takes a Presidential directive to both impose and lift economic sanctions. Political sanctions are easier to work with. But changes in Serbia were noticeable right away. Within a few months, the economy was remarkably normalized. What did not change was what we called the "outer wall of sanctions," the sanctions we had decided to retain because of the Kosovo issue. These were mainly political sanctions related to recognition of Serbia-Montenegro, exchanging ambassadors and so on. They were largely symbolic, but Milosevic was furious when he realized they would not be lifted. This was the kind of political stigma he thought he had shaken at Dayton. It was the beginning of a real parting of ways between Milosevic and Holbrooke. It also marked a divergence between the U.S. and most of our European allies. The Europeans were not as concerned with Kosovo as we were and did not support the outer wall of sanctions. Most of them rushed to recognition and full normalization of diplomatic ties with Serbia. Unfortunately, this sent just the wrong message to the Kosovar Albanians.

Q: How did the Kosovar Albanians react to Dayton?

PERINA: They were of course disappointed that Dayton had done nothing to address their problems. Suddenly everyone was rejoicing that peace had returned to former Yugoslavia but Kosovo seemed to be forgotten. This was greatly damaging to Rugova's advocacy of non-violent resistance to Serb domination. Some Albanians were saying that precisely the lack of violence in Kosovo made it possible for Europeans to forget the issue. That is why we felt it essential to maintain this outer wall of sanctions. It was a message to Milosevic but also to the Kosovar Albanians that we had not forgotten Kosovo. But it was not enough. It was in this period after Dayton that some of the Kosovar Albanians decided they had to rely more on themselves and started building the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which about a year later took everyone by surprise when suddenly the Albanians had an army.

Q: What was the role of Albania proper in all of this?

PERINA: I can't really say definitively but I think it was not large. The Albanian Albanians were having a lot of domestic problems, both political and economic. In many ways, the Kosovar Albanians were wealthier and better off than the Albanian ones. There was also a certain rivalry between Albanian leaders in Albania and Kosovo, almost a love-hate relationship. I think all of this minimized the role that Tirana played.

Q: I must say again, as an old hand in the area, I was surprised in later news footage how good Kosovo looked compared to how I remembered it.

PERINA: There was a legacy of better times in Yugoslavia. It was also my impression that the Kosovar Albanians coped with the international sanctions better than the Serbs. The borders of Kosovo were more porous to allow imports, and the Albanians have a reputation of being more mercantile. Even Serbs would tell me during the sanctions that anything could be obtained at the Kosovo open-air market. I don't know if there is any empirical data, but many people believed that the Kosovar Albanians were better off economically under the sanctions than the Serbs. Politically, of course, it was the reverse. The Serbs were in charge, and any Albanian who raised his head was quickly beaten down.

Q: You came back to the States when?

PERINA: You know how it goes. They wanted me right away in Washington. So my deputy took over in Belgrade, and I returned in February 1996 to become the senior DAS (Deputy Assistant Secretary) in the European Bureau. My wife got permission to stay in Belgrade until the summer so that she could finish the school year at the International School of Belgrade where she was teaching.

Q: And how long were you the DAS?

PERINA: For about a year and a half. Until the summer of 1997.

Q: By the time you became DAS, had NATO moved troops into Bosnia?

PERINA: Yes, we did have forces there to help the implementation. They were international forces, including some NATO forces. Holbrooke thought it important to get the international community in there as quickly as possible.

Q: When you came back to Washington in 1996, did you have the sense that the State Department and the Administration understood the Balkans and were prepared to deal with the region more effectively than in the past?

PERINA: There were not many successes that the Clinton Administration could point to but I do think that Dayton was one of them. But I sensed that Holbrooke was very worried whether there would be the proper follow-up on Dayton once he left. That is one reason why he wanted me and other people who had worked on Dayton and Yugoslavia to be in charge of the Bureau in Washington. Warren Christopher was the Secretary of State at the time, and he had no particular experience in this part of the world. There were really two primary issues that I dealt with during my 18 months as DAS, apart from the day-to-day matters. The first issue was Dayton implementation, and the second issue was NATO expansion. Those took up about 70 percent of my time.

Q: So you took over the Holbrooke role on Bosnia?

PERINA: No one could take over the Holbrooke role, and he did not really give it up. Even though he was out of government, he frequently called up John Kornblum or me to find out how things were going and to offer advice. He was clearly worried about the whole settlement coming apart. It was his legacy. And of course there were difficult questions that came up regarding the implementation of Dayton. One of the early debates arose after the indictment of Karadzic and Mladic by the Hague Tribunal. We had indication that they were hiding in Republika Srpska and being assisted by some people within the government. The question was how much of an obstacle this should be in our relations with Republika Srpska, particularly in moving forward with some of the Dayton provisions such as providing reconstruction assistance and so on. Some people in the Administration believed that apprehending Karadzic and Mladic was a top priority and nothing should be provided to Republika Srpska until it extradited them. Other people felt that blocking Dayton implementation was exactly what Karadzic and Mladic would have wanted and that we needed to move forward quickly in building relations with the Bosnian Serbs to develop support for Dayton among the people. I tended to side with the latter. I felt that Karadzic and Mladic were finished, condemned either to the Hague or to hiding out for the rest of their lives, and that making them the centerpiece of our relations with Republika Srpska served only to maintain and enhance their importance. For the most part, my side lost the debate. Strobe Talbott and even Holbrooke feared that Karadzic and Mladic would promote resistance to Dayton if they remained at large in Bosnia. My feeling was that they could not do that to a significant degree if they were forced to remain in hiding, and that we should not let their presence somewhere in a mountain hideout restrict our efforts to win over the Serb people. It was a debate that went on for a long time.

Q: As we speak today ten years later, they're still in the mountains in Bosnia or Serbia. How are they able to do this, I mean to avoid capture?

PERINA: How are they able to avoid capture? Well, clearly they do have supporters, though I think fewer and fewer. There are a lot of extreme nationalists among Serbs, but also a lot of very decent people. The Serb nation has been very divided politically since Dayton. The question is how long do you keep on punishing and isolating an entire nation because some criminals, admittedly very bad criminals, have not been brought to justice? Should we have delayed the Marshall Plan after World War II until we captured Eichmann, Mengele, and all the top Nazis? To some degree, we fell into such thinking after Dayton. The outer wall of sections, linked to Kosovo, was fully justified. But the obsession with Karadzic and Mladic was exaggerated and complicated the implementation of Dayton. And the pressure didn't work because, as you say, they are still at large ten years later.

Q: Were there elements of anti-Serbism that were pushing this inside or outside the government??

PERINA: I would not ascribe it to anti-Serbism as such. It was a policy decision. Of course, there was a lot of pressure from the Hague Tribunal because they wanted Karadzic and Mladic badly. But mainly people feared that Karadzic and Mladic would be leaders and rallying points for Serb resistance to Dayton as long as they were free. This exaggerated their importance and underestimated the deeper and more complex roots of Serb nationalism. Somehow we often think that problems can be solved just by getting rid of people at the top. It is a bit like thinking that Iraq would flourish if we could just get rid of Saddam Hussein or that getting rid of Bin Laden will resolve the problem of terrorism.

Q: And of course, the Kosovo issue was still on the table.

PERINA: Exactly, and that was much more important. The sanctions linked to Kosovo were fully justified and in retrospect perhaps should even have been stronger. But by adding the Mladic and Karadzic conditionality we gave some Serbs the impression that the bar was so high and linked to so many issues that the West just did not want to normalize relations with Serbia. So why even try? But as for Kosovo, it was still relatively quiet in my time. The real crisis came after I left. But we were amazed to suddenly see the Kosovo Liberation Army appear out of nowhere. Our intelligence agencies had totally missed picking this up. A lot of the money came from Albanians in Western Europe, and we were just not focused on them.

Q: Getting back to your position as DAS, how did John Kornblum use you?

PERINA: Well Kornblum was also involved in Dayton implementation. There was a huge amount to do in that area. He did a lot of the overseas travel and was out of Washington very often. So as the Senior DAS, I ran the entire Bureau when he was gone. I was basically his back-up on almost everything. This was both good and bad. I did everything, but I also did nothing in the sense that there was no specific portfolio for which I alone was responsible.

Q: You also had this arrangement where Strobe Talbott was running the former Soviet Union. How did that fit in?

PERINA: That's right. This was the period when the former Soviet Union was not within the European Bureau. It had been broken off and put into the Office of Newly-Independent States (NIS) at the start of the Clinton Administration because it was a region that Strobe Talbott wanted to have for himself. By the time I became DAS, Strobe was the Deputy Secretary and no-longer the head of the NIS office but he still supervised it directly. So it did not fall under the European Bureau, and I never worked on the former Soviet Union in this period. Later, at the start of the Bush Administration, it was put back into the European Bureau.

Q: Were there coordination problems because of this?

PERINA: Not really. We coordinated on a lateral level with the NIS people, and a lot was coordinated through Strobe Talbott who supervised both the NIS Office and the European Bureau when he was Deputy Secretary. It did cause a bit of a problem with some of the new countries of the former Soviet Union because they felt that the United States was making a political statement and taking them out of Europe, especially since we made an exception for the three Baltic states and kept them within the European Bureau. It was hard to explain why the Baltic states were kept in Europe but Moldova and Ukraine, for example, were not. But the motivation for all of this was simply bureaucratic and not political. No political statement was intended. And Strobe Talbott had a good relationship with Holbrooke. As a matter fact, it was sometimes said that Strobe was Holbrooke's only friend in the State Department. Strobe took a lot of interest in both the Soviet Union and the affairs of the EUR Bureau, and he was seen as a much better person to work with than Madeleine Albright, who was usually off on some travel.

Q: You must have worked closely with both Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright. What was your impression of them?

PERINA: I did spend a fair amount of time with Warren Christopher and found him very much a gentleman. He was a careful and meticulous lawyer. His strength was that he knew his own limits in foreign policy and did not hesitate to delegate and take the advice of others. He was not a great innovator or strategic thinker, but rather a reliable caretaker. Madeleine Albright was quite different. She came in with a lot of flair, stressing how she would be non-partisan and active. There was a lot of showmanship with Madeline Albright. She was very good at that. She knew how to deliver good sound bytes and speeches. But in fact she became one of the most partisan secretaries of state I worked with. She was distrustful of the Foreign Service and also not a very deep or strategic thinker. Strobe Talbott was much better and more or less ran the Department during this period.

Q. Let's talk about the enlargement of NATO. How big an issue was this?

PERINA: It was a big issue, almost as big as Dayton implementation. Unfortunately, it was also an area where I had some doubts about our policy. I felt that the biggest challenge we faced in Europe was to keep Russia on the right path-promoting reform, integrating it into Western institutions, and building a relationship that would not revive Russian nationalism, something very easy to do. We did after all have this remarkable opportunity in that we defeated Russia in the Cold War but not alienated the Russian people, who by and large viewed the U.S. and the West positively. We had all the cards for a really historic partnership with Russia if we could keep it moving forward rather than backward. But NATO expansion did not fit into this. It was unnecessary and only helped to revive Russian paranoia. And it was unnecessary. It did not bring anything of value on the security front.

Q: So who was pushing for it?

PERINA: Well my sense was always that the motivation was political. NATO membership was obviously favored by the ethnic groups in the United States: the Czechs, the Poles, all of the Central and East Europeans. The votes add up. I can understand that Poles, for example, wanted to be in NATO as an insurance policy against Russia. But it would have been much wiser to take a longer-term view and try to really transform Russia. This was a time for really creative thinking about European security architecture-for trying to devise an arrangement that would give Russia the sense of being included rather than excluded and integrated rather than isolated. This would have had to involve both NATO and the European Union. But once we started down the expansion road with the first tranche of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, it was obvious that it would be very difficult to draw the line and stop. You cannot say these countries get into NATO but the rest of you don't. So the expansion continued to the Baltic states, and now there is even talk of Ukraine, Georgia and so on. It was obvious that Russians-and I mean average Russians, not just the government-would begin to see this as threatening. I just did not see NATO expansion as worth the cost of alienating Russia and losing a really historic opportunity to change its direction.

Q: How were the decisions made on who would be in the first group to join NATO? Weren't there so-called standards that were set up?

PERINA: Yes, there were numerous criteria devised but in the end it was just a political judgment call. I was very much involved in this because I had a good relationship with the Romanian Ambassador, Mircea Geoana. The Romanians really wanted to be in that first tranche of new members and lobbied extremely hard for it. It was Geoana's major objective in Washington. To me it was pretty clear that Romania was not politically ready to be a NATO member. Democratic reforms were shaky, and the country had problems with neighbors like Moldova. But people were leading the Romanians on in order to motivate them to undertake reforms, and the Romanians started believing that they had cleared the hurdle. The Europeans were just telling Bucharest what it wanted to hear because they assumed the U.S. would block the membership. Well, in the end that is exactly what happened. It came down to the U.S. and we predictably decided it was too early for Romania's membership. I was tasked with breaking the news to Geoana informally the day before Strobe Talbott did it formally. It was a real shock to him. He was devastated and thought his diplomatic career was over. In fact it wasn't, and he later became Foreign Minister of Romania.

Q: And Romania got into NATO.

PERINA: And Romania got into NATO in the second tranche. By then it was less of an issue. The real irony was that once most of these countries got into NATO, it was no big deal because their real objective was to get into the European Union.

Q: It really had no particular importance anymore.

PERINA: It had a certain symbolic significance but that was it. And the symbolism was exactly the wrong kind to the Russians and damaged our relationship with them. That is why I believed that it was not worth the cost, even though this was very much a minority view. Remember also, the European Bureau was not in charge of Russia.

Q: But there was fear of Russian revanchism among the East Europeans. NATO membership made them feel safer.

PERINA: Yes, but I fear that the way we handled the threat of revanchism made it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Russia was so weakened in 1995 that it was hardly a threat to anyone. On the contrary, it was a basket case. The standard of living had declined even from Soviet times. The Russian people had made enormous sacrifices to get rid of Communism and were really hoping for help and partnership with the West. The NATO expansion made them think that the reverse was happening-that their weakness was being exploited. And Russian nationalists and demagogues came forward to take advantage of this perception.

Q: How did we view the European Union? Were we seeing the European Union as a good thing or potentially as a rival?

PERINA: At that time our status was pretty high in the European Union and in Western Europe. We had won the Cold War in a way that no one had imagined a decade earlier, and we were the only super power on earth. For the most part, the Europeans looked to us for leadership. France, however, was always the most difficult. It had always been worried about America's dominance of Europe, and this certainly did not diminish after we won the Cold War. It was in this period that the French really started pushing for a separate European military identity and a more coordinated foreign policy within the European Union. We always said for the record that we did not oppose this but we very much wanted it to stay within agreed limits. We certainly did not want the European Union to become a rival to NATO. We had some early discussions on this with the Europeans during my time as DAS. There was a lot of thinking within the U.S. Government about what rules should be applicable in the relationship between NATO and the EU. The evolving view was that NATO should have first choice on deciding whether it would deal with an issue or whether it would fall to the EU. It became more complex when we got to matters like military troops and equipment that were designated as both NATO and national assets. Thanks to the British and Germans, for the most part the EU accepted the guidelines that the U.S. proposed.

Q: How about Germany? Was there any concern about a reunified Germany? Wasn't this worrying its neighbors?

PERINA: I don't think we or the Europeans were worried about a resurgent Germany. To us German democracy seemed pretty solid. We had traditionally wanted Germany to play a stronger role in Europe as a counterbalance to France. So a unified Germany was not a concern. It was one of the real achievements of James Baker as Secretary of State and showed, in my view, how basically cooperative the Russians were in working with us at that time. What did concern me about Germany when I became DAS was something else. It was all the reports about how difficult it was for West Germany to integrate the East, how hard it was for the two halves to come together. And this, of course, was under the ideal circumstances of a very affluent West Germany investing an immense amount in reunification. You know they converted East Marks into West Marks at a one-to-one rate. What a great deal for the East Germans. But the fact that there were still all these difficulties and tensions made me wonder how difficult it was going to be to integrate the rest of Eastern and Central Europe into the global economy. This was, after all, something with which no one had experience, something never done before. But I am glad to say that, in retrospect, I think this actually went better than I expected at the time. I would not have guessed that ten years later so many of these new democracies would be in the European Union. I thought it would take much longer but I am glad I was wrong.

Q What other issues did you work on? Did you do a lot of travel as DAS?

PERINA: I did a modest amount of travel, primarily because Kornblum was always on the road, and I had to hold the fort down in Washington. But I did make some visits to Sarajevo and saw it for the first time since the end of the fighting. The devastation was truly shocking. Miles and miles of just rubble. It showed that this had not been just a regional conflict but really a total war. On the other hand, I also visited the three Baltic republics for the first time ever and was surprised at how good they looked despite half a century in the Soviet Union. On another trip I visited Albania, which was going through a very difficult period. I met with President Berisha and drove through the country from Montenegro to Macedonia. It did impress me as poorer than Kosovo and was politically very unstable. There was a lot of opposition to Berisha, demonstrations, scandals and so on. It generated a lot of work for us. Otherwise, I traveled to Western Europe for contact group meetings and other events. Once I actually flew overnight to London and then back to Washington on the same day. I would not recommend it and never did it again. It was hard to get away from Washington. As the Senior DAS, I had a flow of day-to-day issues and meetings that never ceased. It was really one of my least favorite jobs. I always preferred working overseas to working in the Washington bureaucracy.

Q: How did the Moldova assignment come about?

PERINA: I wanted to go somewhere in the former Soviet Union. I was tired of the Balkans and realistically not going to get an ambassadorship in Western Europe. Moldova was what I was offered. It was one of the republics I had never visited in the Soviet Union, and I did not know much about it. But it turned out to be a very pleasant surprise for us. It was a much more pleasant place than we had imagined. The people were extremely friendly and hospitable, and the country was very interesting to work in. It had all the economic and political problems endemic to other parts of the former Soviet Union plus an unresolved conflict over the secessionist region of Transnistria. Working on this conflict in fact then lead to my subsequent assignment as the Special Negotiator for Eurasian conflicts.

Q: You were there from when to when?

PERINA: I was in Moldova from September of 1998 until September of 2001.

Q: Can you give a brief summary of Moldovan history leading up to the time you got there?

PERINA: There is no such thing as brief history in this part of the world, as I am sure you know. Moldova's history is interesting because it has always been a border region between different empires. Even in ancient times it was right on the border of where the Roman Empire ended. In modern times it was on the border between the Ottoman and Russian empires and then between Romania and the Soviet Union. It was always going back and forth between big neighbors. The ethnic mix reflects this. It is a classic multiethnic state that is roughly 60% Romanian speaking and 40% Slavic speaking, primarily Ukrainian and Russian.

Q: I remember reading about Bessarabia, which is how people used to refer to it.

PERINA: Right. That was a name often used up until World War II. It used to have an even greater ethnic mix. It had a large Jewish population in the nineteenth century. Some cities were over 50% Jewish. A good part of this population emigrated, often going to the United States, early in the twentieth century. Many of those that remained were killed by the fascist regime during World War II. The Jewish population is making a gradual comeback, and there are now about 50,000 Jews in Moldova in an active, well-organized community. The country also has a sizeable Bulgarian minority and an ethnic group called the Gagauz, who are basically Turks who settled there over the centuries and converted to Christianity. So you see it is a considerable ethnic mix, and it cannot be geographically divided. It is a leopard skin, as some people there said, of ethnic groups dispersed throughout the country. Basically, Moldova is one of those multiethnic states that exists because it has to, because the population cannot be integrated into any neighboring state without a significant conflict.

The ethnic tensions in fact erupted with the break-up of the Soviet Union. Some of the Romanian speakers started calling for unification with Romania, which sparked resistance among the Slavic speakers. A conflict erupted, and in 1990 the region called Transnistria, a long narrow strip east of the Dniester River which has a slight majority of Slavic speakers, declared independence from Moldova. The Soviet 14th Army helped the Transnistrians in a war that continued until 1992 when a ceasefire was declared. But the conflict remains unresolved to this day, with the country divided. So Transnistria is a secessionist region, unrecognized by any country in the world but not under the control of the Moldovan government. However, Transnistria is being de facto supported by Moscow because without Russian assistance it could not survive for very long. Russia is keeping the secession alive.

Q: The other border of Moldova and Transnistria is Ukraine. How does that fit in?

PERINA: Ukraine is very much involved in the mediation effort and is a key country that can help resolve the conflict because it can clamp down on Transnistria's borders. Recently, it has started doing that more seriously. Ukraine is in fact one of the three official mediators that were agreed upon in the 1990's to find a solution to the conflict. These three are Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE. The OSCE representative has in recent years been an American, so we have a role as well. The problem is that Russia and Ukraine both are not impartial to the conflict. Many of the Slavic speakers in Transnistria, for example, are ethnic Ukrainians. There are more of them than of the Russians. So Kiev says it politically cannot impose very stringent sanctions because it would be punishing its own ethnic brethren. The Russians use a similar line. For the Russians, Transnistria provides sort of an outpost of influence in the region. True, Russia and Transnistria are not contiguous, but there are many economic and political links nonetheless. It is also a symbolic issue for Russian nationalists. Zhirinovsky visited Transnistria several times to show his allegiance to the Russian population.

Q: How does Romania fit in?

PERINA: Romania has a big interest in all of Moldova because it sees it as historically a part of Romania. There is a Romanian province of Moldova-Wallachia, and it was really one region in the middle Ages. Bessarabia fell under Russian control during the time of Katherine the Great and has thus been part of Russia or the Soviet Union for over two centuries, with the exception of the twenty-year period between World War I and World War II when it was part of Romania. So it is an ancient and disputed territory-a little like Macedonia in the Balkans which is an independent country but also has historic links to the Macedonian region of Greece. There were Romanian nationalists on both sides of the Moldovan-Romanian border calling for unification with Romania. But in my time and in recent years only about 10% of the population favors unification with Romania, and all the Slavic speakers oppose it so it would just lead to another war. Now a further complication is that Transnistria was really not a part of Bessarabia historically but rather a part of Ukraine. It was part of the border changes that Stalin implemented to make escape of ethnic republics from the Soviet Union less likely. He took the southern tip of Bessarabia and gave it to Ukraine, and he took Transnistria from Ukraine and gave it to Moldova to create a kind of interlocking jigsaw puzzle. He did this in the Caucasus as well, and it accounted for many of the regional conflicts when the Soviet Union broke up.

Q: Did you have any problem getting the appointment to be Ambassador?

PERINA: No. The hearings were straightforward and everything went well. The clearance process is of course long but it gave me time to study Romanian and brush up my Russian so that was not a problem.

Q: Who had been Ambassador before you?

PERINA: A fellow named Todd Stewart who was an economics officer. He was the second Ambassador and I was the third.

Q: Let's talk about what American interests were when you went out there?

PERINA: Well the American interests were to preserve and promote stability in this part of Europe. We saw how the Yugoslav conflict had destabilized the Balkan region, and we did not want another conflict destabilizing the Eastern Balkans, particularly a conflict that could draw in Russia and Romania. So our interest was to try to resolve the Transnistrian conflict and to help Moldova develop into an economically and politically successful country.

Q: What was the government of Moldova like at the time?

PERINA: There were some big changes in the government while I was there. When I arrived there was essentially a center left government under President Petru Lucinschi. He had been a Communist Party functionary in the Soviet Union but after the Soviet break-up renounced Communist ideology and moved toward the center, although he really had interests on all sides and very cleverly played the entire political spectrum. There were many such leaders with leftist pedigrees but re-born views in the new republics that emerged from the Soviet Union. But about halfway through my tour, there was an election and the unconverted Communist Party candidate won. It drew a lot of attention because Moldova was billed by the media as the first country emerging from the Soviet Union which elected a Communist president. This seemed to forget about Lukashenko in Belarus, but I guess he wasn't considered freely-elected. In any case, this was Vladimir Voronin who was the head of the unreformed Communist Party in Moldova, although he turned out to be a far more complex and difficult to categorize President than most of us expected. He and the Communist Party were quite left-wing in rhetoric and ideology prior to gaining power but then began changing to a more pragmatic course. Indeed, Voronin eventually broke with the Russians over Transnistria and has become one of the more pro-Western leaders in the former Soviet Union.

The main reason the Communists got elected was because the center and center-right parties were incapable of working together. The leaders of these parties were just not used to making alliances and compromising in order to cooperate with one another. Everyone wanted to be the king. This is in fact a problem of democratic parties in many of the post-Soviet states. So the Communists remained the single largest party and best organized party. The majority of the country would have preferred a more centrist government but the center right parties could not agree on a slate or single candidate so their votes were split up.

Q: Was the land still collectivized from Communist days?

PERINA: It was one of the earliest countries where a land privatization program was initiated. This was the major USAID program in Moldova and considered quite successful. It was started under my predecessor, Todd Stewart, and concluded during the time I was there. Basically, all the collectivized farms were divided up among members of the collectives. The idea was that this would motivate efficiency and productivity because people would have a vested interest in their little plot as opposed to the large collective farms that were generally collapsing. Some people did criticize the privatization with the argument that inefficiency was created by going from large to small economies of scale. Subsequently we found the truth was somewhere in between. There is a loss of efficiency with small plots but the argument was academic because the large farms were dysfunctional. No one had loyalty to them, people stole from them, machinery was not taken care of and so on. Our idea was that the new owners would in fact work together in voluntary associations but preserve the vested interest that comes from ownership.

Q: Did our assistance programs help the economy?

PERINA: I think so. We had a lot of assistance programs. We were in fact the single largest donor of humanitarian and technical assistance, and in my time we gave more than all other donors combined. We gave about $50 million a year in assistance, which is a significant amount for a country of a little over four million people. Moldova had on a per capita basis the third highest level of U.S. assistance in the former Soviet Union. Armenia and Georgia were the two higher recipients, and their assistance levels were largely earmarked by Congress for political reasons. Moldova earned the assistance because it cooperated on programs and was making real reform efforts. There was a certain concern if this would continue after the Communists came in because they had been critical of the land privatization program and initially made moves against it. But then they backed off and recognized that reforms were needed, particularly if they wanted continued assistance from the West. One of the good things in recent years has been that the EU has taken greater interest in Moldova and now is perhaps giving more than the United States. With Romanian entry into the EU, Moldova became a neighboring country to the EU and thus they have taken greater interest.

Q: How about the OSCE, the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe?

PERINA: The OSCE has a large mission and is very active, especially since it is one of the three mediators of the Transnistrian conflict. It also does all the other things that OSCE missions do: monitor human rights conditions, monitor and observe elections, and so on. The last three heads of the OSCE mission have been Americans, primarily because that is what the Moldovan government wants. They want someone to balance off the Russians in the Transnistria negotiations and think that only the Americans can really stand up to Moscow. I think on this point they are right.

Q: Were Americans well accepted there?

PERINA: We were very well accepted. The people were extremely friendly. We had a large Peace Corps presence, over a hundred volunteers, and whenever I met with some they told me how much they liked the country and how hospitable the people were. I was very proud of our Peace Corps volunteers. They lived under some terribly difficult conditions in small towns throughout the country and yet they were so upbeat and dedicated. It was very inspiring to see this American commitment and idealism. I had not worked in a country previously that had a Peace Corps program, and I was very impressed with it. The other great thing we did was in the area of exchange programs. We had the funding to send several hundred Moldovans a year to the United States, mostly on shorter visits of three to four weeks under the International Visitor Program. I am a great believer in exchange programs. Many of our participants had never been to the West, and had never imagined they would visit the United States. For so many of the Moldovans who participated, it seemed to be a life-changing event. I had one idea to send a group of local museum directors to the United States to see how museums are run. They came back astounded. It was very gratifying to be able to do this for people.

Q: But you send Moldovans to the United States, the world opens up, and it is hard to go home. How did you handle that?

PERINA: True, this is often a problem, particularly with students and younger people. They see the limited opportunities for themselves in Moldova, and it is difficult to go back. But it was less of a problem for the older, professional people we sent. They had families in Moldova, established homes, and usually a much weaker command of English than the young people. For the most part, they did not want to start over in another country. Most of the Moldovans trying to go abroad were either young students or unskilled workers who went to Russia and Western Europe to earn money that they could send home. This was a serious problem. Some rural villages were almost empty of working-age men. Children were growing up without their fathers in the household. On the other hand, it did bring money and hard currency into the country and helped a lot of families survive difficult times.

The economy was in bad straits, and still is. The per capita income in my time was between $50 and $100 per month. It was very hard to measure and in fact may have been higher because there was such an enormous black or underground economy by people who did not declare their income in order to avoid taxes. This then meant the government did not have money for pensions, schools and social programs. Pensioners were particularly hard hit. You know, Moldova was the republic with the most moderate climate in the Soviet Union. As a result of this, many pensioners went there to retire, especially military pensioners who had weak ties to any other place. In this respect, it was a bit like the Florida of the Soviet Union. Well, when the Soviet Union fell apart, suddenly the new Moldovan government had responsibility for all of these pensioners who had previously gotten their pensions from Moscow. Imagine if Florida suddenly became responsible for all the social security payments there. It was one of the many problems Moldova faced and one of the many complications from the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Q: How was the Embassy involved in dealing with the Transnistrian issue? Was Transnistria just a separate world or what?

PERINA: We did quite a bit. I did not participate in the mediation negotiations since the U.S. was not one of the three mediators. That was done by the American who headed the OSCE Mission. But we in the Embassy were active in other ways. I had a lot of discussions with the two presidents, Lucinschi and Voronin, on policy toward Transnistria. I also tried to be more active within Transnistria. In particular, I initiated a dialogue with the Transnistrian so-called President, Igor Smirnov. We had not engaged with the Transnistrians on that level before except through the OSCE Mission, and Washington agreed it was worth making the effort from a bilateral standpoint. Smirnov was, of course, a thug but I had experience in dealing with those from Belgrade. He was not even a Moldovan. He had come to Transnistria from Russia after the Soviet break-up and led the secession effort, and afterward he turned the territory into a big money-making machine. You have to understand that, while the war had its origins in some real ethnic tension that arose when the Soviet Union broke up, by 1998 the ethnic component of the conflict was kept alive artificially. Relations between Romanian and Slavic speakers were much improved. There was no real threat of unification between Moldova and Romania. Transnistria still existed because it was turned into an economic fiefdom for Smirnov, his family and his cronies. I used to call it Europe's biggest duty free shop. It was basically a big staging area for smuggling operations. Enormous amounts of money were made by smuggling goods into Ukraine and Moldova proper through Transnistria to avoid taxes and customs duties. Many people in both Moldova and Ukraine were complicit in this and made money from it.

Q: How did this work?

PERINA: The basic scenario was something like this. A shipment of goods would come into the port of Odessa marked as destined for Transnistria. The Ukrainians would allow it to pass duty free to Tiraspol, the capital of Transnistria. Then it would be smuggled across the border back into Ukraine or into Moldova without payment of any duties. This was relatively easy to do. Moldova had no checkpoints because it did not want to imply that Transnistria was a separate country. As for Ukraine, there were many entry points along the lengthy border. People on the Ukrainian side who were in on the scheme also paid off customs officials, and so on. With high duty items like cigarettes and liquor, the profits were enormous but many commodities besides these were also smuggled. I heard estimates of hundreds of millions of dollars generated through such a scheme. Clearly many people in Moldova and Ukraine were involved and had a vested interest in keeping this going, including very high-ranking people in the Ukrainian government. That is a major reason why it was so difficult to get Ukraine to put pressure on Transnistria.

But getting back to Smirnov, when I arrived and Lucinschi was president of Moldova, the conflict had become fairly benign. There were still formal talks to resolve it but the tensions were low. In fact, Smirnov sometimes actually visited Chisinau from Transnistria. I first met him at a Russian Embassy reception that he was attending. The relationship between Transnistria and Moldova became much tenser after Voronin became President. In any case, Smirnov was hardly isolated, and we saw no benefit in avoiding talking to him. I received the Department's concurrence to have some meetings and try to persuade him to find a resolution to the conflict. This had to be done carefully because Smirnov was of course looking for ways to make any contact with Westerners look like recognition of an independent Transnistria. During my first visit to Tiraspol, the Transnistrians wanted to have television cameras, a formal lunch and so on. I refused all this and said I would only come for a meeting and no protocol functions. The Transnistrians agreed because they wanted a dialogue. Altogether I met with Smirnov about half a dozen times during my tour. They were frustrating talks.

Q: How so?

PERINA: Well, he felt under no real pressure to change a profitable arrangement. His only interest was in keeping it going. It was clear that the ethnic issue was no longer a concern even for him, although he still used it publicly as a pretext for secession. The real issues were all economic. He wanted to retain Transnistria as a money making operation. Unlike in other secessions, say Kosovo or Abkhazia, the Transnistrians did not insist on being recognized as an independent country, having a UN seat and so on. Their so-called foreign Minister Valeri Litskai once told me that they would be happy to be like Taiwan: not recognized as a separate country but free to have all their own economic relations. "Just let us do our business," he would argue. The problem is we could not allow that because it was hurting all of Moldova badly. Tax revenue was lost by the Moldovan government. Foreign investors were afraid to go into a country with an unresolved conflict. It was draining resources that were needed for development. We wanted Moldova to be stable and successful, and Transnistria was clearly an obstacle to that. An additional problem was that a lot of Moldova's industry was located in Transnistria. This had been done since the days of Stalin so that the industrial base would not be directly on the frontline. But it was industry that Moldova as a whole needed badly for its economy. It was unfair for just the Transnistrians to exploit it. There was, for example, a steel plant which was one of the largest and best in the former Soviet Union. When I was preparing for my confirmation hearings, I looked at the trade figures and I saw that the U.S. had a trade deficit with Moldova. I could not believe this. I asked the desk to look into this, and it turned out that we were one of the importers of rolled steel from Transnistria. These are the steel rods that are most often put into construction concrete, and importing them was not illegal because there were no U.S. sanctions in place against Transnistria. On the contrary, the U.S. was purchasing so much Transnistrian steel that on paper we had a trade deficit with Moldova.

Q: How did the Russian troops in Transnistria fit into all this? Were they selling their tanks in the background?

PERINA: There were two categories of Russian troops, with the distinction between them often deliberately blurred by the Russians. One category was several hundred Russian peacekeepers who were there ostensibly to maintain a ceasefire. The Moldovans had agreed to these but regretted the agreement almost before the ink was dry. The second category was several thousand troops who were remnants of the Soviet 14th Army that had been stationed in Moldova during the Cold War. They were ostensibly there to guard the military weapons and stockpiles left over from the 14th Army and not yet withdrawn. This included over 40,000 tons of ageing ammunition stored at a military base in Transnistria called Cobasna. The Moldovans wanted the stockpiles plus the Russian troops out of Moldova but the Russians claimed that Smirnov would not let them withdraw the weapons and ammunition and they could not let this materiel fall into his hands by leaving. There was a lot of theater in this because the Russians in fact had means to put pressure on Transnistria if they really wanted Smirnov to let them leave. But Smirnov did claim that all of this materiel belonged to Transnistria, just as other Soviet assets fell to the republics where the assets were located when the Soviet Union dissolved.

Q: We were doing a lot to help the Russians dismantle weapons in many parts of the former Soviet Union. Were we doing anything of that nature?

PERINA: Yes, we were. The background to this is that at the 1998 OSCE Summit meeting in Istanbul where there was agreement on an adapted CFE treaty, we prevailed on Yeltsin to make public commitments that Russia would withdraw all its remaining troops from Moldova and Georgia, where there was a similar problem. These became known as the Istanbul commitments and were quite controversial later because Moscow tried to weasel out of them and we refused to ratify the adapted CFE treaty until they were fulfilled. In any case, we wanted to help the Russians withdraw or destroy these armaments because they were destabilizing, and destroying weapons is in fact very expensive if done safely. The experts who came told me that it costs far more today to destroy a Soviet tank then it cost to build it. So the OSCE created this voluntary fund to help with the arms withdrawal, and the U.S. was the major contributor to the fund. We made several million dollars available for this, and the fund was administered by the OSCE Mission in Chisinau. Well, to make a long story short, there was some limited destruction of tanks and one or two trainloads of weapons and ammunition were withdrawn but then the withdrawals stopped, and the Russians and the armaments are in Moldova to this day. It became pretty clear to me that the Russians did not really want to withdraw all this materiel because it provided a pretext for them to stay militarily in Moldova, even if with just a token force.

Q: Were these weapons being sold? Were they being shipped off to someplace like Syria or Iraq?

PERINA: There were many rumors to this effect but I never saw any evidence of sales. The fact is that most of the armaments were not worth much and were dangerous. Smirnov, of course, argued that they were very valuable. He once told me that he would sell them all to the U.S. for four billion dollars. This is probably more than all of Transnistria was worth. We once had reports that the Transnistrians tried to sell some of these stockpiles, as did the Russians, but no one was interested. The materiel was all old, unstable and dangerous. I think the Russians thus concluded that its greatest value came from providing a pretext for an indefinite Russian presence in Moldova.

Q: What were the Russian troops doing? Were they isolated on bases or visible on the streets?

PERINA: Occasionally you would see some on the streets of Tiraspol but for the most part they were on the bases, which were ostensibly still under Russian control. Some of the Russian troops had been there for so long that they had basically gone native. They married spouses in Transnistria, acquired families and were pretty well settled in. They also did not want to leave for some new posting in Siberia.

Q: Still, it strikes me that all of this was sort of a wasting asset for Smirnov. Time was not on his side.

PERINA: That is exactly what I tried to convince him of in our meetings. But he and his cronies were making a lot of money, and they wanted to keep the business going as long as they could.

Q: Were you working with our Embassies in Moscow, Kiev and Bucharest? Was this a joint effort?

PERINA: We coordinated closely. Those three embassies were the key ones as well as our OSCE Mission in Vienna, given all the OSCE involvement.

Q: When you talk about the conflict, were people still getting killed?

PERINA: No. By the time I was there it was not a hot conflict like Nagorno Karabakh or the other ones in the Caucasus. There was tension, especially after Voronin came in because he and Smirnov really got to hate one another, but no one was being killed. Occasionally there were confrontations between police forces on the boundary line or something like that but both sides usually backed away from real violence. It had become largely an economic conflict, and not even an ethnic one. By the time I arrived, Moldova actually had very good ethnic relations between Romanian and Slavic speakers. Both Russian and Romanian were accepted in public. A politician would speak in Russian on the seven o'clock evening news and then in Romanian on the eight o'clock news. A politician would be finished if he spoke Russian on television in Estonia, for example. This good relationship between the ethnic groups in Moldova was why most people believed that the Transnistrian conflict should be the easiest of all the conflicts in the former Soviet Union to resolve. In theory it should be. But as Yogi Berra said: In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice but in practice there is.

Q: How active could the Embassy be in the Transnistrian area?

PERINA: We did things that were possible to do without going through the local authorities. We did not want to do that anything that would imply official recognition of Transnistrian authorities as an independent state. My going to see Smirnov was OK because we viewed him as a provincial leader in a country to which I was accredited. I never called him President, and we made our point that he fell under the US Embassy in Moldova. But we would not deal with Tiraspol as though it was a sovereign government. Thus we could do things like exchanges and certain assistance programs that did not need to go through the government, things we could carry out directly with the people concerned. We did not give any technical or humanitarian assistance that had to go through the Transnistrian government. Transnistria did get much less U.S. assistance than Moldova proper because of this restriction.

Q: How did economic conditions compare between Transnistria and Moldova? Was the situation in one better than in the other?

PERINA: This was an issue of much debate between the two sides, and it is difficult to judge because the statistics are so unreliable. I think that people in Transnistria were worse off because of the isolation and the control and exploitation of the economy by Smirnov and his people. The Transnistrian currency, the ruble, was a joke and had no value outside of Transnistria. At least the Moldovan leu was convertible within Moldova and relatively stable. But the hard fact is that the economic situation was bad on both sides of the Dniester. That is why human trafficking, for example, became such a problem in the country.

Q: Could you explain what you mean by that?

PERINA: Moldova became one of the main source countries in the region for young women who were sent overseas for prostitution. It was a terrible problem. In some cases, the girls knew what they were getting into and chose to do so just to escape the poverty in Moldova and get to the West. In many cases in my time, however, the victims did not know they would be forced into prostitution and thought they would be working as nannies, waitresses, or something like that. Most often, it was women and girls from the countryside who were tricked in this fashion. Moldova became notorious as a source country for such trafficking. Most often the victims were sent to Western Europe or the Balkans and the Middle East but one NGO even found two Moldovan girls in a brothel in Cambodia. Fortunately, the matter got so much publicity that a lot of international donors started giving money to deal with the problem. Also, trafficking was not unique to Moldova. It was a big problem in Ukraine, Russia, the entire region. By the time I was leaving, there were many NGO's and programs dedicated to fighting human trafficking.

Q: What could the Embassy do about this?

PERINA: We directed a good chunk of our assistance money to supporting such programs. Primarily these were educational programs to warn young women of what could happen to them. The Embassy financed production of a documentary film that gave testimony from real victims of trafficking. It was shown in schools and on Moldovan television. There were even billboards in Chisinau warning against the dangers of being recruited. So we did a lot, and I think the problem diminished but of course the roots of the problem were economic, and the only long-term solution was to raise the standard of living.

Q: Was Moldova lobbying for NATO and European Union membership?

PERINA: Not for NATO membership. Moldova's constitution stated that the country would be neutral, and lobbying for NATO membership would have complicated any reconciliation with Transnistria. Moldova was a member of the Partnership for Peace program and cooperated with NATO in that respect. There were even several NATO-related training exercises in Moldova with international participation. The Embassy also had a very active military assistance and training program run by the Defense Department. We had very good relations with the Moldovan military.

As for the European Union, most Moldovans are very Western-oriented and would have loved to become members. I think they hope to do so someday. In my time, they recognized that it was unrealistic to expect membership but they did want closer relations and economic ties with the EU. Unfortunately, the European Union was not very active in Moldova at the time. They have become much more active in recent years after Moldova became a neighboring country to the EU.

Q: You left Moldova in 2001. Is there anything else we should talk about from this period?

PERINA: Yes, I left in 2001. There are two things I would mention briefly. The first was the Y2K episode. Remember that? It was the technical crash that all the experts said would occur when computers tried to switch from 1999 to 2000. I still don't understand why this was supposed to be the case but that is another matter. The thing I want to mention is that Moldova together with Ukraine and Belarus was one of the three countries in the world granted the right of voluntary departure for Embassy family members and non-essential staff. I don't know how this happened. Somehow Embassy Kiev got this for its people, and then it was extended to Moldova and Belarus. A lot of our Embassy people got free Christmas trips to the U.S. because of this. The bottom line was that the experts believed disaster would occur: computers would collapse, lights go out, utilities fail, and so on. We were all instructed to stock up on food and water, and I as the Ambassador was instructed to be in the Embassy building at the stroke of midnight on December 31, 1999 to assist with the impending chaos. Well I was in the Embassy at midnight. It was a New Year's Eve I will never forget. The clock struck 12:00, and we all waited with bated breath to see what would happen. Of course nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. If anything, things worked better than before because the Moldovans had taken some of our advice to heart about improving their computer systems. But even without that, I doubt anything would have happened. The experts were totally wrong and did not seem to understand how few things actually were computerized in that part of the world. It was a lesson to me about how you cannot always believe the experts. And the Moldovans, of course, all thought we were a little crazy.

Q: It reminded me of the religious groups that expect the world to end, give away all their possessions and go up on the mountain to sing hymns and await judgment day. I remember how nothing happened after Y2K.

PERINA: The other episode I wanted to mention was about the tragedy that did happen and we did not expect, and that is 9/11. We were scheduled to leave Moldova on September 15, 2001. We had our tickets arranged and a full week of farewell dinners scheduled. And of course 9/11 made it a completely different week that I will never forget. The reaction of the Moldovans was incredible. I would never have imagined such a spontaneous outpouring of sympathy and support. The entire sidewalk in front of the Embassy was covered with flowers and candles that people brought. Classes of schoolchildren sent condolence letters to the Embassy. We opened a condolence book that even President Voronin came to the Embassy to sign, and a special memorial service was held by the Orthodox Church in the city's main cathedral. It was a very touching experience because the sympathy was so genuine and sincere. Of course, we cancelled all our farewell dinners but had a very moving farewell with the Moldovan people. We flew to the U.S. on September 23 after U.S. airports were reopened.

Q: So what was your next assignment?

PERINA: My next assignment was Washington-based but involved a lot of travel. My title was Special Negotiator for Eurasian Conflicts, which basically meant conflicts in the former Soviet Union. It was a job with the rank of Ambassador, though I did not have to go through confirmation because I already had the title. I worked simultaneously on resolution of four of the conflicts in the former Soviet Union. These were the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the two conflicts in Georgia resulting from the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the Transnistrian conflict in Moldova. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the major responsibility in the portfolio, and the one I spent the bulk of my time on. You will notice that I did not work on the Chechnya conflict in Russia. That is primarily because Russia was not interested in any outside assistance, and we could not help if Russia did not cooperate. So we handled Chechnya as a human rights problem within Russia. The four conflicts I did work on where all different in nature and had different mediation procedures so it is probably best if we discuss them one by one.

Q: You did this from when to when?

PERINA: I was appointed right when I left Moldova in September of 2001 and I held the job until May of 2004. I made 29 trips to Europe within that period in connection with this job.

Q: When you arrived back here, what was the basic position of the Administration toward these conflicts?

PERINA: With regard to the major conflict I dealt with, Nagorno-Karabakh, people felt they had just been burned. In April 2001 there had been a large meeting organized by the U.S., by my predecessor Carey Cavanaugh, in Key West, Florida. (President) Robert Kocharian of Armenia and (President) Heydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan attended, as did the new Secretary of State Colin Powell. There was a lot of media attention and expectation that an agreement would be signed. Well, the meeting ended in failure, and it was an embarrassment for Powell and the Bush Administration. Carey Cavanaugh spent the next six months trying to revive the negotiating effort but could not do so. So when I came in, there was a sense that any progress was unlikely in the near future. It was a little akin to when I went to Belgrade in that there was a deep, pessimism about future prospects. I like those kinds of challenges, however, because you have no place to go but up.

Q: So let's talk about Nagorno-Karabakh. What were the issues and why had the talks failed?

PERINA: Nagorno-Karabakh is the most significant conflict still in the Caucasus and the most dangerous unresolved conflict that broke out when Soviet Union dissolved. It actually has far older roots and a complex history and the conflict started even before the Soviet Union broke up. But the worst fighting took place roughly from 1991 to 1994 between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It was a bloody war, and the casualty figures are disputed but probably were about 20,000 killed and 60,000 wounded, with close to a million refugees. Even though Nagorno-Karabakh itself only had a population of about 200,000, the refugees came from Armenians who fled Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis displaced from Armenia. It was a serious war. The region of Nagorno-Karabakh itself had a majority Armenian population but was made an autonomous oblast in Azerbaijan by Stalin in 1923. As the Soviet Union weakened, the Armenian population did not want to remain within Azerbaijan and declared independence in 1991. This led to the war which really then became a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The worst fighting stopped with a ceasefire in 1994, and the Armenians have since then controlled both Nagorno-Karabakh and a large area of land around it as well. Until the conflict is somehow resolved, the international community considers that Nagorno-Karabakh is still a part of Azerbaijan, and that is U.S. policy as well. No country, not even Armenia, has thus far recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent country. So that is the situation on the ground.

Now as for the mediation mechanism, the organization that has been tasked from the very beginning to try to help find a solution is the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the OSCE, and specifically a sub-group of countries called the Minsk Group. The Minsk Group in turn agreed on countries referred to as the "Co-Chairs" of the Minsk Group to serve as specific mediators to help the two sides find a solution. For a long time the Co-Chairs were Russia and Sweden but then that arrangement was changed in 1997, and a troika of Co-Chairs was agreed upon from France, Russia and the United States. So that is the history in a nutshell. I was appointed as the U.S. representative to the Minsk Group and thus one of the three Co-Chair mediators. The French and the Russians also appointed Ambassadors approximately at my level but interestingly the Russians also had a First Deputy Foreign Minister who took an interest in the conflict and participated in many of the trips and negotiating sessions. Thus the Russians often had the most senior delegation member among the Co-Chairs because they had a person who was number two or three in the Foreign Ministry.

Q.: Who was this?

PERINA: His name was Vyacheslav Trubnikov, and he was appointed First Deputy Foreign Minister in 2000. He later became the Russian Ambassador to India. I spent a lot of time with him and got to know him quite well. One of the interesting things about him was that he worked in the Foreign Ministry but during Soviet times had actually been a KGB officer. He freely admitted this and made no effort to hide it. He was in fact proud that he had risen to the level of Colonel in the KGB.

Anyway, to get back to the negotiations, there had over the years been many proposals by the Minsk Group Co-Chairs to find a solution and each one had been rejected by one side or the other. They included the basic ways one can solve a conflict like this: mediation, territorial exchange, autonomy, confederation and so on. The Key West approach, which was sort of a land for peace swap, also failed. Ironically, most of these deals failed over what by an outsider could be considered secondary issues, issues like the status of the corridor between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh since they are not contiguous. This was the case also in Key West, although there is debate still on whether the leaders really see these issues as important or just make the secondary issues deal-breakers because they get cold feet on the whole approach and just want to get out of it. Key West, for example, was a very good deal for the Armenian side, probably the best deal they had ever been offered. But Azerbaijani President Aliyev started raising objections on secondary issues, and Kocharian did not show any flexibility to accommodate him, so it all came apart, and it was a real shame. Things really seemed at a dead end.

Q: So this where you took over?

PERINA: This is where I took over and tried to figure out how to move forward. I was the new Co-Chair. The Russians and French were a bit burned out by Key West, and they looked to me, to the U.S., for new ideas. For a few months, I did try to see if it was at all possible to resurrect the Key West approach but in fact it was not. The two Presidents were in a bad mood. They were angry at one another for the failure of Key West, and accusing each other of bad faith. I realized we might be facing a real lull in negotiation before new ideas could be developed. But a lull could be very dangerous in terms of public perceptions in Azerbaijan. The Azeris were the side most frustrated with the status quo. They saw their land as occupied and wanted progress in resolving this. If they had no perception of an ongoing negotiation, then the Azeri public might start concluding that war was the only way to change things. For this reason it was important to maintain a process, at least an ongoing dialogue that showed people the sides were still talking with one another.

I laid out this idea to the other Co-Chairs at a meeting in Washington in December 2001. I said that we had to demand that the two Presidents agree to regularly-scheduled meetings at a neutral location to which they would send their personal representatives. If the representatives did nothing but stare at each other for a day, so be it. But we would force them to continue having meetings and keep the structure of a process in place. The two other Co-Chairs agreed, and we started sounding out the two sides. They were both very receptive because they also understood that a visible process of negotiation was in their interest. To be sure, there were some hitches. At first, the Armenian side insisted that the Karabakh Armenians had to be included. Recent talks had all been just between Aliyev and Kocharian, and we knew that Aliyev would not agree to including two Armenian reps. Kocharian dropped this, and other problems were worked out. During a visit that we the Co-Chairs made to Yerevan and Baku in March 2002, the two presidents formally agreed to start new negotiations through their Personal Representatives. We later agreed that these would take place in Prague, and this was the start of what came to be called the "Prague Process" which is the foundation of the talks that continue to the present day.

Q: Prague! Do I guess correctly that you had something to do with picking this city?

PERINA: I admit I did but there was a rationale behind it. We agreed among the Co-Chairs that we wanted these new talks near Vienna, which is the headquarters of the OSCE, but not directly in Vienna where other Minsk Group country delegations might try to get involved. We also wanted the talks in Eastern rather than Western Europe just because it would be less expensive, and the OSCE would be paying all the costs of the meetings. It basically came down to Warsaw, Prague or Budapest. What decided it was that Prague had a small, permanent OSCE office that dated from the early 1990's when some OSCE Permanent Council meetings were held there. The office was a type of secretariat, and it was underemployed. We saw that this would be a great help in all the administrative and logistical organization of these meetings, since the Co-Chairs had no standing staff except the assistants to the three Ambassadors. I admit I also did favor Prague because I knew the city, the language and had good contacts with some Czech diplomats. But those were secondary considerations. The Co-Chairs agreed on Prague and so did the Armenians and Azeris.

Q: Were the Czechs happy when they learned this would be coming to town?

PERINA: They were very happy. I raised it first with the Czech Ambassador to the OSCE. He reported it to the Czech Foreign Ministry, and in less than a week we had Czech acceptance of the proposal. We made a trip to Prague to work out the terms, and the Czechs even gave us free use of a beautiful palace called Stirin about 45 minutes outside of Prague. Initially, each President nominated a Personal Representative at the deputy foreign minister level. For the Armenians it was Tatoul Markarian, later an Armenian Ambassador to Washington, and for the Azeri side it was Araz Azimov. The first meeting of the Prague process took place at Stirin Palace on May 13-15, 2002. The Czech Foreign Minister attended the inaugural session.

Q: So what happened?

PERINA: Well, we started again exploring ideas and options for a solution. The talks really started almost from the beginning. But this was the process I was involved in for the next two years. As the Prague Process continued, it changed a little in format. We began meeting in other cities as well with the Presidents and Foreign Ministers. Toward the end of my tour, the Prague Process was upgraded when the Presidents nominated their Foreign Ministers, rather than Deputy Foreign Ministers, as their representatives. It was almost moved from the Stirin Palace to a venue very near the Prague Castle just for convenience sake. The last Minsk Group meeting I had was in Prague in April 2004 when the Armenian and Azeri foreign ministers met as the Personal Representatives.

One thing I should clarify. When I said the Co-Chairs were mediators, that was perhaps misleading. The role of the Co-Chairs was not to mediate in the sense of to arbitrate. We were more in the role of facilitators, helping to come up with ideas but not in a position to impose them on either side. We were there to be helpful but we could not force a solution.

Q: Was there a problem for you and for the French rep because there are such large Armenian communities and lobbies in the U.S. and France? Was this a problem for Azerbaijan?

PERINA: The largest group of Armenians outside of Armenia is probably in Russia. The Azeris knew all this and probably were not happy with it, but they trusted us. They knew they had their own sources of influence, which included their strategic location and their oil. The Armenians in fact believed that the international community tended to favor Azerbaijan because of the oil factor. The Azeris also felt that international law was on their side. Nagorno-Karabakh was considered legally a part of Azerbaijan by all three Co-Chairs. So the Azeris argued sovereignty, while the Armenians argued the right of self determination and self-defense for Nagorno-Karabakh. Each side had different assets and a different approach, but the Co-Chairs tried to be fair to both. Our position was that any solution that the two sides could agree upon would be acceptable to us. We were there to help the two sides find such a solution.

Q: What pressures were on Armenia and Azerbaijan to find a solution?

PERINA: The Armenian side was holding all the land so they were much more a status quo power than Azerbaijan. The problem for the Armenians was that they were landlocked and surrounded on most of their border by Turkey and Azerbaijan, who had closed borders and imposed a trade blockade as a result of the war. There was a real economic cost from this for the Armenians. For Azerbaijan, the main problem was that about 15% of what they saw as their land was under foreign occupation. They wanted the land back. The refugee problem also put political pressure on Baku. There were about half a million refugees from each side as a result of the war. The Armenians had largely integrated their refugee population, but the Azeris had not. They still claimed they had several hundred thousand living in camps. At one point, we the Co-Chairs visited an Azeri refugee camp, and it was really appalling to see the conditions under which these families lived ten years after the war. They were living under terrible conditions in these crowded refugee compounds. Of course, the fact is that the Azerbaijani government purposely kept them so for political reasons. They wanted them as evidence of what an injustice had been done to the Azeri side. So after a decade they had not integrated them, even though Azerbaijan certainly had the resources from oil revenues to do so.

Q: What was happening on the ground in the disputed territory?

PERINA: Nagorno-Karabakh is a dangerous conflict because it's one of the few stalemated conflicts where there are no peacekeeping troops to separate the sides. What separates the two armies are enormous mine fields and trenches and snipers. There are still a few soldiers on both sides killed almost monthly by sniper fire. Obviously, this is an uneasy truce that can easily break down. The first time I visited Nagorno-Karabakh, we physically crossed the front lines from Azerbaijan into Nagorno-Karabakh. It was a revealing but very difficult experience. It had to be worked out with both sides, of course. Both sides had to clear a path through the minefields. We then walked for several hundred yards along this path, which was only about a yard wide and marked with a string, in single file and carrying our suitcases. I could literally see some of these mines sticking out of the ground on both sides of the path. It was frightening. Worst of all, one of the Azeri soldiers who was clearing the minefield triggered a mine and lost a leg about 15 minutes before we crossed. We just heard an explosion and commotion and then learned what happened. We arranged through the OSCE to give some monetary compensation to the soldier and to his family but how can you compensate someone for the loss of a leg? After that, I told the other Co-Chairs that it was the first and last time I would cross in this fashion because it was not worth the cost of people getting hurt. The Azeris agreed that we could go into Nagorno-Karabakh from the Armenian side, even though politically they did not like it.

Q: What was keeping the negotiations from making some progress?

PERINA: There were a number of reasons why the talks didn't progress. One of them was that both sides felt that time was on their side. The Azeris felt they were going to get all of this incredible oil revenue and they would be able to increase their military strength and overwhelm the Armenians who were losing population through emigration and in bad economic straits. On the other hand, the Armenians also felt that time was on their side simply because they were holding the land and creating a type of fait accompli. One Armenian said to me, "In a generation, how many young Azeris will want to die for Nagorno-Karabakh?" But both sides were wrong in thinking that time worked for them. The Azeris were wrong in thinking that oil money translates easily into military prowess. If that were true, the Middle East would look very different than it does today. It is just not that simple. But the Armenians were also wrong in thinking that people in this part of the world forget old grudges and conflicts. In fact, these issues are passed remarkably from generation to generation, as is the case among Armenians themselves. So both sides were mistaken in their views but it made resolution of the conflict very difficult.

Another complication we had in the talks was that in December 2003 President Heydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan died. He passed away in the U.S., in the Cleveland Clinic, where he was being treated for heart problems that he had had for many years. He had arranged things so that his son Ilham Aliyev would be the likely successor as President, but we still lost about a year through the whole process of transferring power from the old Aliyev to the son. It was also a setback because the older Aliyev was an extremely powerful figure in Azerbaijan. We always assumed that he, if anyone, had the political strength to make the kinds of compromises that would be needed for a settlement. The son Ilham was politically weaker and had acquired a reputation as a bit of a playboy and not a serious leader. However, I must say that when he became President and the Co-Chairs started working with him, we were all very impressed by how intelligent and capable he actually was. He was a serious and thoughtful interlocutor. That was a welcome surprise, although we still lost a lot of time with the transfer of leadership.

Q: How was it working with the Armenians?

PERINA: I think we worked quite well with them also, although Kocharian was a very tough negotiator. Too tough, in my view. I think he lost some good opportunities by not being a little more flexible. The real asset on the Armenian side was the Foreign Minister, Vartan Oskanian, who was very capable and engaging to work with. He was born of Armenian parents in Syria but had in fact been raised in the United States and became a U.S. citizen before moving to independent Armenia. He was very straightforward and informal but still very effective. It was like dealing with an American.

Q: So what was the status of the talks when your assignment ended?

PERINA: Well, I am glad you ask that because in fact it was not all bleak. We did make some progress, and it stemmed from an idea I got when reading about the EU-managed referendum on independence in Montenegro. It occurred to me that the concept of a referendum as a way of dealing with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict had not been explored in previous negotiation attempts. I first raised the idea one evening in July 2002 on the grounds of the Stirin Palace with the Armenian representative, Tatoul Markarian. This was during the second formal meeting of the Prague Process. He seemed very skeptical but said he would report it to his boss, Foreign Minister Oskanian. A few days later he drew me aside and said that the Armenian side was not interested in this approach. I assumed it was because the Armenians were still hoping to somehow resurrect Key West. In any case, I thought the referendum idea was dead. But then about a year later, both Markarian and Oskanian started telling me that they would be interested in exploring this. They even started asking me to put it formally on the table. I think it was because the Azerbaijani message got through that there was no way in the world Baku would return to the Key West approach. We sounded out the Azeri side about the referendum, and they also were initially very skeptical. Then in late 2003 Aliyev told us, that is to say the Co-Chairs, that he was willing to discuss this idea. Agreement on this approach led to the elevation of the Prague talks to the level of Foreign Minister. By the time I had my last meeting as a Minsk Group Co-Chair with the Azeri and Armenian Foreign Ministers in April 2004 in Prague, the referendum approach was the major one on the table. In fact, despite a lot of permutations since then, it is basically the approach that my successor Steve Mann worked on and his successor Matt Bryza has worked on. Unfortunately though, as is obvious, it also has not brought any resolution of the conflict, at least not so far.

Q: How was the referendum supposed to work? Who would participate?

PERINA: Well, you touch on a key issue because in fact the concept of how the referendum would work has evolved a lot since the original idea that I had. The way I imagined it was that all of the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh prior to the conflict who were still living would be eligible to vote. There apparently were registration lists from the Soviet days that would make it possible to identify them. There would be polling places in Azerbaijan for the refugees, and so on. It would be difficult but it was possible, and the OSCE would have organized the voting. In all likelihood, the Armenians who were about three-quarters of the population of Karabakh before the war would have won the referendum but the occupied territories around Karabakh would have been returned to Azerbaijan in any case. So the outcome would have been similar to Key West but more managed and in response to a more acceptable process, i.e. a referendum, rather than just the result of a war. This would have been a final resolution of the conflict. The way the referendum idea developed after I left, however, was somewhat different. It became a means to postpone a final resolution of the conflict to a referendum many years down the road but to set up an agreed interim solution that would stabilize the conflict and allow the occupied territories to be returned to Azerbaijan and the economic blockade of Armenia to be lifted. Determining the final status of Karabakh would thus be kicked down the road but under terms that all agreed upon and that would stabilize the situation. It was a fair approach. Sometimes freezing a conflict under agreed terms can be a way of resolving it, for all practical purposes.

Q: Does Nagorno-Karabakh have a land connection to Armenia?

PERINA: No, not geographically. This was another big problem. The Armenians were holding a land corridor from the war that connected the two but the corridor was outside of Nagorno-Karabakh proper. So the question of what corridor could be agreed upon in a settlement was an issue. The Armenians of course wanted a corridor with the most security, something that would have more or less the same status as Karabakh. For Azerbaijan, this was clearly both a political problem and a practical one since it would divide regions within Azerbaijan unless it could be crossed and also used by Azerbaijani citizens. This was one of the issues that led to the failure of Key West. It is an issue that comes up with every proposed resolution scheme, but it will have to be part of any final resolution.

Q: How was team cooperation among the three Co-Chairs? Could you work well with the French and Russians?

PERINA: I have to tell you that in this case we worked very well together, all three of us. This may have been because it was a conflict that no one could really control, not even the Russians. It was a true indigenous conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It wasn't like the other secessions that I worked on, those in Georgia and Moldova, that were assisted by Russia and only viable with Russian support. With Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia could possibly bloc a settlement but it could not make one happen. Nobody could force a settlement on the Armenians and the Azeris. It was too big and too emotional an issue for both sides. So there was less opportunity for Russia to pursue its own agenda. With the French, I think we were very lucky with the negotiators. The first French Ambassador I worked with, Philippe de Suremain, was absolutely first-rate. He later became the French Ambassador to Kiev. Sometimes the three of us, that is the three Co-Chairs, were telling one another that if we could find a solution to this conflict it would be an important symbol of the United States, Russia and the European Union, as represented by France, jointly resolving a real international problem. It was a nice idea but it did not work, though the fault was not lack of Co-Chair cooperation. The problem was the complexity of the problem and the intransigence of the parties. My own personal opinion now is that for the time being probably the most you can hope for is stabilizing this conflict rather than really resolving it.

Q: Did you feel the influence of the Armenian lobby in the United States on this issue?

PERINA: Certainly I knew there was a lot of interest in this issue on the Hill and in the Armenian community in America. One of the reasons the U.S. had gotten more deeply involved in this issue by becoming a Co-Chair was in response to pressure on the Administration to do more in finding a resolution of the conflict. So in a sense, I owed the creation of my job, the existence of the Special Negotiator position, to the Armenian lobby. But I must say that apart from the interest, there was no effort by the Hill or the Armenian community to push us in a particular direction in the negotiations. It was more a case of keeping people informed of progress and so on. I regularly briefed staffers and also members on the Hill about the talks, and I also met with Armenian community leaders. I visited Glendale, California, home of one of the largest Armenian communities in the United States. There is even a local Armenian television station there. I gave interviews and had a number of public meetings. It was mainly an effort to reassure people that we were working on the problem and had not forgotten it. I did not go into any details of the negotiations because these were always very tightly held. But I always had good meetings, and I think people trusted us to be fair. Besides, I always had the impression that the American Armenian community was really more interested in the genocide issue than in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Q: So what was the next conflict you worked on?

PERINA: Let's turn to Abkhazia. This is a region on the Black Sea within Georgia that seceded from Georgia when the Soviet Union came apart. The reasons also stemmed from ethnic hatred with a very long history. There was a war between Georgians and Abkhaz in 1992, and it was a very cruel and bloody war. Probably twenty to thirty thousand people were killed, with atrocities committed on both sides. I recognized the minute I started working on this that it would be the most difficult of the four conflicts in my portfolio to resolve. The hatred between Abkhaz and Georgians was the worst I had ever seen in either the Balkans or the Caucasus. It was even greater than that between Serbs and Albanians. This was for historic reasons but also because of the cruelty and nature of the war. It was an unusual war. In most ethnic conflicts of this sort a majority ethnically cleanses a minority. In Abkhazia, however, the reverse was true. The Abkhaz had been an ethnic minority of about 100 thousand people out of half a million but with Russian and Chechen help they ethnically cleansed several hundred thousand Georgians. The entire region after the war had a population of about 175 thousand, which is fewer than the number of displaced Georgians. This meant that the Abkhaz were dead set against any settlement that would allow even a portion of the Georgians to return, which was the prime demand of the Georgians. So there was very little common ground to work with for a settlement.

I always believed that another reason for the difficulty of resolving this conflict was that Abkhazia was really worth fighting over. It is gorgeous, with mountains coming right down to the Black Sea. Since I was the negotiator, I had opportunity to visit all of these secessionist regions, even though American diplomats were normally restricted from travel there because we did not recognize the regimes. I never found Transnistria or Nagorno-Karabakh or for that matter Kosovo particularly attractive, and South Ossetia least of all. But Abkhazia is prime real estate, potentially a big Club Med. I visited during tangerine season, and there were these orchards of tangerine trees right by the seacoast with a Mediterranean climate and beautiful scenery. It was also fascinating because driving from Georgia proper to Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, there were all these abandoned houses and villas along the road. This was because after 200,000 Georgians were expelled, the Abkhaz could not fully populate the area. There were some groups that started coming, particularly Russians and Armenians, but it was not enough to re-populate the region and fill all those abandoned homes.

Q: Were there Russians in the region?

PERINA: There were, in many different capacities. There were a growing number of Russian tourists and also Russian investors and businessmen who saw the potential of the area. There were several Russian bases in Georgia, including in Abkhazia, that were a holdover from Soviet days but still held by the Russians. But most importantly, there was a peacekeeping force in Abkhazia of several thousand Russian troops. This had been part of the ceasefire arrangements in 1994. The peacekeeping force was supposed to be a CIS (Confederation of Independent States) force but in practice it was all Russian, and it was one of the big political problems. The Georgians agreed to the force in 1994 but thereafter recognized that it was really functioning as a protective force for Abkhazia. In my time, the Georgians were always demanding that the Russians pull out but then backed away after the Abkhaz said this would lead to a renewed war. This was a lot of discussion of finding a substitute force from other countries but no agreement was ever reached on one, and not many countries volunteered to be peacekeepers. So there was always a crisis when the time came for the annual renewal of the CIS peacekeeping mandate but in fact it was always renewed.

Q: So how did the negotiations work?

PERINA: The negotiating structure was totally different from the one in Nagorno-Karabakh. The United Nations was in charge of this conflict and not the OSCE. There was in fact a United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) that was responsible for overseeing the ceasefire and the work of the peacekeepers. This did not work very well because the Russian general in charge of the peacekeepers did not feel at all responsible to a civilian UN diplomat who was in charge of the Mission. UNOMIG had a presence of several hundred people in Sukhumi but this was no match to several thousand Russian troops. The UN role did determine that the political negotiations regarding Abkhazia took place in UN contexts, on many different levels. There was a formal negotiating process of which we were not members and that involved the United Nations, Russia, the Georgians and the Abkhaz. This very soon got bogged down and was not going anywhere. Then there were negotiations in New York, in the Security Council, within a group called the Friends of the Secretary General on Georgia. This friends group was basically a number of countries that had expressed interest in this conflict and met periodically to discuss it and give recommendations to the Secretary General. The Friends Group included the United States, Russia, France, the UK and Germany, among a few others. So a lot of negotiating was done in this context. But then in addition, a special mechanism was set up in my time to try to activate discussions between the Georgians and the Abkhaz. This effort was undertaken by the UN Undersecretary for Peacekeeping, a Frenchman named Jean Marie Guï¿½henno. He organized a series of meetings at UN headquarters in Geneva to discuss the Abkhaz issue among the key members of the Friends Group and with the Georgians and Abkhaz. I was the U.S. representative to these meetings, and the first three were held in my time-in February and July of 2003 and then in February of 2004. The first one involved just the UN, U.S., UK, Russia, France and Germany, and the following two included the Georgians and the Abkhaz.

Q: Anything come of these?

PERINA: Unfortunately, I can't say it did. Within the Friends group, the Russians were clearly protective of the Abkhaz, and when we did get an Abkhaz representative to Geneva, he was absolutely unrelenting in refusal to engage in any discussion that would imply the slightest Georgian sovereignty over Abkhazia. And this was supposedly one of the more moderate Abkhaz leaders, their so-called Foreign Minister Sergey Shamba. So the effort was made and a lot of opportunity for talks existed but the process never took off. I think perhaps the only function of it-and this is something of value-was again that the existence of the process reduced the pressure on the Georgian side for military action against Abkhazia. The Georgian government was under a lot of pressure from the 200,000 refugees to do something about Abkhazia. If a negotiating process had not existed, the calls for war would have been even greater. As I was leaving the Special Negotiator job, I felt that this was the most dangerous of the conflicts I had worked on, and that a definite danger existed that it could erupt into a hot war. It became even more dangerous and unstable after Saakashvili became President of Georgia. During my tenure, the President was still Shevardnadze.

Q: Were you there during the Rose Revolution?

PERINA: No. That came after I left. I was there during Shevardnadze's time.

Q: What was Shevardnadze's attitude?

PERINA: I met with him a couple of times during my visits to Tbilisi. Frankly, he was a bit past his prime. There was a lot of unhappiness with him among Georgians, and his popularity ratings had fallen to single digits in some polls. He said all the right things about resolving the Abkhaz conflict but there wasn't much energy behind the words. He was confused on how to go forward and seemed just to be coasting in his presidency. Our meetings were pleasant but never very productive.

Q: Was he afraid to stand up to the Russians?

PERINA: It is difficult to say. He was critical of the Russians, though certainly not as much as his successor Saakashvili. The Russians were playing a dirty game in Abkhazia. Formally they said they were against secession but in practice they did everything to help Abkhazia stay independent of Georgia. This was similar to what they were doing in Transnistria and South Ossetia. The Russians could have helped force a settlement if they wanted to. Abkhazia is not really viable as an independent state. It has less than 200,000 people since the end of the fighting. It would have a very difficult time remaining independent. Probably, it would sooner or later join Russia, and that may be exactly what the Russians are hoping. During my time, I had the suspicion that the Russians and Abkhaz were working toward an eventual partition of the region in which a strip in the south would go to Georgia and the rest join Russia. There is a region in the south of Abkhazia called Gali where in fact the Abkhaz had a very different policy than in the rest of Abkhazia. They were allowing Georgian refugees to return and so on. They may have been working toward an eventual partition as a compromise with Georgia to end the conflict. But this is just a suspicion based on what was happening in Gali. I have no real evidence for it.

Q: Were you getting any analysis from our Embassy in Moscow on Russian policy?

PERINA: I visited Moscow frequently during this time and worked closely with our Embassy. But it was equally difficult for them to analyze Russian intentions. I also think that perhaps Russian policy was not always consistent or coordinated. It may have been much more haphazard and based on conflicting interests than we assume. The Foreign Ministry in Moscow was not a particularly strong institution at this time and probably not in a position to call all the shorts. There were business interests, political considerations, pressures from Russian nationalists in the Duma and so on that may have influenced aspects of Russian policy. I think we sometimes give them too much credit in assuming their policy is a coherent whole.

Q: OK, what is the next conflict?

PERINA: That would be South Ossetia, a small region in the north of Georgia on the Russian border. It is only about two and a half hours by car from Tbilisi. It is called South Ossetia because there is a North Ossetia within Russia proper, right across the border. This is another case of secession by an ethnic group that did not want to be part of an independent Georgia. The story is similar to that of Abkhazia but on a smaller and far more muted scale. There was also a hot war between South Ossetians and Georgians in 1991 and a ceasefire imposed on Georgia by Russia in 1992. Probably about a thousand people died in the fighting, and tens of thousands of Ossetians fled to the north, into Russia. South Ossetia had a population of about 100,000 before the war, divided roughly into two-thirds Ossetians and one-third Georgians. The population now is probably not more than 70,000, in roughly the same proportion. You can see that this was a smaller war, and the stakes are smaller than in Abkhazia. It also was not as brutal. But still it remains an unresolved conflict because the region does not accept Georgian sovereignty and is protected in this by Russia.

Q: Did it seem that this conflict could be resolved more easily?

PERINA: Definitely. This is what many people believed, and I believed as well. There was a different dynamic to this conflict. The hatreds were not as deep as in Abkhazia or Nagorno-Karabakh. In fact, most of the history of the region had been peaceful. Inter-marriages between Georgians and Ossetians were not unusual. The outburst of Georgian nationalism after independence had sparked the conflict but there seemed to be hope of bringing the ethnic groups together again. There was no more violence underway by the time I got involved, and a peacekeeping force of Russian, Georgian and Ossetian forces, plus an OSCE monitoring mission, were keeping things fairly quiet. The conventional wisdom about South Ossetia was that it was not a dangerous conflict and that the Ossetians were waiting to see how the Abkhaz conflict would be resolved and then try to piggy-back on it in cutting a deal with the Georgians.

Q: What kind of a deal?

PERINA: Well, that would depend of what kind of deal the Abkhaz cut. But at one point I had the notion that perhaps we should try reversing this-rather than waiting for South Ossetia to copy Abkhazia, we should start by resolving South Ossetia and seeing if that might help promote an Abkhazia settlement. So I made a trip by car to the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali to meet with the leadership. Unfortunately, however, there was a power struggle underway within this leadership. A rather moderate President, or so-called President, who many thought would be willing to find a resolution of the conflict had just been replaced with strong Russian backing by a hardliner named Eduard Kokoity. Kokoity was in Moscow when I visited and so I was told I could only meet with one of his deputies, a person so unremarkable that I honestly do not remember his name, though it will be in the reporting cable. He was also pretty hardline in not willing to even discuss any compromise to South Ossetia's so-called independence. The one thing he did want to discuss was any possibility of American economic assistance to the region. This was not surprising given the incredible poverty of the region, which was the most salient thing that I remember about it. Tskhinvali was this dusty little town with empty streets and hardly any people that I could see. It was a very depressing place. There was more life to be seen on the road to and from Tbilisi but it consisted largely of open air markets where things like old automobiles and machinery appeared to be on sale. I was later told that this was indeed part of the basically black-market economy of South Ossetia, where stolen and custom-free goods were sold and smuggled into Georgia proper. Like Transnistria except on a smaller and poorer scale, South Ossetia basically found a niche in black-market dealings. One person facetiously called it a big parking lot for stolen cars.

Q: So the black market kept it going?

PERINA: I think it was a big part of the reason. I would say two things kept it going: the economic interests that stemmed from the black market and then Russia. There was probably a lot of overlap between these two. The Russians had both economic and political interests to keep it going. My impression, and everything I heard from other observers, was that most of the population would have been ready for a settlement. There was in particular a real desire for Western economic assistance. The region was terribly poor. One Westerner in Georgia who had been watching the situation for a long time told me that basically South Ossetia could be bought for 100 million dollars. Not literally bought, of course. He meant that an offer of such an assistance program would convince most South Ossetians to re-join Georgia. I think that the European Union tried the approach of offering a large amount of assistance. The European Union in fact took a special interest in this conflict, perhaps also thinking that it was the one most likely to be solved. The EU was looking for projects to enhance its international profile and would very much have wanted itself to be seen as the main force in resolving one of the frozen conflicts in the Caucasus. The EU did a lot in South Ossetia but the main reason it all failed was, in my view, Russian resistance. Moscow was just not ready to give up the region, particularly after Saakashvili came to office and RussianGeorgian relations plummeted. The Russians wanted to hold South Ossetia, if only as additional leverage against Georgia.

Q: So the fourth conflict you dealt with was Transnistria?

PERINA: That's right, the Transnistrian secession in Moldova. We have talked about this conflict before since I already worked on it when I was the Ambassador to Moldova. I just changed hats and continued to work on it as the Special Negotiator. Of course, this was still in sort of an ex-officio capacity since the U.S. was not one of the designated mediators. We just tried to use our influence to promote progress in the talks. A formal role for the U.S. and the EU came later, after I left, when we were formally designated as participating in the OSCE talks. When I became Special Negotiator I knew this conflict quite well, I knew Smirnov and all the players, and thus was in a position to be helpful. I also still believed that this should be the easiest conflict to resolve, even easier than South Ossetia. The economic stakes of the black market were probably much higher but Moldova had the advantage of not being on Russia's border, as Georgia was. Transnistria was not contiguous with Russian territory as South Ossetia and Abkhazia were, and this made it more difficult for the Russians to maintain a grip on it. At least that was my thinking.

Q: Were you wrong?

PERINA: Yes and no. The good news was that Russia in fact was ready to find a settlement, on its terms, to the conflict. The bad news was that its terms included maintaining a status for Transnistria that would largely just have legalized the status quo. I used to characterize the Russian position, in a very simplified way, as follows: The Transnistrians would wink and say "OK, we are part of Moldova," and the Moldovans would wink and say "OK. The conflict is resolved." But otherwise, Transnistria would be given so much autonomy that everything else would stay the same: the Russian presence, the black marketeering, the state within a state structure and so on. In fact, all of these things would be legalized through a settlement. In our view, such a settlement was worse than no settlement at all because it would have been a permanent, institutionalized Russian presence within Moldova and a permanent economic drain on the country.

Q: Was there a real chance of this happening?

PERINA: Absolutely. We in fact came very close to it in December 2003 with the so-called Kozak Memorandum. Dmitriy Kozak, a close confidante of Putin's and his deputy chief of staff, suddenly showed up in Moldova in the fall of 2003 with a mandate to resolve the Transnistria conflict. He did all of the negotiation in shuttle diplomacy between Voronin and Smirnov, and it was a unilateral Russian effort. None of the other mediators were involved. I visited Moldova in late September when he happened to be in town and asked to meet with him. We met for drinks in the lobby of the Jolly Alon Hotel. Kozak was pleasant enough but gave very little information on the substance of the negotiations. He described it as a type of memorandum dealing with the principles of a settlement but not containing many details on implementation. I specifically asked him if there was a military component, such as the question of a peacekeeping force, and he said there was not. A few months later, in mid-November, we were in Moscow with EUR Assistant Secretary Beth Jones to conduct consultations in preparation for the Maastricht OSCE Ministerial meeting, scheduled to be held in early December. It was then that the Russians first showed us a draft of the document being negotiated. They also told us that Voronin had agreed to sign it. Everyone was in total shock. The document was terribly slanted in favor of Transnistria. It outlined a federal structure which retained almost all of Transnistria's independence but also enhanced its influence within Moldova through the legislative structure. The Transnistrians acquired de facto veto power over major Moldovan policy decisions, including on matters of foreign policy. There was also an annex allowing Russian troops to remain in Moldova for twenty years, and perhaps longer. It would have made Moldova a permanent hostage of the Transnistrians.

The Russians wanted the document signed by Voronin and Smirnov prior to the Maastricht Ministerial meeting, and they thus knew they had to make it public. They put it on an internet website, where it began circulating. The reaction was outrage, not just among Western governments but also among Moldovans. By late November, there were demonstrations in Chisinau of up to 50,000 people by some estimates protesting the memorandum. It seemed neither Voronin nor Kozak had anticipated such a reaction, but Putin was going forward with plans to fly to Chisinau for the signing ceremony early in the week of November 23. I was in Vienna at this time involved in the final OSCE preparations for Maastricht. I remember walking along the street in the early afternoon of November 21 and getting a call on my cell phone. It was Voronin's office saying that he wanted to speak with me. He got on the line and asked me what I thought the U.S. reaction would be if he signed the memorandum. I told him that it would be very negative, and that he would lose the support of the United States and most other Western countries as well. He told me he was reconsidering the entire memorandum and would make a decision that weekend. Well, as we later found out, on the eve of Putin's departure for Chisinau, Voronin told the Russians he would not sign and cancelled the signing ceremony. We heard from many sources after that that Putin was just furious at Voronin. What Putin hoped would be a triumph of Russian peacemaking turned out to be a huge personal embarrassment. It led to a major deterioration in Russian-Moldovan relations.

Still, the Russians have never given up on the Kozak approach to resolving this conflict, and they continue to put pressure on Voronin to accept such an approach. He has so far resisted, to his credit, but he is unpredictable in these things and could still change his mind. I like to think that I played a role in preventing him for signing the 2003 document, though the situation was such that there were other Western governments dï¿½marching him at the time, and our bilateral Ambassador Heather Hodges also delivered a formal demarche from Washington against signing the memorandum. In retrospect, however, I think the factor that influenced Voronin most were the domestic demonstrations. By coincidence this also happened to be the weekend that Shevardnadze was toppled from power in Georgia by demonstrations-the weekend of the Rose Revolution. I think this is what scared Voronin most. He saw what happened to Shevardnadze. While Moldova's demonstrations were still manageable, Voronin did not want to take the chance of the same thing happening to him and that is why he decided not to sign.

Q: Given all this, what was your assessment of the U.S. role in all of these frozen conflicts? Was there really a role for the U.S.?

PERINA: I think there was a role in two respects. First, as I mentioned, it is important to keep a negotiating process, a diplomatic track, going in all of these conflicts. If there is no diplomatic activity, the only alternative for those wishing to change things is war. The participation of the U.S. is important to giving most of these negotiations credibility and support. Secondly, the U.S. role is also important as a counter-weight to the Russians. The Moldovans and others understood this, and that is why they always wanted the U.S. engaged in the negotiations. The European Union, for all its good efforts, is still not cohesive or organized or fast enough to be able to stand up to the Russians when it becomes necessary. At the same time, I think it is true that none of these conflicts can be resolved without Russian cooperation. Russia's influence in this part of the world is just too great and likely to remain so. In the case of Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia is in fact the key factor that perpetuates the conflicts. In the case of Karabakh, the Russians cannot force a settlement but they can be spoilers and prevent one if they choose to do so.

Q: Did you sense that Russia was becoming more adversarial and hardline in its policies? Were people starting to become more worried about Russian policies?

PERINA: We spent a huge amount of time trying to figure out Russian policy and what they were really up to. It was very difficult because the policies were so often seemingly inconsistent and contradictory. The Russians would say one thing and act completely differently. Part of this, of course, might be attributed to basic duplicity, and I am sure it was, but it was also more complicated. The Presidents in the region such as Voronin and Shevardnadze all complained to me about their frustrations with the Russians. Voronin in particular would tell me how Putin promised him something but then it never happened. I once asked Trubnikov, the Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister whom I got to know well through the Karabakh negotiations, why this was so. He answered "Well, you know, Putin can decide something but then by the time it works its way through the bureaucracy, it can come out looking very different." It occurred to me then that part of the problem was that all of us who were trained as Sovietologists were in part still looking at Russia from that perspective. We assumed decision-making was centralized, coordinated and controlled, as in the days when all power was concentrated in the Kremlin. In fact, many things in Russia had turned 180 degrees. Russia was more chaotic, uncoordinated, and decentralized than we imagined. There were new factors such as bureaucratic resistance, political and economic rivalries, and corruption that were playing out in very different ways from how things had worked in the Soviet period. I think that was a big part of the challenge in understanding Russia at this time. Now I would say that since this period, the pendulum has again started to swing, and we do see more of a Soviet pattern emerging in Russia. Certainly, Putin has gotten much stronger than he was five years ago and stronger than many people expected. But Russia remains very different from the Soviet Union, and that has made its policies much more difficult to understand and predict.

But let me make on last point here about Russian policy. Even though I believe the Russians are responsible for perpetuating three out of four of these conflicts that I worked on, I think it is still remarkable how relatively few conflicts emerged from the break-up of an enormous empire like the Soviet Union. Imagine if the Soviet Union had split apart in the same manner that Yugoslavia did-what a bloody scene that would have been. It could have happened but it did not. Overall, the Soviet break-up was remarkably peaceful and civilized, certainly when compared to the Yugoslav experience. I think the leaders of the time, Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and also the Russian people, deserve credit for this. There are not many empires in history that allow themselves peacefully to disintegrate. We are all lucky that by and large the Soviet Union did.

Q: So what did you do in 2004?

PERINA: In 2004 I went to my last assignment as Deputy Director of the Policy Planning Staff.

Q: You were in Policy Planning from when to when?

PERINA: I was there from May 2004 until February 2006.

Q: What was your impression of the Policy Planning Staff when you joined in 2004?

PERINA: When I joined I was not certain what to expect. The office had a reputation as a prestigious place to work. This came in good part from its history. It was established in the spring of 1947 by Secretary Marshall, and the first Director was George Kennan. Kennan describes in his memoirs how he was called to set up this small team of foreign policy experts but really had no idea what their job should be. He requested a meeting with Marshall and asked him what the staff should do. Marshall replied with two words: "Avoid trivia." We had coffee cups in the office with those words on them. Kennan clearly followed the advice because less than a month after this meeting, he presented Marshall with the outline for a European recovery program that came to be known as the Marshall Plan.

Q: That's a tough act to follow.

PERINA: It surely is, and not all subsequent Directors were as successful. Over the years, the office has evolved into something between a think tank and a small NSC staff for the Secretary of State. It really has two functions: first, to come with up new ideas and policies, and secondly, to ensure policy coordination within the Department. That is why almost all substantive memos and papers by bureaus have to be cleared with the staff. The staff is organizationally a part of the Secretary's office and is traditionally headed by an outsider, a political appointee, and not a career State Department person. Because the position is considered to be on the personal staff of the Secretary, the Director does not have to be confirmed by the Senate. There are usually two deputies, one a career person and the other from outside. I was the career one. Then there are usually about twenty or so members of the staff who cover the world. There is usually an expert for each of the major geographic regions, as well as experts in functional areas like global economics, arms control, foreign assistance and so on. Compared to other offices in the Department, it is thus a very small and compact operation. The members usually are very smart people from a variety of backgrounds. I would say that in my time about half the staff came from universities and think tanks outside of government, a quarter was from non-State Department agencies like the CIA and the Pentagon, and another quarter came from inside the Department. The office also included the Secretary's speechwriters. It was a very good and stimulating mix of people. It was also interesting because as members of the Secretary's office we got to see almost everything-all the memos, all the intelligence reports and so on, both incoming and outgoing. We even saw the memoranda of conversation or Memcons as they are called of the President's meetings and phone calls with other leaders. These are normally very tightly held.

Q: So did you feel the office was influential on policy?

PERINA: In a bureaucratic way the office always is simply because other offices have to clear their papers with the staff. But if you mean influential on really major foreign policy decisions, then that is a mixed picture. A few years back, one former member of the staff did a very informal historical study of its influence. He concluded that it depends almost entirely on the relationship between the Secretary and the Policy Planning Staff Director. In other words, the staff is a tool for the Secretary to use. Some Secretaries choose to use it more, and some choose to use it less. That determines how much influence it has.

Q: How would you judge the influence of the staff while you were there?

PERINA: When I got there in 2004 Colin Powell was Secretary of State. The Director of Policy Planning was a fellow named Mitchell Reiss, a professor of law and government at William and Mary College. Colin Powell, whom I admire greatly and thus do not want this to be understood in a negative way, was more of an operational person than a strategic, theoretical thinker. He was respectful of Policy Planning Staff papers that we sent him but he rarely elicited them. His strength was in operations and management, where he was probably the best Secretary I have worked for. The second Director of Policy Planning during my time there was Stephen Krasner, a professor of international relations at Stanford who came in with Condi Rice. He was a very serious, critical thinker. But Condi Rice focused strongly on only a few major policy issues, such as Iraq and the Middle East, on which the whole government was focused. She saw the Policy Planning Staff more as an office for special projects. She assigned Steve Krasner the task of preparing a study of the U.S. foreign assistance apparatus, to which he devoted a lot of effort. He also traveled quite a bit which kept him out of the office. So I would say that the influence of the staff in my time was mixed and probably about average.

Q: Were people concerned at how the Iraq situation was developing?

PERINA: The invasion of Iraq came while I was still Special Negotiator and before I joined the Policy Planning Staff. While I wasn't working on Iraq at that time, I do recall thinking how strange it seemed that within the State Department there was so little debate on the decision to invade. The tipping point came imperceptibly, and suddenly everyone just assumed we would invade. It was almost a given. I think in retrospect that one of the reasons for this was that there had been so little debate about the Afghanistan invasion also, and it appeared to have been successful. So everyone somehow hoped that it would be the same with Iraq and did not want to question policies that seemed to be working. By the time I came to the Policy Planning Staff, about a year after the invasion, the situation was already very different. Everybody was recognizing that things were not going as planned and that there was a problem. Even the political appointees on the staff, who were obviously strong supporters of the Administration, admitted this. So yes, people were worried but no one on the staff had any brilliant ideas on how to fix the situation. We really only had one person working directly on Iraq and about four out of the 20 staff members working on the broader Middle East region. It was difficult to second guess the hundreds of people who by then were in Baghdad or elsewhere closer to the issue. We focused more on the broader issue of dealing with failing and renegade states through what Condi Rice called transformational diplomacy.

Q: Could you explain what that is?

PERINA: A lot of people think that transformational diplomacy is just a fancy term for something that has always been on the foreign policy agenda, and they are basically right. On the other hand, giving something a new formulation is sometimes a legitimate way of giving it policy focus and priority. I think that is what Condi Rice was trying to do. I once asked Steve Krasner where the term transformational diplomacy came from. He said he thought it was coined by Condi Rice herself. I always thought that unlikely but really do not know the origins of the term. Perhaps it did come from Condi Rice. The term had different interpretations but they all stemmed from the notion that in the post-Cold War world weak and failing states were the chief threat to regional stability. I always interpreted transformational diplomacy as the process of developing tools to transform such failing states into successful ones through promotion of economic development, good governance and so on. In its broadest interpretation, however, transformational diplomacy could also encompass very interventionist policies in the internal affairs of states. This always seemed to me uncomfortably close to an ideological justification of the policies that got us into Iraq. But the idea that transformation of dysfunctional states into successful states is a very high priority in today's world is, I think, legitimate, and it is certainly a different priority from the one we had in the Cold War when we supported states just because they were on our side and not Moscow's.

Q: When you were in policy planning did you pick up on the tensions between the State Department and the Defense Department under Donald Rumsfeld?

PERINA: Yes, the fact of these tensions was no secret. They were evident on many levels, starting with the relations between Rumsfeld and Colin Powell. I saw some of the memos between the two of them, and there was no love lost. One area where policy tensions were very evident was on the issue of who would be responsible for the administration of Iraq after we occupied it. Initially, the Defense Department took the lead on this and angered many in the State Department, who felt that State should be in charge. The Defense Department soon saw that this was going to be tougher than anticipated and decided it really didn't want the job. At the same time, State recognized it lacked both resources and personnel for such a huge undertaking. The truth is no one in the U.S. Government, neither DOD nor State, was adequately prepared to take on this task. Let me go back to one illustrative anecdote on this. In about March 2003, while I was still Special Negotiator, I received a call from the office of Marc Grossman, the Undersecretary for Political Affairs, asking if I would be interested in going to Iraq to work with Jay Garner, the retired general who took over as the first administrator of Iraq after the invasion. I said emphatically that I would not be because I was very happy with the Special Negotiator job and had no interest in leaving. But I was astounded that I would even be considered for such a position since I knew nothing about Iraq and that part of the world and had neither served nor even visited there. I had absolutely no expertise for such a job but the Department was just trying on short notice to find available people with Ambassadorial rank to fill the slots it had agreed to fill on Garner's staff. This is an illustration of how prepared the Department was to take on the nation-building of Iraq.

This experience did, however, lead to one of the Department's initiatives during my time on the Policy Planning Staff and that is the creation of the Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization. This office was created in order to ensure that in the future the Department would be capable of taking on reconstruction and stabilization of post-conflict states and not be caught flat-footed as it was after Iraq. It was also hoped that the creation of the office within the State Department would settle the issue of which agency had the lead in such instances. The idea as originally conceived was that there would be a coordinator and a small staff of about a dozen people who would compile action plans and lists of experts-including those outside the government-who could be called up on short notice to help with the many specialized tasks of post-conflict reconstruction, things like providing humanitarian assistance, training police, establishing civil authority and so on. The Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization itself was not intended to take on these tasks but rather to have a surge capacity of finding the right people to do them on short notice. The problem was that the Department recruited a coordinator for the office who had a much more ambitious concept of it. He started recruiting a staff not just for potential future conflicts but rather for almost all ongoing conflicts in every geographic region. This was naturally resisted by many of the regional bureaus in the Department and started some real bureaucratic battles. It also soon outstripped the resources allocated to the project. This original coordinator soon left and a more modestly functioning office now exists. It is, I think, a useful innovation and a concrete example of the kinds of ideas we tried to come up with under the rubric of transformational diplomacy.

Q: Did you find any of your experience with conflicts in the Balkans and the Caucasus useful to you on the Policy Planning Staff?

PERINA: I think that to some degree it was. From the experience of implementing the Dayton Agreement in Bosnia, I at least knew the key elements that had to be included in a reconstruction and stabilization effort. But we faced a much deeper cultural divide in dealing with Muslim and Middle Eastern countries, and the scale of the effort was another order of magnitude. What we most lacked were not experts on conflicts but rather experts on the Muslim world. There was a great shortage of such expertise in the Department. The other Deputy Director on the Policy Planning Staff was, like me, also a Europeanist by background. We all tried our best to refocus on issues like democratization of the Muslim world, which was a high priority. I did learn quite a bit but would still not consider myself an expert.

In October 2004 I went on a trip to sub-Saharan Africa with our resident Africa expert, Makila James. We visited Ethiopia and South Africa, though a planned stopover in Nigeria had to be cancelled because of labor unrest in the country. The trip had a twofold purpose. First we wanted to start annual policy planning consultations with the African Union. This was successful, and the following year we hosted an African Union delegation in Washington for the first such meeting. The second objective of our trip was to look at developments in the Muslim communities of sub-Saharan Africa. This was a bit of shock. African Muslim communities were generally considered rather moderate but we found rapidly-growing radicalization, often through the madrassas or Muslim schools staffed by teachers from Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. In Johannesburg, the editor of a Muslim newspaper who invited us for a meeting in his office almost got into a fistfight when one of his colleagues objected violently to our presence. On our return, we wrote a memo to Colin Powell about the radicalization of African Islam. It went into the larger effort of trying to improve U.S. public diplomacy in the Muslim world, which was another very frustrating endeavor.

Q: How so?

PERINA: Well because it was such a difficult task and because people just did not want to recognize the obvious-that much of the anti-American feeling in the Muslim world and elsewhere was a direct result of our policies in the Middle East, and especially Iraq. Not many people were willing to say that even though I think many recognized it. The Deputy Secretary, Richard Armitage, was among those who did recognize this and dared to say it but there were not many like him. Particularly irritating was when some people in the Administration tried to find easy answers by blaming anti-Americanism on the alleged failures of the Foreign Service and career diplomats. The argument was that the culture of the Foreign Service did not value public diplomacy, and that ambassadors spent too little time on it. At one time, there was a big exercise to find ways of motivating our diplomats to give more public speeches and interviews. Now there is an element of truth in public diplomacy not traditionally being a big factor in career advancement in the Foreign Service, and also in saying that most U.S. embassies should probably do more in this area. But to think that getting more speeches out of ambassadors was the answer to anti-Americanism in the world was naï¿½ve and allowed people to downplay the role of policy as a problem.

Q: What was the feeling in the Department on the effectiveness of Colin Powell?

PERINA: I am perhaps not objective here because I had already worked with Colin Powell on the National Security Council in 1987-89, and I really admired him. I think he was very popular in the State Department as an excellent manager of people. He did a lot for the institution, and people sensed that and appreciated it. It was in stark contrast to the feelings in this regard toward his predecessor and successor. But in terms of policy, I think it was recognized, and he would recognize himself, that he was not as influential as he or others would have hoped. He was generally outflanked on policy issues by Rumsfeld and Cheney, and Condi Rice as NSC advisor was not of much help to him. I sensed that he was never fully comfortable in the job of Secretary of State, and he was never accepted into the real inner team in the White House. The real tragedy, of course, was his UN speech prior to the Iraq invasion which in retrospect truly damaged his reputation. I think his years in the State Department were very difficult ones for him.

Q: How was the transition from Powell to Rice perceived?

PERINA: It was a difficult transition, and not a particularly friendly one. You can see it beginning with the way Colin Powell was dismissed. He resigned, of course, and he did not want to stay on. But the announcement came almost like a dismissal. It was basically a White House press release. No public statement by the President, no Rose Garden farewell. It was quite extraordinary for a departing Secretary of State to get so little recognition. It reflected the fact that Colin Powell had fallen out of favor in the White House. Some of the political appointees on the Policy Planning Staff told me how Colin was viewed as basically unsupportive of the President's policies and how he was suspected of leaking information to the press that distanced him from these policies. He was even criticized by some of not doing enough to counter anti-Americanism abroad because he did not travel enough to defend U.S. policies overseas. Of course, it was not just Colin Powell but the entire State Department, and particularly the Foreign Service, which was seen as unsupportive of White House policies. This has been the complaint of many administrations but I think the distrust was especially bad at this time. So when Condi Rice was announced as Powell's successor, the suspicion immediately surfaced that she was coming to clean up the State Department and get it under control. Her arrival did not dispel this. Senior career officers who were most closely identified with Powell did not fare well. A large number retired. They were replaced by people she brought in, primarily from the NSC or her Stanford days. All of this, of course, is the prerogative of the Secretary of State, and most do want their own team. But there was an exceptional tension in this transition.

Q: To what degree did Iraq dominate the foreign policy agenda? How much attention was given to other issues?

PERINA: By the time I arrived, the Policy Planning Staff paid more attention to other issues simply because there were so many people elsewhere working Iraq that there was not very much our small office could contribute. But for the Department and the government as a whole, Iraq was the gorilla in the room. That was the main focus of U.S. policy, particularly as the insurgency grew. Beyond Iraq, there were the broader issues of the Middle East and the Muslim world. The Policy Planning Staff did work on these issues, particularly in developing ideas on how to promote reform, democracy and economic development in Muslim countries. After these big issues came some secondary issues such as Iran, North Korea, Venezuela and so on. They were on the radar screen of the Department principles, though not consistently. After that, however, most issues were worked at fairly low levels in the State Department. There were exceptions, of course. Colin Powell took a lot of interest in Darfur and tried to do something about it. He was the first major leader to call what was happening there genocide.

Q: Did the Policy Planning Staff work on that?

PERINA: We did. Our Africa expert, Makila James, did a lot of work on it. It was a very complicated situation, with roots in Sudan's civil war and also in deep-seated ethnic enmity. The only way to stop the killing quickly would have been to put in some sort of peacekeeping force but nobody was up to that. The U.S. was bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Europeans played with the idea but backed away when they saw the commitment required, the African Union claimed to want to do it but completely lacked resources. Thus people focused on diplomatic efforts which were very frustrating and manipulated by the Sudanese Government. People in the West understood the enormity of the tragedy- over two million displaced people and hundreds of thousands, perhaps half a million, killed. But many people did not understand the enormity of the task. Many imagine a small region like Kosovo but in fact Darfur is about the size of France, with almost no infrastructure. Policing a region like that is a real challenge, and the international community's efforts in the political arena basically failed. Those who really do deserve a lot of credit are the humanitarian organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, who delivered the food and relief supplies to keep so many of the displaced alive. They are the unsung heroes of the international community. I found much the same thing in Yugoslavia. The UN was rightly criticized for its political failure in dealing with the Bosnian war but UN humanitarian relief agencies did a very good job in helping the civilian population survive the conflict. They deserve a lot of credit.

Q: Was there much attention on the planning staff paid to Europe in this period?

PERINA: Relations with Europe were not good in this period. It was actually the worst period in transatlantic relations that I saw during my entire career. Given the amount of sympathy and support we received from the Europeans right after 9/11, the reversal in the relationship was dramatic. The parting of ways, of course, came with Iraq. The Western Europeans were angry at us for invading without a Security Council resolution, and the Administration here was furious at the Western Europeans, and particularly France, for frustrating efforts to get a resolution. This anger at France was picked up by the whole country, with the Freedom Fries and so on. It was a real low point in our relations with Europe. The exceptions were the UK and the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe-the Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Romanians and so on, the New Europe as opposed to the Old Europe in Donald Rumsfeld's lexicon. The relationship with the UK reflected the very close Bush-Blair relationship. There seemed to be a real personal friendship between the two men. They spoke frequently on the telephone, often at length and in great detail about Iraq and world developments. As for Eastern and Central Europe, we were still popular there thanks to the legacy of the Cold War and our image as the power that stood up against Soviet despotism. Even in those years, however, one could see this goodwill toward America dissipating as these countries began to have their own doubts about Iraq and started maneuvering for EU membership. The Policy Planning Staff still had its established contacts and consultations with our European counterparts but the broader relationship was very cold. Interestingly, this did not seem to bother many in the Administration. Europe was seen as an economic partner but not a real political force in the world. The analyses were all that it would become weaker and less relevant to U.S. security interests. Russia sparked some concern, but it was also seen as weak and non-threatening. Not a lot of attention seemed to be paid to it by senior Administration officials. The real new power on the horizon was China. It received a good deal of attention.

Q: How so?

PERINA: China was seen as the economic giant who was the main rival of the U.S. for global resources and whose political development had not kept pace with its economic development. There was a lot of concern for a certain period about Chinese-Taiwanese relations. The Taiwanese were seen as unpredictable, and the Chinese were seen as having a rather unrefined, undeveloped policy toward the island. The real nightmare scenario was a conflict breaking out between them which would put pressure on the U.S. to intervene.

Q: What about Iran? Was there any support for trying to open a dialogue with it?

PERINA: I was not aware of any during my time on the Planning Staff. I heard that there had been some attempts through diplomatic channels during the Powell years but that the Iranians had shown no interest. There was a feeling among the experts that the internal political situation in Iran would make it very difficult for any leader to admit to a dialogue with the United States. The Iranians were not ready for that. The Administration also still held to a tough line on the axis of evil countries. Being tough was seen as the way to go. On the nuclear issue, the Europeans stepped in and tried to start a dialogue. We did not object to this because it took away pressure from the U.S. to talk to Iran and showed the Europeans what tough going it was. We did not think the EU effort would succeed and were irritated that the Europeans did not see that themselves but did we not try to stop them.

I had some contact with Iranians when I was Special Negotiator. There was a tradition for the Minsk Group Co-Chairs from time to time to brief the Iranians on the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations as a courtesy, since Iran was a neighboring country to the conflict. The Iranians asked for such a briefing shortly after President Bush's "axis of evil" speech, perhaps as a test of whether the U.S. would still have contact with them. I had to get permission directly from Colin Powell for the briefing but he concurred. The French Co-Chair organized the meeting in Paris. It lasted about an hour and dealt strictly with Nagorno-Karabakh and nothing else so it really did not qualify as any sort of dialogue in a political sense.

Q: Did you get any feel for the influence on foreign policy of Vice President Cheney and his office?

PERINA: Not really. I was not involved in any deliberations at that level. I certainly knew the conventional wisdom in Washington that the Vice President was very powerful. What I did see was that members of his staff participated at more interagency meetings than I had ever seen with previous vice presidents. I also know that their views were taken very seriously in the clearance process. This was in some contrast to staff members of the National Security Council. In fact, within the bureaucracy the NSC was considered a relatively weak institution compared to its role in other administrations. Many of the people were junior and did not seek to exert much influence. It is interesting how these power relationships of institutions transfer down to relationships between people on tasks like drafting memos.

Q: When did you retire?

PERINA: I retired on April 30, 2006 after almost 32 years in the Foreign Service. I did subsequently take on some short-term assignments as a retiree, including a two-month stint as Chargï¿½ d'Affaires in our Embassy in Chisinau and a four-month stint as the Chargï¿½ in the Embassy in Yerevan, Armenia. The family links also continued because three months before my retirement my younger daughter, Alexandra, joined the State Department as an attorney in the Legal Adviser's Office. She wanted to work in the State Department, which I think says something good about my career there, at least as perceived by my family.

Q: That's a good way to end.

PERINA: I think so.

Q: Thank you very much, Rudy