

WILLIAM B. COBB, JR.

Interviewed by: Horace G. Torbert

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Q: I'm glad to have you with us Mr. Cobb, and your taking time out for this. I hope to get a little review of your history as a Foreign Service officer and in other activities concerned with foreign affairs. Perhaps you would like to start out by telling us a little something about how you became involved in the foreign affairs field, and how you became interested and finally came into the Foreign Service.

COBB: My father was a public servant and was working for the county in which he was born in North Carolina and I grew up with the idea that public office is a public trust. I attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, entering in 1940 and graduating in 1943 at the age of nineteen because of the acceleration due to World War II.

Q: That gave you certain social problems at the time, didn't it? Except that everybody was in the same boat.

COBB: Everybody was in the same boat. I was turned down for military service because of defective vision in my left eye, which has been present since birth. I then began working for the Glenn Martin company in Baltimore as an inspector in aircraft manufacturing and in spare parts. While working for Glenn Martin I was a member of the UAW-CIO and was active in trying to unionize the plant where I worked. I was asked to become shop steward for my section of the plant.

Q: I take it you were successful in activating it?

COBB: No, we never won an election. But we tried, we got 43% of the vote, or something like that. But I was asked to become a shop steward for the section where I worked, representing about 1,000 employees, and I realized that I was way over my head in what I was doing. I think the reason I was asked to be the shop steward was because I was the only person who had a college education and whom the members felt could negotiate with management on management's level.

Q: That is an interesting beginning.

COBB: At this time I decided that I would be better off if I went back to school. I had a degree in political science, majoring in public service and public administration. I applied to Princeton to attend graduate school. I was accepted and went to graduate school in October 1944 and completed one year. In January of 1945 I heard from a cousin of mine who was in the Foreign Service, Churchill Hutton, that there was an effort on the part of Department to recruit clerk-vice consuls in the Foreign Service Auxiliary and Churchill suggested that if I were interested in coming into the Foreign Service, this might be an opportune time to explore it further. I knew of his career; he had served in India and Ireland and other posts. I was interested in the Foreign Service for this reason. I then came to Washington and had an interview with the late Walton Ferris who was recruiting for the Foreign Service Auxiliary at this time. After the interview I received a letter offering me a position as a clerk-vice consul. There were travel orders to come to Washington. I requested deferment of the appointment until I completed my year at Princeton and then accepted it and came to Washington in June 1945.

Q: Were you at the Wilson Center at Princeton?

COBB: I was in the School of Politics. I had three outstanding professors at the School of Politics; I studied constitutional law under Edwin S. Corwin, I studied public administration under William Carpenter, who was the head of the department, and I studied the foundations of national power under Harold Sprout. This gave me a strong foundation on which to build.

I came to Washington in June of 1945; I attended what was then the old Foreign Service Training School.

Q: You were handled much like an incoming FSO class?

COBB: They did not have any FSO classes. In my class there was Mary Olmsted, myself, Steve Comiskey, these are names that come to my mind. All of us were expecting to go overseas as vice consuls or economic analysts, or to do other specialized work that might come along.

Q: Was there sort of an understanding on this that you would get an opportunity to become a FSO?

COBB: No. No understanding at all. This was before the Foreign Service Act of 1946 and the Department was doing its best to fill vacancies using no legislation at the time. It must have had, I think, an executive order allowing it to fill certain jobs in the Foreign Service Auxiliary. We were commissioned when we went overseas as vice consuls but we were not Foreign Service officers. We were much like the old non-career vice consuls, the same legislation may have been used. When I was first assigned after completing the Foreign Service course under the leadership of Perry Jester and Carol Foster I was assigned to Luanda, Angola. At the time the war was still going on. I filled out a visa application and waited for the visa to come through. I later learned the application had been sent by the Portuguese embassy to Lisbon by sea mail and that Lisbon, not wanting a second officer in Luanda, had sent the application by sea mail for the approval of the governor general. The Department inquired after six weeks where the visa was and was told that it was in process, so to speak, and just to wait the outcome. Then I waited another six weeks, this was a total of twelve weeks of waiting. By that time even the Department was irritated and I was asked if I would go to Managua on a temporary assignment while waiting for the visa? I said sure. I did not know where Managua was, I did not even know what country it was in at the time. The song had not been written. ["Managua, Nicaragua is a wonderful town"] I was told it was in Central America and the best way to get there was to take the train to New Orleans and take the Pan Am plane from New Orleans by way of Brownsville, Merida to Central America and to get off in Managua. That is about what happened. I took the train to New Orleans, bought two Haspel suits from the factory for \$10.50 a piece and felt as if I was prepared to go anywhere the Foreign Service might send me.

I arrived in Managua two days later, having taken the up and down trip in a DC-3 or 4. I arrived at the airport in Managua and took a taxi into town. I had been told in the Department that I would probably go to the Grand Hotel, so I went to the Grand Hotel and asked if there was a reservation for me. The answer being no, I made one, got my room and asked where the embassy was? They said it was about three blocks down the street so I walked three blocks down the street to the embassy. I walked in and I said, "I'm the new vice consul". There were no marine guards in those days. They did not know who I was. I walked into the office of Maurie Bernbaum, who was the second secretary, chancellor of the embassy, and Maurie said, "What are you doing here?" I said I have been assigned here to replace Dave Ray. He said that he knew nothing about it, where is so-and-so? "I got a telegram saying he was coming but I did not get one saying you were coming."

I said, "I'm sorry, but here I am. What shall I do?" He said, "In the first place, go to the Grand Hotel and get yourself a room." I said I had done that. "Then you come back to the office and I will tell you what to do. All you have to do is to replace Dave Ray as the vice consul in charge of the visa section. Dave has been declared persona non grata and left the country last week at the request of Mr. Somoza." He had been known to agree with a visa applicant that Somoza was a son-of-a-bitch. The visa applicant went back and told the members of his club that everybody in the embassy did not think that Somoza was perfect, that at least there was a vice consul who thought he was a son-of-a-bitch. Somoza heard about it within twenty-four hours and came down to the chancery and told Ambassador Fletcher Warren he wanted Ray out of there immediately as being disloyal. Fletcher Warren did not have much choice except to get him out. So that is how the vacancy had occurred and I was assigned to it.

I was shown my office, which was not an office, just a place in the interior patio and was told that visa applicants would come to me and I would say to them, in Spanish, "Jura usted que lo que ha declarado en su solicitud es la verdad." I asked what that meant. It means, "Do you swear you have told the truth in your application?". I said "I can certainly do that". So that is how my Foreign Service career began. I stayed in Nicaragua only two weeks.

Q: Only two weeks!

COBB: Only two weeks. I fell and broke a bone in my left leg just above the ankle. I did not know it was a break for two days and hobbled to and from the office on a stick, but realized I could not walk on the foot and so Maurie Bernbaum called Dr. Fuentes, who was the local dentist and asked him to x-ray it. So I went to the dentist's office; the dentist put his x-ray machine down over my ankle and took it a picture of it.

Q: There was no shielding I suppose?

COBB: Oh no. I think it was the only x-ray in town that worked, that's why we used it. He reported back that I had a broken leg and that I ought to have attention. There was no plaster of Paris in the country at the time so they could not set it. Bernbaum wisely sent this information to the Department of State which said, "Send him back home and we will put him in a cast when he gets back". So I left Managua on about the 16th of October 1945, flew back to Washington, landed at National Airport, called the office of Harry Havens, who was in charge of the medical branch and told him I was reporting in as according to the orders I had received. He said, "Take a taxi out to the Navy hospital. I will arrange to have you admitted." Which I did.

Q: This was out in Bethesda?

COBB: Yes it was. I took a taxi out to the naval hospital and when I got there, I went in the emergency entrance and there was a stretcher, and a young Navy lieutenant said in a carefully modulated voice, "Do-you-speak-English?" I said, "Yes, what do you think I speak?" He said, "We were told that the vice consul from Nicaragua was coming. We did not know if he spoke English or not." I was in the naval hospital where they set the bone and took care of it. I had a complete recovery. Then I had to negotiate with the Department my status of medical leave. I had not been in the Department long enough to acquire any medical leave, so I was put on leave without pay during the time I was in the naval hospital. In those days the charge was \$5 a day for full coverage for Foreign Service officers.

Q: Essentially you paid for your food and bed linen.

COBB: That is right. I was there for a total of twenty days altogether and it cost me a \$100 out of my pocket. Of course my salary at the time was \$1,800 a year, so that was still quite a hunk of money. After being released by the naval hospital I reported for duty in the Walker Johnson Building, a State Department annex, and was assigned to work on congressional correspondence, which at the time was a flood, and there was no orderly system for handling it. We would draft letters for the congressmen as best we could with the information we had. Half of them got out all right and the other half were sent back by Blanche Halla for various reasons. I stayed around until I was told there was a vacancy in Havana and I was assigned there. I went to Havana on the 31st of January 1945.

Q: This really then was the official beginning of your Foreign Service career. Now this was another visa assignment, but this time you were an expert after having done it for two weeks in Managua.

COBB: This time I was in the immigration visa section in Havana. This was a very interesting position. There was a large number of European refugees in Havana who had gotten there before we entered World War II and who were awaiting an opportunity to come to the United States. They had regarded Havana as a staging area and did everything they possibly could to influence the prompt issuing of visas to enable them to come to the States.

Q: These were to a large measure Jewish refugees?

COBB: Yes.

Q: They had been there long enough to be pretty sick of it all.

COBB: Many of them had finally gotten jobs in Cuba. They had not intended to when they came, but they finally did and were working as shopkeepers, clerks or commission agents, things like that. They were making a fairly good living. They did not have a lot of resources and this was one of the things that troubled the Department at the time. We had an unspoken rule that either the applicant or his sponsor had to have at least \$5,000 in the bank in the United States in order to avoid becoming a public charge. This was very much on peoples' minds at the time because of the return of the GIs from Europe, the uncertainty of the economic situation in the States, whether there would be adequate employment opportunities for our own people as well as for the refugees. It was a major factor in determining eligibility under the immigration laws. There were the other usual factors such as to swear you were not a member of the Communist Party, you were ruined if you had tuberculosis in those days.

Q: It is amazing how things have changed, the health thing, particularly tuberculosis. One tends to forget, it could almost like AIDS today.

COBB: It was a "loathsome and infectious disease", I think that was definition we were using.

Q: What was Havana like economically in those days, had it prospered from the war?

COBB: Yes, Havana had prospered during the war. The price of sugar had been good during the war. Cuba lived off sugar and tobacco, then as now. Havana was in its best days, people spoke of the Vaca Gorda (fat cow) as being the good old days in Cuba, and this was almost the Vaca Gorda again. The US gambling interests were just coming into the casinos in Havana. They slowly began to infiltrate in 1945 and the American tourists overwhelmed the gambling industry coming down on the boats overnight from Key West to Havana. They carried hundreds of people and fifty to seventy-five automobiles, and they ran every day. The tourist business was extremely good to the Cubans. It was an interesting time.

Q: I imagine the protection business in the embassy was considerable?

COBB: It was. I was in the visa section for a year under John Cope who was in charge of the section. He replaced Bill Walker, who died a few weeks ago. I don't know what has become of Cope, but he was a good officer. The DCM at the time was Bob Woodward and the economic counselor was Al Nufer; they made a very good team.

Q: Later Al died in the Philippines.

COBB: He died in the Philippines, but he served with distinction in Argentina. He was a very talented officer who had little educational background other than the hard-knocks of this world. He never went to college. He had gone to a German commercial high school and had become a clerk in the consulate in Bremen, right after the war, World War I. He had a sister named Helen, who was also a clerk in the consulate. Both had long Foreign Service careers. Subsequently I remember Al Nufer saying that despite the instructions from the Department we caught a lot more flies with sugar than with vinegar. He was always trying to protect US interests in the Cuban context and at the same time not unnecessarily offend the Cubans. His wife was a Cuban from Cienfuegos. So far as I know she is still living in Florida. One of Al's daughters had married a rancher in Cuba which at the time was seeking to avoid dependence on sugar and tobacco, the Cuban government was encouraging the introduction of livestock and ranching. The other one married the son of the ambassador, Henry Norweb.

Q: Norweb was sort of a legendary figure in the Foreign Service, do you have any stories about him?

COBB: Yes. Not Norweb as such. There was a story in Havana at the time that Bob Woodward was trying to help Norweb understand more completely than he did what was going on in the embassy. He took him on a tour of the embassy one day. Norweb came into the visa section, stood at the head of the stairs, looked out at the mass of about 400 people waiting for word on their visas. He said, "Hmm, it looks like Macy's basement" turned around and walked away. Bob's efforts did not come to much.

After a year I was transferred to the Citizenship and Protection section on a rotational basis just to get more experience. That was completely different. There I issued identifications cards to Americans who were born in Cuba but who wanted identification as Americans but who did not want to travel so we did not give them passports. We gave them identity cards. In the past five years I have seen one of the identity cards I issued in 1946.

Q: This did not require much in the way of procedure?

COBB: Yes it did, the same as getting a passport. The application had to be sent to Washington for approval.

Q: Why do something different?

COBB: Why not issue the passport? It was just that the card was a cheaper document. At the time there was a lot of passport theft and tampering with passports and the Department did not want to have as many American passports available to the American public as it does now.

I had very close relations with the funeral industry in Havana. On six successive Saturday nights, after midnight, I was called because of deaths of American citizens. Most of them were having too good a time for their age. The crowds would come over on the ferries, they would drink all the way over to Cuba, they would drink the whole time they were in Cuba and they would have a heart attack and have to be shipped back on the ferry, so to speak. Because of the history during the Prohibition era when caskets were used to ship liquor from Cuba to the United States instead of bodies, the vice consul was required to check the contents of the casket and to certify that to his knowledge that it contained only the body of the individual and then to put the US Government seal over eight counter-sunk screws on the top of the shipping box to insure it was not tampered with between the time it was closed and the time it arrived in the States. That was my job and I did it.

We also had other problems in Cuba. Once I was called by the police to say that they had a crazy man in jail and that he was beating against the bars and they did not know what to do with him. Could I come to see if I could quiet him down? So I went to the city jail and there was a man jumping on the bars as if he were an orangutan, clad only in his shorts. I asked what happened? They explained they had picked him up - he had gone berserk in his hotel room, he had destroyed everything in the room. The manager of the hotel had called the police to take him away. They had done so and put him in the jail temporarily. They said, "Now we turn him over to you." I said, "I don't know what to do with him". I called the office and said I have an American on my hands who seems to be crazy, I don't know what to do with him. Chuck Hutchinson, who was the consul and my boss, said, "Put him in a straitjacket and take him to the insane asylum." I asked if there were a psychiatric hospital we could take him to first? They said yes, so he was put in a straitjacket and the police drove me and the man to a psychiatric hospital on the edge of town. When we got there the patient tried to make a run for it and escape but fell into some bushes so they were able to catch him and restrain him. I went back to ask the police what kind of personal effects he had; he had a couple of hundred dollars in his wallet and I took this into custody. The next morning I got a telephone call from the psychiatric hospital say, "you can come and get him now". He is sober and ready to go back to the States. It was purely an alcoholic thing. I went and got him, brought him down to the office, went out with him and bought some clean clothes with the money he had and got him a ticket on an airplane, took him to the airline terminal, put him on the bus to the airport and he thanked me very much. I never heard from him since.

While I was in Havana I took the written Foreign Service exams, I think in November or September 1946, after the passage of the Foreign Service Act of 1946. Three of us in Havana took the exams there, Jimmy Cortada, George Warrelman and I. I was the only one who passed. I did not pass by a very good grade, I got a 72. I had done so well in the reading comprehension portion of the exam, I had gotten a 95 or 99 or something like this, and that carried me. This brought up the rest of my grades so that I got a passing grade on the written. The question was, what was going to happen on the orals. About that time Bob Woodward, who was DCM, was driving back to Washington from Havana and he came up through North Carolina and stopped off in my hometown and visited with my parents, introducing himself to them. They were, of course, enchanted. He got to know them and to know where I came from. Bob has said that he recalls even now how gregarious and hospitable a person my father was.

I took the bus up from Key West to Washington to take the orals. You paid your own way and this was the cheapest way of doing it. I took the oral exam and was told I had a passing grade and that I would be commissioned as a Foreign Service officer. I went back to Havana and found that my social life had changed immensely. I had never been invited into the home of any Foreign Service officer when I was in Havana and suddenly I was on the list as the junior eligible bachelor. I went everywhere, was asked everywhere and enjoyed going everywhere. It was a fact of life in those days that there was a distinct separation in the office and in the community between people who were Foreign Service officers and people who weren't.

Q: I think that began to change fairly soon thereafter.

COBB: A number of us worked on changing it because we had experienced it at the time. And finally in May I received a transfer to Manila.

Q: Was Nufer already there?

COBB: No, Nufer did not get for three years, he had just left to go to El Salvador as ambassador and was replaced by Les Mallory. I was in Havana with an unusually interesting group of officers, Prescott Childs, whom you may remember. Prescott and his wife and two boys were good friends. Maury Hughes was also a consul general. This was time when the first administrative officers were sent out to replace the consuls general who were the administrators of the mission.

Q: Many were recruited from the Department of Agriculture.

COBB: Some were recruited from the Social Security Administration, others from the Civil Service Commission. I remember the tension that was caused when Roy Little was assigned as administrative officer in Havana and Prescott Childs just could not understand why there was to be an administrative officer, he had been running the administration in every post he had been in, and why should they put someone in to do this specialized job? Roy Little fitted into the job very well and tensions evaporated when we saw the usefulness of having an administrative officer.

Q: Well you went to Manila after taking home leave at your own expense?

COBB: Home leave and medical leave just did not exist. One of things that happened to me when I became a FSO, I had a cut in salary. I had risen to \$2,600 and I was knocked back to \$2,250. They thought this was necessary. Subsequently someone put through and amendment to legislation saying that you could not lose money when you were transferred from one job to another in the same agency. But instead of big salaries there were good perks. When I was transferred to Manila - no consultation at the Department of State - I had completed two and a half years in Havana, I wrote to Rebecca Sandford, who was in charge of travel to the Far East, and I said, "Can you arrange for me to go from Havana to Manila by ship, because I have an automobile in Havana and I would like to take it to Manila?" She wrote back and said it was advisable as the cheapest way of getting my car to Manila was putting it on a boat. So I was able to go first class on the President Polk which stopped in Havana, through the canal, up through Acapulco, Los Angeles, San Francisco on to Honolulu, Yokohama, Shanghai, Hong Kong and then Manila.

Q: This was about five or six weeks of transit?

COBB: Forty-two days. I was on shipboard with Fred Morris Dearing and his wife. He had been an Assistant Secretary for Latin American affairs and minister to Peru. Fred Dearing and I hit it off right away and he recommended to me to keep a journal. He said that every Foreign Service officer worth his merit keeps a journal. So I started keeping a journal, but did not keep it up.

Q: Useful things. I never had the discipline myself.

COBB: Also on board was Klahr Huddle, the first American ambassador to Rangoon. I got to know him well. There was a couple returning to Port Said as consul and a number of others going to China.

Q: Did you have time to get off at each post?

COBB: There were a hundred passengers on board, all first class. The President Polk and the President Monroe were owned by the American President Line, and they went around the world. The President line had other ships that exclusively plied the Pacific, the bigger ones. For example, after going through the Panama Canal we got into San Francisco we were there four days while they loaded and equipped the ship for its onward voyage. San Francisco was the home port of the President Line. I stayed at the Fairmont Hotel, it cost me \$4.50 a night for a single room with bath. I sent out my laundry and that was more expensive than the room.

When we got to Honolulu we were offered a tour of the island. We got to Hong Kong, Mr. Dearing had sent a telegram saying that they hoped to call on the consul general and got a telegram back saying, "the American consulate general is not an agency of American Express and you should not expect the kind of service one would get from American Express, I would be glad to receive you." [Laughter]

When we got to Yokohama...

Q: This is side B of the interview.

COBB: We got to Yokohama, we were met by a car from the consulate general and were taken there to meet what was described as a very promising young officer who had just become Class Three, and both Mr. Dearing and Mr. Huddle told me to watch the man, he is going places. His name was U. Alexis Johnson. And he still is going places. He was very hospitable to us and took care of us. We saw the Dai Budtsu, the big Buddha, and the other things one sees in twenty-four hours in Yokohama.

We got to Shanghai and it was difficult. It was in January and the temperature was down to about five above zero. The papers said that forty bodies were found on the streets the night before, frozen. I did not have anything but seersucker suits, coming from Havana and going to Manila. Mr. Huddle said, "Bill, do you want to ashore?" I said, "Sure." He said, "Here, I will lend you an overcoat" so we went ashore and walked along the Bund and a little Chinese boy would come up and tug on Mr. Huddle's coat sleeve and say, "Want girl, mister?" Here was the first ambassador to Rangoon, who was a stiff man at best. He said nothing, he kept walking. Another little boy came up and dragged on his sleeve, "Forty Russian girls, mister, forty different ways." Huddle kept walking. After we got to a large intersection of the streets, down around the waterfront area, a Chinaman came up to us and said, "You two fellows looking for the seamen's club?" With that Huddle turned to me and said, "Cobb, I think we better get back to the ship." So we turned around. That was too much for him. So we went back to the ship and went up to the bar, and Huddle said to me "Would you like a drink Cobb?" I said "Yes, I would like a Manhattan". With a perfectly straight face he said, "Sammy, bring Cobb a Manhattan and bring me a double Manhattan". [laughter]

That was the old Foreign Service.

Q: This is a piece of useful flavor. It did not last very long, did it?

COBB: No. When I arrived in Manila I found I was again to be a visa officer, an non-immigrant visa officer this time. This was a disappointment. I thought I was ready to keep going, but I was a visa officer in Manila for another year. At that time I was inspected by John Muccio and I told him I was disappointed and Muccio said he could understand, but just to ride it out that one of the great things about the Foreign Service system was that if you did not like your boss, or your boss did not like you, you could be sure that either you or he would go fairly soon. So to be patient.

I found that I could be patient for a few more months, but I got into a little trouble at the time. The non-immigrant visa load was extremely heavy in Manila. Everybody wanted to go to the States on a "visit". I turned down for a visitor's visa a professional boxer named "little Ne-Ne" who was coming to Honolulu to fight an American. The reason I turned him down was because he was on our list of individuals who had cooperated with the Japanese and had been indicted for treason and had not been successfully tried. He was indicted along with another prominent Filipino and they could not get two witnesses who would agree to appear at the same time for a treason trial. There was a lot of that in the Philippines. The Army CID files and other files available to the embassy showed that this man had been a traitor. He had cooperated with the Japanese as more than ninety-five percent of the Filipinos did under duress. So I turned him down as an undesirable alien. It made the newspapers. One of the columnists in the big Manila Chronicle wrote a column that the American Consul General did not know what was going on in his office, otherwise Vice Consul Cobb would not have been allowed to k.o. "Little Ne Ne" the way he did. There appeared in the regular section of the newspaper a cartoon showing me in the ring with "Little Ne Ne" and he on the floor, and I was clothed in red, white and blue shorts. Getting caught up in the rise of Philippine nationalism, which was just beginning, ...

Q: They were independent?

COBB: Yes, I went to the second and third Philippine independence celebrations. Getting this publicity was enough to get me transferred to the political section of the embassy - it got me out of the non-immigrant visa section.

Q: I think it is amazing they put you in the political section.

COBB: I think they thought that Ed Rice would be a good supervisor, which he was. Ed Rice was a very fine officer who served in China, meticulous and extremely well educated, a good writer and a good analyst. It was under his leadership that I began to do political work. It meant being sent out to listen to the political candidates and report back on the size of the crowds and what the candidate was saying, what the position was, what it would mean to Philippine-American relations and the like.

Q: You were covering internal politics?

COBB: Internal politics. I did not have anything to do with international politics. I worked with a lot of other people, Keyes Beech from the Chicago Tribune, Benson Davis of AP and others who were covering Philippine internal politics.

Q: Did you stay in the job - you were out there about three years.

COBB: For a short time I was sort of - the original ambassador when I got there was Emmet O'Neal, the Congressman who had been defeated by Thurston Morton, but who was a close friend of Harry Truman, and who was the second American ambassador to the Philippines. McNutt was the first. O'Neal resigned and was not replaced for a long time - Tom Lockett was the chargé d'affaires for many, many months. Then Myron Melvin Cowen was assigned. When Lockett was there I was chief of chancery - read all the mail and routed the key mail to people in the embassy and followed up to make sure they answered it.

Q: I did not realize we had the term chief of chancery which the British always used, a junior officer filled the position who was on the way up.

COBB: At that time I was on the way up too. It was an informal thing, I don't think Washington was ever told I was chief of chancery. It was one of things that we were assigned to do as a junior political officer. It was to keep the substantive business going.

I submitted an April Fool's card [an informal term for the assignment preference request due every April 1st]. I had asked for an assignment, a change of post, I think I put down Marseille or Singapore, places picked out of the blue. I was assigned to Madras. Madras did not appeal. I had been for five years in the tropics where we had no change of seasons and no leaves falling off trees and that sort of thing. So I came back to Washington en route to Madras. I think I had home leave at the time. I came in and saw Bill Blue at the Walker Johnson Building and told him I really did not want to go to Madras, because I wanted to see the leaves come out in the Spring and the leaves fall in the Fall and to have a change. Without batting an eyelid he said, "I think that can be arranged. How about La Paz?"

Q: That taught you a lesson of some significance.

COBB: La Paz was a wonderful post as far as I was concerned. I think that everybody who has served there looks back on it with a greater degree of affection than eighty percent of the posts where they have served.

Q: Small posts always are.

COBB: This was a challenging small post and a very good one. I went by ship again. I had friends in the transportation section in Foreign Service Personnel. I got put on the Santa Cecilia going out of New York. And went down to Antofagasta, Chile. The Santa Cecilia was supposed to connect with the weekly railroad trip from Antofagasta to La Paz, but it missed so I had to spend six days in Antofagasta waiting for the train, in the Hotel de Londres. I remember it because the water came up in my hotel room and bubbled up during odd times. This was a hotel built out in the bay in Antofagasta. I had nothing to do. There was no consul or other officer there. No American contact of any sort. I just spent a week nosing around town, introducing myself to various people.

Q: Were there any American business men there?

COBB: No American business, it was just the terminus of the rail line and the copper port - there were big copper mines in the area.

Q: We've got to La Paz, what was your assignment there?

COBB: In La Paz I was assigned as the commercial officer. Before going to the La Paz I had gone for two weeks to the Department of Commerce for training and was sent to the Boston field office to learn about operations of the Department of Commerce. I did world trade directory reports and in addition I was responsible for biographic reporting because I had done biographic reporting in Manila. In those days biographic reporting was considered quite important, there was a whole section of the Department that received the reports from all over the world on up-and-coming individuals, leading businessmen and the like. I don't know what has become of that function now, I think they have just dropped it.

Q: Probably to our loss. I remember doing a little of it on a voluntary basis.

COBB: We had a regular form to fill out.

[Transcriber's note - I believe that the CIA now has taken over the biographic reporting function]

Q: You were now at your third post where Spanish was useful to you. And that was remarkable, I had no such experience in my life.

COBB: I suppose that is how I got those posts, they matched my languages. When I arrived in La Paz I was met at the train by John Amott who said, "You are coming to live with me. I have just taken over the DCM's residence and need a roommate badly to pay the rent, so you are coming to live with me." The DCM, Jim Espy had just left the post and the new DCM was a bachelor and was not interested in running a household. Amott, a junior officer in the political section, took the house and proceeded to recruit me and an Army lieutenant, a West Point graduate who was assigned to Bolivia with the Inter-American Geodetic Survey. So the three of us bachelors lived together and it was very comfortable with three rental allowances - we did very well. We had a house with a swimming pool, we entertained extensively. We had lots of good friends. We even entertained the President of Bolivia at a Christmas party. The president came for a pre-Christmas dinner at our house because his military aide was one of our good friends and the military aide said to us, "I think the president would enjoy coming in to an American home before Christmas. If you would like I think I can arrange it."

Q: How did this go down with your ambassador?

COBB: We did not have an ambassador.

Q: Who was in charge?

COBB: Tom Maleady and Tom agreed, in fact he was very pleased. We arranged for the American church to have its choir come and sing Christmas carols on the steps while the president was there. It was quite a show. He met all the members of the group. We had a Christmas tree and he found a present under the Christmas tree. He was a bull fight aficionado and I got him a book called The Brave Bulls that had just come out. That was his Christmas present. It was the kind of occasion that a young Foreign Service officer remembers with great pleasure. He did not remain president very long, but we were not responsible for his dismissal.

Q: Did you stay long in the commercial section?

COBB: No. I was gradually moving over to the political section. I became the political officer under the DCM. We had a commercial attaché^{1/2} and a commercial officer, a DCM and a political officer. We had an administrative officer who was also the certifying officer.

Q: This was like the Eastern European posts I served in later on.

COBB: We had a military attaché's office and we had something which we called the legal affairs office - the other side of the river. When I was in La Paz I did all sorts of things; I was security officer, I wrote the evacuation plan, I was the certifying officer. I got into a bit of trouble - I refused to certify the ambassador's voucher on one occasion because I knew he was cheating. My conscience got the best of me. The ambassador refused to live in the embassy residence and theoretically had two suites in the Sucre Place Hotel, but was only paying for one of them and pocketing the difference. So I refused to certify his accounts and with that an inspector came running down from Washington to see what in the world was going on and I told him. The inspector said to me "I will certify the account, I will take care of it. I can assure you the ambassador will not be here much longer." The inspector went back and arrangements were made for the ambassador to leave.

Q: Was this a career man?

COBB: No. This was Irving Florman, the famous non-career man who had been appointed by Harry Truman. He was famous because he had invented the roller on the Dunhill [cigarette] lighter. He passed out Dunhill lighters on every occasion to his friends and others. He had been appointed ambassador, so the story goes, because his brother, who was an industrialist in New York City, had supported Harry Truman. Truman was supposed to have said to him, "You are one of the few people who supported me in my campaign and I would like to do something for you, what can I do?" He said, "Give my brother a job outside the country." [laughter] So Irving Florman was appointed ambassador.

Q: At least Harry did not have a brother who was a problem.

COBB: Florman was never confirmed while he was ambassador for eighteen months. So in the absence of confirmation he did not get a paycheck. That was the system in those days. He had to live on his rental allowance and his post allowance. This is why he was fudging on his accounts. While we were there Florman also accused me and others of being communists to the Department. This was in the beginning of the McCarthy days and it was necessary to send down an inspector to check on this allegation, that we were communists. This came about because Florman had received an invitation directed to him and the staff to attend the dedication of the Franklin D. Roosevelt park. He did not pass the invitation on to anyone of the staff, just kept it to himself and went to the ceremony. He came back in high dudgeon because nobody from the embassy was there. He said, "They are just a bunch of communists, that is all. They did not come to this ceremony honoring Franklin Roosevelt." But not one of us had known anything about it. When it got explained, and it got explained, it was all right.

Q: Well you survived all that.

COBB: I got promoted on the basis of that. In those days my career was going great. I was in Bolivia at the time the revolution took place and I was doing political reporting. We came to the conclusion that Paz Estenssoro who was elected president of the Bolivian Republic by the MMR was not a threat to US interests. The tin companies all accused him of being a communist; in fact the tin companies accused the embassy of being communist sympathizers because it was known that we did not think Paz Estenssoro was anything but an nationalist. We reported to this effect. I later heard Mike Barall who was at the time office director for the west coast of South America, say that the embassy reporting came as a surprise to him, that the desk officer felt the embassy was not reporting accurately. But that he, Barall, had talked to Eddie Miller, who was the Assistant Secretary of State, and they came to the conclusion that the embassy reporting was probably accurate and that it was a chance for the US government to support a popular movement in the hemisphere. They went to Eisenhower and Eisenhower agreed. So the US government recognized the MNR and Paz Estenssoro as president back in 1951 or maybe 1952.

Q: You spoke of a revolution.

COBB: This was the outcome of the revolution. There was an armed revolution, except in Bolivia people do not get killed, they "take" the national capitol, they "take" the presidential palace with armed forces but nobody gets shot. I had Bolivian friends who said, "We have lots of revolutions, but we know how to do them. We don't hurt people in our revolutions. We just change governments."

Q: So that is what brought Paz Estenssoro in?

COBB: Yes. He continued as president for a long time. He had a minister of labor named Juan Lechin who was more leftist than he was. He was originally of Lebanese origin as so many people are in South America, especially people who rise to positions of leadership. The present president of Argentina is an example. Lechin was a leftist and the head of the mine workers' union. He had a girl friend who was working in the embassy and thus through her he was accessible to embassy officers. You could call up and say, "Can I come over and see you?" and he would say, "Sure." We would find out what he thought. That was one of the things I liked; there was very little deviousness with the Bolivians in those days. They wanted our support, they needed our support and when we gave it they were grateful for it.

Q: Who replaced Florman?

COBB: Tom Maleady as charge, and finally Eddie Sparks was named ambassador. Eddie got as far as Lima when the revolution took place. He had to wait six weeks in Lima to be sure we recognized the new government. I went over every week from La Paz to Lima to brief him on what was going on in Bolivia and where we stood vis a vis the government and our relationships. We did not have any official relationship, but we had contacts with them.

One other thing that was sort of interesting, when I was security officer of the embassy - the embassy was located on five stories of a commercial building. One day, without any warning, I got a telephone call saying there was a bomb outside the military attaché's office. I said, Okay, went down to the office and there was this bucket and a fuse coming out of it and the fuse was lit. I said, "Well, let's just put the fuse out." We doused it with water, put the fuse out, and called the security people in the Bolivian police and army. They came and took the bucket away and put in a little adobe structure and set it off and it blew the structure into pieces. It was a genuine bomb. [laughter]

Q: They did not expect it was? Did you ever find out what had caused the incident?

COBB: No. We thought it was caused by a disgruntled vendor. In those days there were lots of vendors going through the embassy selling artifacts, selling blankets, or carvings or vicuña skins. We did not have the kind of security in the embassy that you have today. It was a sitting duck.

Q: The barber came into your office.

COBB: The barber came in and cut your hair. This was part of the game. You did not think anything of it. We think it was a disgruntled vendor who took some offense to the fact that he was not able to make a sale at the military attaché's office, or that they would not let him in.

Q: They had a little more security.

COBB: They had a little more security. So he put the bomb outside their door.

Q: You were lucky. Shall we go back to the personnel business.

COBB: I was transferred from La Paz to the Canary Islands where I would have been my own boss.

Q: And not many Americans about.

COBB: Not even on cruise ships. All the tourists to the Canary Islands in those days were British. And this assignment was just done routinely. I think somebody said he is ready for a post of his own now. I got back and Bob Woodward was chief of personnel. He said, "Where are you going? The Canary Islands. I don't think that is the place for you." He said, "You would be better off if you stayed around here for awhile." We were good friends, and still are. He said, "You know, I think you ought to be transferred to the Department. You ought to get a wife." He went on to explain that he had done the same during his transfer to the Department he had met and courted Virginia Cook and that although he had not been able to convince her to marry him during the period, once he went back to Bolivia, she was ready to marry him. So they got married in Lima.

Q: We put her on the train.

COBB: That shows how small the world is. Well anyway, back here I was assigned to Personnel, initially to the Eastern European area, working under Bill Boswell and Francis Cunningham. Then I was in charge of Far Eastern personnel for a couple of years. While I was in charge of Far Eastern personnel I met a girl who was working in the steno pool in CIA and lived in a house in Georgetown, as girls did in those days - five girls in a house. I proposed to one of them and she said, "Yes." Her name was Virginia. With great glee I told Bob Woodward that not only had I taken his advice but I was going to get married in the States and her name was Virginia. [laughter]

Q: She was called Ginger.

COBB: It worked out fine. We were married in the Falls Church.

Q: In those days the personnel system was sort of split between Personnel and the bureau. The bureaus controlled their own people more than they do today. Was that a better system?

COBB: It was different and it worked. When I was in charge of Far Eastern personnel I also was in charge of personnel for the bureau [Far East Bureau]. The bureau had an executive director named Cappelo. I was able to take the recommendations from Foreign Service Personnel directly over to the office directors in the bureau and get their approval on the proposed personnel changes and if they gave their approval then there was nobody to object. The executive director was confronted with the fact that his office director had said Okay. So I worked with people like Phil Bonsal who was in charge of Southeast Asia at the time.

Q: You had to talk with people both going in and out?

COBB: Right. The thing was to find jobs in the Far East for people who had been on the European circuit too long and to find jobs in Europe and elsewhere for those who had been in the Far East too long, of which there were a large number. It was tricky in both directions. I was accused of ruining a couple of peoples' careers, Mac Godley's, for example, for sending them to the Far East for the first time.

Q: I don't think Mac's career was very ruined. [George McMurtrie Godley was later ambassador to Zaire, Laos, and Lebanon]

COBB: A lot of people I transferred to the Far East for the first time. People I had known around.

Q: Of course the Far East was expanding while Europe was constrained.

COBB: I chose Frank Galbraith, for example, to be the first officer to study Indonesian and I always remember when he was sworn in as ambassador to Indonesia he said, "You know you are the one who started me on this trip." It was true. He was a very junior officer. In those days Personnel was responsible for selecting the officers who were going to do area and language studies. I think they have lost that function now, I don't know. We had personnel panels, it was sort of an auction system. Each one of us was responsible for finding places for people coming out of our areas and for selecting people to replace them. In the end you had to coordinate it with the office directors. I would sometimes take over three or four names to Bonsal and say, "do you have any preferences?" He would know some. We kept the posts staffed with competent officers who were willing to go after they were told they really had no choice.

Q: In the early part of this tour you were having a good deal of McCarthy trouble in Personnel, weren't you?

COBB: Yes. When I was in Personnel at the time I was one of four Foreign Service officers. All the rest had been let go, transferred or moved out. We were down to the bare bones. The lady [Mrs. Baylog] in the Personnel file room caused all the trouble by talking to McCarthy and telling him the files were mismanaged and people were taking documents out of the files, she was giving us a bad time. I was one of those who was taking the files out. The only reason was that they were not pertinent to the decision-making process. Some of them did not belong there. I never had to appear as a witness, I was never called upon to appear up on the Hill although I was in Personnel when Scott McLeod came in as chief of Security and George Wilson was named as chief of Personnel, he had been Bill Knowland's [Republican Senator from California] administrative assistant.

Q: That is when Bob Woodward left?

COBB: That is when he left. Wilson replaced him. Fritz Jandrey was around at the time as deputy chief of Personnel.

Q: I had not realized that Fritz had been there. It was an interesting assignment.

COBB: It was. I got to know the Service, the people. At the time I felt I knew eighty percent of the officers in the Far East and twenty-five percent of the officers elsewhere. And I knew how the system worked. And knowing that I asked for an assignment to Martinique, and got it. This was my reward for my service in Personnel - as consul in Martinique.

Q: I talked to your predecessor, Clint Olson. He seemed to think it was an idyllic post, so I guess you did too. I suppose most of it was citizenship and protection?

COBB: Very little of that. It was mainly keeping the flag up - though we had an interesting political system there. Amie Cesare was the mayor of Ft. DeFrance. He was also a deputy in the French National Assembly, elected on the Communist party ticket. Olson used to say that Martinique had the largest number of people voting communist in the free world. He made quite a name for himself as a communist fighter on Martinique. [laughter] Those of us who took a longer view of it realized that these people did not know what the Communist party was but knew that Aime Cesare was a black and a friend of theirs - they would have been voting for him if he had been running on the conservative ticket just as well as on the communist ticket.

Q: Was Martinique considered to be in the European bureau?

COBB: Yes, although I did not report to Paris. All reporting was sent to Washington. Paris did not know I existed for all practical purposes, except when I would write Paris and say I have a clerk who wants to move to Paris, will you please find a job for him in the embassy? They always did. It was that kind of relationship.

Cesare defected from the Communist party in a speech in Martinique at the time of the Polish revolution just before the Hungarian revolution...

Q: When we were interrupted by the end of the tape you were telling about the mayor of the city in Fort DeFrance.

COBB: He was also one of the three deputies to the French Assembly from Martinique.

Q: He renounced communism after the Hungarian revolution, saying that the communist system obviously did not solve the needs of the poor ...

COBB: or the requirements of the needy and if they could throw it off in Hungary they certainly could throw it off in Martinique.

Q: I hope you got full credit .

COBB: I don't think anybody can.

Q: I think it is about the same as when the consul in Florence and I converted the Republic of San Marino to crypto-democracy. [laughter]

COBB: When I was in Martinique, General de Gaulle came through. He was the ancien chef d'etat on his way to Polynesia and he stopped off on his way at Martinique and Guadeloupe for a week of public accolades. It was the first time that any president or former president of France had ever come to Martinique. Arrangements were made by the French prefect to have the school children of the island to line the fourteen kilometer highway from the airport into town and wave little French flags and shout "Viva de Gaulle!". There were lots of attendant ceremonies during the four days and I was involved in them being the chief American representative. The American consul on Martinique and the British consul on Martinique as well as the Dominican Republic's consul on Martinique were the only three full-time consular officers. All the others were consular agents. We were invited to all the public ceremonies for the general. I remember going down the receiving line for the first occasion at the prefect's and de Gaulle saying to me and to man next to me, "Tiens, le consul American parle le franais." "Oui mon General" was my response.

Q: Now he was out of power at the time?

COBB: He was out of power, but recognized as a former chief of state. I wrote a despatch - in those days one wrote despatches - saying that of all the public acclaim he received, he would be deceived if he thought he would carry Martinique if he ran for the presidency of the Republic. DeGaullism was dead in Martinique, this was just an arranged turnout for the former chief of state. This dispatch goes down in history as one of the many mistakes that Foreign Service officers make in their zeal to predict things. Of course when he ran for the presidency he got something like seventy-two percent of the vote in Martinique.

Q: I doubt, however, that anyone ever looked at the dispatch later. You were fairly safe.

COBB: Like Bob Murphy's famous despatch from the embassy saying Hitler was a passing phenomenon.

Q: Were there any other highlights of this period?

COBB: Not particularly. The de Gaulle visit and things like U. S. Navy visits were major features. The Caribbean cruise business was just developing and I wrote the first brochure in English on Martinique to be distributed to the cruise ships that came into the harbor. This leads up to one other major incident. The Ile de France came into Martinique on one of its trips and it had come out of New York and was going back to New York at the end of the cruise. As it left the Martinique harbor it ran aground with four hundred Americans on it. It could not get off, the screws were damaged, the ship was helpless.

Q: So all you had to do was get four hundred Americans...

COBB: To keep four hundred Americans happy until something could be done. It was quite a task. We entertained them at the residence. We entertained them all over town. The entire American community, all five of them, turned out. I went on board the ship to calm them down and addressed all the passengers over the loudspeaker, told them that their needs would be taken care of and the French Line was arranging air transportation for those who wanted to fly back. They would bring in another ship for those who wanted to sail back.

Q: Meanwhile there was plenty of champagne on board.

COBB: There was champagne on board and plenty to see and do in town. It worked out all right, but it was a bad seventy-two hours.

Q: It was one of those things that was not your responsibility, but you had better do something.

Again you went back to the Department - was this something you arranged or was it arranged for you?

COBB: My wife came down with hepatitis on Martinique. She and the vice consul in charge of the USIA and one other American all got hepatitis at the same time, at the same cocktail party, the same bad clams. It was a bad time, it was severe hepatitis and lasted a long time. So in November we came back on home leave and I was transferred to the FSI [Foreign Service Institute] to work for Harold Hoskins and Seaborn Foster, as liaison officer between the FSI and Personnel.

At the time Hoskins felt that Personnel was assigning the castoffs of the Foreign Service to the training slots and he wanted to do something about it. I was to come in and review the people whom Personnel was assigning to the mid-career course and to area and languages to make sure they were not the castoffs. I also worked closely with Hoskins, and was executive secretary of his public liaison advisory committee. This was an interesting experience. He had Francis Bolton, General Grunther, Bob Murphy, Mr. Wriston and Clyde Cluckholme.

Q: Where did Hoskins come from?

COBB: He was a protégé of Colonel Eddy.

Q: A well-known Arabist.

COBB: Right, Hoskins was also an Arabist. Hoskins came to the Department by being the vice president of Cannon Mills, vice president of sales, which was a big job at this time. Mr. Rooney accused him of being a brassiere salesman in the Middle East. Hoskins was a tenacious fighter. He was the one that organized the famous letter to the New York Times signed by several members of the advisory committee protesting Rooney's budget for the FSI. Hoskins' interest in the Middle East stemmed from the fact that he had been the chairman of the board of the American University at Beirut. He was a strong supporter of AUB. After he died, Mrs. Hoskins made a significant contribution to AUB. Hoskins had hopes of becoming an ambassador. He was on good terms with Loy Henderson. I think Loy respected him as a fighter for what he thought was right. In those days, both the FSI and the Medical Division were created at the same time under the same legislation and Hoskins made something of the FSI. It was prominent and important, people may not have looked up to FSI, but at least they knew that it was there and was trying to do a function. At this time we established the Senior Seminar. I say 'we' because I was working with Willard Barber and John Hoover and others who were the first deans of the Senior Seminar. We got Eisenhower to come over to present the diplomas to the first graduates. It was a real contribution to the ongoing life of the Foreign Service.

Q: It was one of the good examples of the interchange between the private, or non-governmental population and the Foreign Service officer corps. Did you stay in the FSI the whole time?

COBB: No, I did not. I was then offered the job of Swedish-Finnish desk officer in BNA, and I was the desk officer for Finland during the visit of President Kekkonen, I helped arrange the visit. Kekkonen had been in this country in 1932 for the Olympics in Los Angeles where he participated and had never been back. He had a distorted view of America. He thought that everybody was living in poverty because he was believing the Soviet press as to what America was like. When he indicated an interest in coming to this country we worked on a plan to let him see the achievements that European immigrants had been able to make during their time in this country. It was a very successful visit. I negotiated the joint statement by Kennedy and Kekkonen with Max Jacobson who was at the time the Foreign Secretary of Finland or Deputy Foreign Secretary, and I was called in by Bill Burdett and asked by what authority I had done this. I said that this was fully in line with all the position papers we have on the subject, isn't it? Burdett said, "Yes, but you are not supposed to be doing it." I said, "Well, I am sorry, but I did it." So it was done.

Q: What was the sense of this?

COBB: The sense of the statement was that we would respect Finland's neutrality. We had Douglas Dillon's chop on that. Dillon had also said we would go to Finland's defense if it was attacked, but we did not say that. Finland enjoyed a much better reputation in this country thanks to paying off the war debt [World War I]. It is the only case that I know of where there is an unlimited bank account of good will for a country.

Q: There were good business relations before the war with Finland.

COBB: We got President Kekkonen to see as much of the country as we could, we got him out to Hawaii, and then he suddenly had the strings pulled out from under him by the Prime Minister of the Soviet Union who said that he was getting ready to invade Finland. With that Kekkonen flew back, cut short his visit, and flew to Moscow to keep the invasion from taking place, and succeeded.

Q: At least you had a substantial visit.

COBB: He had a full visit, he had completed the American part of his visit. He was vacationing at the home of the Pan-American vice president in Hawaii at the time. While I was on the Swedish-Finnish desk the prime minister of Sweden also came over, but he came over on the Easter weekend and wanted to be received by the President. Jackie was furious. We made arrangements for there to be a private luncheon on the President's private dining room on the Saturday before Easter. Mrs. Kennedy declined to attend and Leticia Baldrige sat in for her at the informal family luncheon on Saturday.

Q: Who was the prime minister?

COBB: Erlander. He was a very good prime minister of Sweden. He represented all the Swedish virtues. He was simple and direct. When I was on the desk I met Olaf Palme. Palme came to this country for the tenth anniversary of his graduation from Kent State and the Swedish embassy said, "Bill, you ought to meet this young man. He is going places in Sweden." And he did. Not always places we wanted.

Q: One of your big achievements on the desk, I see, was to get yourself assigned to Sweden.

COBB: That was not too difficult. Bill Owen was due to leave, he had been in the political section, and so a switch was worked out between Bill Owen and myself. He came back to the desk and I went to Stockholm. It was a logical assignment. I did not know any Finnish or Swedish, but Swedish was certainly a more learnable language than Finnish. The assignment was a good one although I was number two in the political section. When I first went there Steve Winship was in charge of the political section. He had been staff aide to the Assistant Secretary for EUR so he got the better job. Al Jenkins was the DCM although Al's interest was not in Sweden, but in the negotiations with the communist Chinese that were taking place in Poland. Al used to go over to Poland to translate every six weeks and to be on the team. I think Alexis Johnson was the chief of the team at the time. These conversations went on for the two years we were in Sweden. I was in Sweden at the time Jack Kennedy was murdered and saw the outpouring of Swedish affection towards him that was overwhelming at the time, but I don't think it was any greater than in other countries.

Q: I was in Somalia and there was considerable there.

COBB: We were there for the demonstrations. Swedes always have a penchant for finding a cause outside Sweden to support and irritate the rest of the world. They did it successfully when we were in Vietnam, but they were doing against the French when we were in Sweden. Algeria libre, free Algeria. And they would demonstrate on every possible occasion about a free Algeria much to the irritation of the French diplomatic corps and the French people who were in Sweden. Werner Wiskari who was a Finn was the last resident correspondent for the New York Times in Scandinavia. He was a good friend of mine when we were in Stockholm, and we worked together. I followed events in Finland and in Sweden with him for a number of years and continued to do so.

Q: You mean the Times has no representative in Scandinavia?

COBB: No resident correspondent.

Q: That is surprising. I thought they had prided themselves on their coverage.

COBB: Sweden was an interesting post. Jeff Parsons was the ambassador. He was a fine ambassador. He was still in a state of shock after having been assistant secretary for the Far East, ambassador to Laos and then having had the policies he advocated contradicted by the administration. He did a good job in Sweden, but he never got anything thereafter. He was hopeful but realistic. I remember him saying once, "I don't know anybody on the Seventh Floor [executive floor of State Department] anymore." That makes a difference.

Q: What was the major issue between him and the administration regarding the Far East?

COBB: He advocated support of the Laotian government and Kennedy did in his first speech and then the apparatus back here got to Kennedy and said, "We can't support the Laotian government, we don't have the facilities for going and backing them up. This would be just water down the drain." That was the end of it.

Q: That was until a short generation later. Until a man whose career he ruined, Mr. Godley appeared [note this is not too audible - please check]. He became General Godley.

You were three years there.

COBB: After three years there my BNA (British and Northern European Affairs) connections came up again. There was difficulty in British Guyana, Cheddi Jagan was the prime minister and the UK had agreed for independence for British Guiana at an unspecified date. Lyndon Johnson said, "Goddammit, I don't want to have another communist country in the hemisphere." And Jagan was ostensibly a socialist but was certainly a crypto-communist. His wife, Janet, from the University of Chicago, was more so. The Department was anxious to follow Lyndon Johnson's directive not to have another communist-led country in the hemisphere. So I reported back to work on problem of how to make the country a free one without having a communist leader. Working within a full panoply of the government's resources. I was coordinating as a special assistant to the director of BNA at the time. We were working with all our resources to see that it did not happen. When I first came back I went down to British Guiana and met Cheddi and Janet. He was still prime minister. Elections were held and he was overturned. The elections were held under a proportional representational system that had never been used in the British Commonwealth before, but which had proved satisfactory in Israel. The governor general in British Guiana was convinced without much arm-twisting to introduce the same election system there.

There had been a careful study which showed that if this took place the splinter parties would get sufficient representation in the legislature so that Cheddi Jagan would not continue to have a majority. The elections turned out as we anticipated and he lost the election to a man named Fores Burnham who was described by Dean Rusk as, "Well, he's no George Washington, but he is the best we've got." And he certainly was not a George Washington. Burnham came in as a socialist and Del Carlson, who died a couple of years ago was Consul General. Burnham wrote a letter to the Secretary of State, asking as a special favor that Carlson be named the first ambassador. The letter got sent to me for reply. I replied that we appreciated his viewpoint and we would give it careful and strong consideration. When the time came to name an ambassador Del was named ambassador.

I went down for the independence ceremonies and took my office director, Harry Shullaw, down with me. We had a good time. Then I accompanied Burnham on his trip to the US. He came up for his golden handshake. In those days the prime ministers of the little independent countries were invited to Washington within six months after becoming independent to shake the president's hand. Burnham came and did as he was expected to do. He got a trip across the United States in Air Force Two. We took him to Texas, and California. When he got to Los Angeles, he wanted to see Watts [a black neighborhood and scene of a bad riot in 1967], which the assistant chief of protocol panicked over, not knowing what Watts looked like. But he went to see Watts and everything went all right. Burnham said that, "it looks just as good as Georgetown does to me." It did. I did not understand why these people were rioting.

Q: Probably a result of rising expectations.

COBB: Burnham went back and proceeded to nationalize the aluminum companies, nationalized the sugar industry and made a total mess of things and now Guyana is almost a basket case.

Q: Didn't Jagan come back into power?

COBB: He never did. He is still there, he is still alive. Burnham is dead. He had delusions of grandeur. They buried him, at his request in a glass casket in the Guyanese heat and he deteriorated. So they had to get the body embalmed ala Lenin. It was horrible. They finally brought him back and put him under concrete. He is no longer a public embarrassment.

Q: It must have been quite a heady experience for you. Working on a new country.

COBB: It was. It was a lot of fun.

Q: Was there anything you can talk about, any techniques used. You said generally it was establishing this new form of election. There must have been some financial help?

COBB: Yes. The help took various forms. The minister of finance wanted a financial advisor and so Carlson asked me, who in the department might go down and give him some advice for six or eight weeks on how to straighten things out? I sent Carl Norden down and Carl was very good working with him and giving him ideas. He is a very interesting guy. If he has not been interviewed, he should be.

Then Burnham was having difficulty with his rice crop and we got Connel Brothers of New Jersey, who since have become the biggest rice dealers in the US and in the Far East for that matter, but back in the '60s they were still operating on a first name basis with us. They went down to try to help Burnham with his rice crop. He was having flooding problems and needed a sea wall to protect Georgetown from the ravages of the bay. We sent down technicians, Army engineers, to help with things like that. We were very responsive to requests for specific projects that seemed reasonable. We, of course, indulged in some things that did not pan out. There was a big housing project sponsored by the AIFLD, American Institute for Free Labor Development which was the AFL-CIO State-AID operation. They were trying to build 500 low cost houses as a demonstration project, but they never got off the ground with it.

Q: Did you have any feeling about our treatment of this newly independent country? You served in a couple of longtime independent countries in Latin America. What is your feeling about what our attitude should be to try to develop responsible and solvent governments in Latin America. Is there any particular formula that you think we should use?

COBB: I don't think there is a formula. To the degree that we can support public education in these countries and vocational training, we can do more in the long run, this would be the best contribution we can make.

Q: That is the French solution in liberating countries and it has worked.

COBB: The difficulty in doing this is that so many of those getting an education do not want to leave the country (France or the United States) for they feel a lack of opportunity to put their education to good use. You see this in Korea, in particular, where they came to the United States for an education, and they did not go home. We saw it in the Philippines where all the temporary visitors came over here and became nurses and filled a need. The same way the doctors came over and filled a need. That is why I say vocational training. Everyone of these countries needs better carpenters, better auto mechanics, better plumbers, to keep the infrastructure going.

Q: I see in 1965 you went to the War College, was this going directly out of ...?

COBB: BNA lost British Guiana when Ed Martin came in. Bill Tyler was assistant secretary [of EUR], he was very interested in the country but after he went to the Netherlands [as ambassador], and Ed Martin came in, and the first thing that he did was to offer it to the Latin America Bureau.

Q: Ed Martin was assistant secretary of EUR?

COBB: He followed Bill Tyler. My office was transferred to Latin America, there I was back home again by force majeure and Jack Vaughn was the assistant secretary in ARA. He tried to get Canada and the Caribbean states and everybody else into the Latin America area. All he got was British Guiana, he did not get the Caribbean at the time, they came later. He never got Canada.

I worked during most of the independence period in ARA and then I asked to go to the war college. I was given some hope I could get the war college provided I could get a replacement for myself. So I called my friend Bill Luers, who was on the in Paraguay desk, and asked him if there was somebody in Paraguay now who knew a little bit about the Soviet Union, and asked him what he thought of that person as a replacement on the British Guiana desk. Bill said, "I think I am the man for the job." So Bill Luers came in and replaced me. He did not have a spectacular career before, he was just another laborer in the vineyards. He met Maurie Bernbaum when Guyana and Venezuela were having a border dispute. Bernbaum liked him and offered him the job of chief of the political section in Caracas, which he took. He went on to become DCM and ambassador in Caracas. He should be interviewed.

Q: The war college year - where did you go?

COBB: I went to the Middle East and I wrote a paper on the lack of strategic significance of Aden, which upset the faculty advisor, but which intrigued Jack Poole, who was teaching at the war college at the time. I wrote a pretty good paper, saying that this was one of the major fictions in American and British foreign policy. Aden had not been significant since coaling stations went out.

Q: Then going out of there did you have your assignment in timely fashion for Mexico.

COBB: One rarely gets one's assignment out of war college in a timely fashion. One has to work on it one's self. I was offered the job working as George Landau's deputy on Spain and Portugal. I thanked George but said I had an opportunity to go to Mexico and that although it was not one of the top jobs, for the sake of the wife and children, education and everything else, I would rather go abroad than to stay here at the time. I knew something about George too [laughter] I knew that he was a very demanding task master. So I was an FSO-3 and was assigned to a FSO-3 job in Mexico City as the transportation and communications officer in the economics section. The economic section had five or six specialized officers. There was a minerals officer, a fisheries officer, transportation and communications officer, fiscal officer and I think a general economic officer all under the leadership of the economic counselor, who at the time was Gardner Ainsworth.

The reason the job was interesting was that this was the time we were told to broaden our cones [professional specialties], so to speak, and to get ahead in the Foreign Service, officers should have economic experience as well as political experience.

Q: This was one of the swings back towards good general officers.

COBB: That is right. I had accumulated a lot of political experience and had little or no economic experience, though while I was in Sweden I was acting commercial attaché for six months. There were nine US scheduled airlines at the time flying to Mexico and the number of flights they could operate was limited to X-number per week by agreement with the Mexicans. They had pledged to allow unlimited flights after date-X if we would agree to restricted flights up to then. It was my job to make sure that the Mexicans lived up to their side of the agreement on date-X and allow the US carriers to determine the number of flights, or the market to determine, rather than be limited to three flights a week or two flights a week, or the like. We were able to do this. I had very close relations with the director general of civil aviation and spent hours with him talking about the virtues of the free market system and the fact that the charter market system was different than the scheduled market. I urged Mexico to allow charters to come in also. The US-Mexican aviation relations were then and have continued to be satisfactory. Before that time it had required presidential intervention every time there was a negotiation. Harry Truman had to intervene, Eisenhower had to intervene, Kennedy had to intervene, to resolve the conflict between the interests of the country that had two airlines serving the United States and the interests of the country that had nine serving Mexico. In these days aviation negotiations were not a matter of public record and public concern the way they are today. I was assistant chief of aviation negotiations responsible for an area. Our instructions in a negotiation were signed off on by the assistant secretary for the economic bureau and who was operating under the delegated authority from the secretary. We were charged with defending the status quo because under the status quo the US carriers had a very satisfactory economic position in most of the countries around the world. Other countries would come in and say that they were dissatisfied with the bilateral treaty and want to change it ...

Q: You were in the middle of your description the procedure for improving aviation negotiations. You might tell how you prepared yourself for that.

COBB: I think I got the job because my bio in the register [Biographic Register) said that I worked for an aircraft manufacturer.

Q: You had been inspecting engine parts.

COBB: I was presumed to know something about the parts of an aircraft, at any event. In my general political experience in negotiations one gets negotiation experience. In Mexico I had negotiated a treaty to change radio frequencies, AM and FM, to avoid interference with each other, I assisted significantly with that and I was known to the telecommunications and transportation sections of the Department because of that success in Mexico.

Q: We are back in the Department now? We sort of skipped lightly over your Mexico assignment. You did not say much about that.

COBB: Let's go back to Mexico. I was a FAA liaison officer in Mexico. FAA had officers stationed around the world, but they were prepared to accept me in Mexico as their liaison officer so I worked very closely with the FAA regional office in Fort Worth. They would send down people to see me to discuss problems they had with Mexican airports, or with the inspection of Mexican aircraft. The FAA approved the facilities of Mexicana as "approved facilities" for the repair of airline engines and aircraft. They would have to come down regularly to be sure the books were up-to-date. That there were no slip-ups. We had very good relations with the airline. I went on the FAA inspection flights of all the airports of Mexico on two occasions. We would get in a small aircraft and go to every airport in the country to make sure it had a windsock, that the lights were working at the ends of the airport, that the radio was on the proper frequency.

Q: This is an awful quick way to learn the subject.

COBB: We had some interesting experiences. Once one of my FAA colleagues did not return to his hotel room in Puerto Vallarta one night. We did not know where he was and we were due to leave at 11 the next morning. We checked the hotel room and he had not spent the night in it. So his other colleague and I decided we had to go look for him. We went into town and walked around the seafront in Puerto Vallarta, which was a little town at the time, and asked if anybody had seen a man of a certain stature, a certain height, black hair, etc, etc, and an American. They said, "Yes, we saw him, he was down at the bar last night with a girl until about one o'clock and then they left." We said to ourselves, "God knows where he is now." We asked if they knew who the girl was? They said, "Oh, yes, here she is now at the bar." We spoke to her and asked what became of her boyfriend of last night. She said, "Well, he was so drunk that we put him out to get some fresh air, I don't know what happened to him thereafter." We decided that we had better go see the chief of police. We went around to the police and asked if there was an American there? The police said, "Yes, we picked one up this morning on the seawall, he was stoned drunk. We did not know what to do with him so we just brought him in here. He is right over here." We looked and what we saw was a coffin with candles at each end of it. We sort of took a deep breath and went in. Here was this poor American FAA inspector huddled in a cell sobering up staring at the coffin. We got him out of jail, apologized for the disruption he had caused, thanked the jailer for putting him up for the night. We put him on the plane and took him back to the States.

Q: Sometimes first time travelers do this sort of thing. Sometimes experienced travelers do the same.

COBB: I don't think this man had ever been outside the States before.

Q: You said that you also had telecommunications responsibility which is a pretty complicated subject.

COBB: It is a complicated subject. You could always depend on the Department to send you down an expert if you needed one. Occasionally I would need an expert and get one. The Director General of Telecommunications in Mexico was well known up here, and there was a good feeling between the telecommunications office and the Mexican telecommunications office. They built a telecommunications tower while I was there and our biggest concern was whether or not the satellite that was put for the Olympics would work to carry the transmissions from Mexico during the Olympics of 1968. The first satellite went up and did not work, but they were able to use a different satellite. At that time COMSAT was established and INTELSAT and the Mexicans played a prominent role in the establishment of INTELSAT. They had to be nursed along to join in because they felt it was impinging on their sovereignty. At the same time the Mexicans established a network of ground stations to provide domestic communications from satellites. This was early in the game. There were not many ground stations at the time. The Mexicans realized that this was a way of saving money if they could depend on satellites and were quite anxious to do so.

Q: That has revolutionized communications around the world. Who were the senior officers there. Was Robert McBride there?

COBB: Bob McBride had not arrived between the time I was assigned to Mexico which was in June and the time I arrived in August or September. Tony Freeman was ambassador. Tony and Phyllis were both militant Democrats and he resigned when the administration changed and the new president was elected. Then Bob McBride came soon thereafter. Henry Dearborn was the DCM. McBride was a very fine ambassador. He was a shy man, a man whose word was 24 karat gold, he knew what was going on in the embassy and he conducted a good embassy. He may have killed himself in doing so.

Q: He was a good man. Then you had an economic counselor?

COBB: Gardner Ainsworth was the economic counselor and he was followed by Dorothy Jester, who was a former cultural officer who had gotten into the economic/commercial cone and became economic counselor. Jack Kubisch was the DCM much of the time under McBride. He established very good relations with Henry Kissinger, something that Mr. McBride did not have.

Q: Now we get back to the Department where you were spending full time on aviation.

COBB: Aviation negotiations did not make the newspapers in those days, we did not want them to. We worked very closely with the then Civil Aeronautics Board and the Air Transport Association, the ATA. The Civil Aeronautics Board had a division of international aviation, broken down by region and we had regional offices that worked with them to determine what the ultimate US objectives were in any negotiations that came up. The US delegation was always composed of representatives of the State Department and the Civil Aeronautics Board and there was an official observer from the Air Transport Association who took full notes and prepared reports on the negotiations which were circulated to the US airlines that were interested. We did not keep our own notes.

Q: Didn't keep your own notes?

COBB: No, the official record was prepared by ATA.

Q: I'll be darned. That seems to be sort of dangerous.

COBB: That was the way it was worked out to keep them from being seated on the delegation. They were fighting for representation the way that some of the telecommunications people were on delegations. This was the Department's way of keeping them off the delegation but at the same time giving them the opportunity to know what is going on in the negotiations as it affected them. The airlines, if they were distressed by something that happened, would go to the CAB to put pressure on the State Department to channel negotiations in a certain way.

Q: Did you get a copy of the record?

COBB: Immediately and we could change or revise it. The record was so accurate that very little revision was necessary, it was almost a verbatim text of what took place.

Q: It sounds like a questionable procedure.

COBB: It so happened that for most of the negotiations in which I participated a former Foreign Service officer, now working for the Air Transport Association, took the notes. They employed former Foreign Service officers in several capacities.

Q: In this position did you have a formal place in the hierarchy?

COBB: We were well down in the hierarchy. It was the Aviation Division and was divided into two sections, Negotiations, and Plans and Policy. Plans and Policies looked after relationships with international aviation organizations in Montreal. It also assisted aviation manufacturers. Our relations were with the US carriers, scheduled and nonscheduled because they were the ones who operated the routes we negotiated for.

Q: You did this essentially until retirement.

COBB: I did this until retirement, until December 1975. I headed up US delegations with Argentina, Singapore, Korea, Japan and Bolivia.

Q: This gave you a string in your bow that most of us retired generalists in the Foreign Service did not have. You were able to work this into the tourist business.

COBB: I had very good aviation connections and still do, and aviation was the life blood of Mexican tourism. I was able to help the Mexicans a great deal because I knew what the published sources of information were in this country - air traffic between this country and Mexico and the US and other countries in the world. The Mexicans had no idea what was available and so I was able to get the public record and help them in their plans for penetrating the US market more effectively.

Q: How did you come about taking this job? I think that the post-career aspects of Foreign Service officers lives are very often interesting.

COBB: At the time I knew I was ready to leave the Department, I knew I was ready as I had been passed over for promotion and had been seven years in class and things did not look as though they were going to change. I took an outplacement course offered by the Department, something known as the Crystal course, there was an outplacement guru called John Crystal, and he gave a course to people retiring and there were some twenty of us in the session. Crystal said, the main focus was to write a biography and to cluster it to see what you had done in your work experience and see if that could not in some way be turned into a new life for you. He said to focus on what you enjoyed doing the most, since it is probably what you do the best. I followed his directions and wrote the autobiography and clustered it. It was quite apparent that what I had enjoyed doing the most in the Foreign Service was sharing my enthusiasm for the country that I happened to be in with visitors, helping them appreciate the country more. When people would come to Mexico, visiting the ambassador, I would get assigned to taking them out to visit the archeological sites, taking them to the colonial churches or other places depending on their interests. I wrote the first brochure on Martinique in English at my own initiative and distributed it through the Chamber of Commerce in Martinique so that people who had only a day to spend on Martinique would learn something about the country and where they were, the size of it, its problems and what there was to see. In Bolivia I had done the same thing, I had visited in the country extensively and when the few Americans who came to Bolivia we would share our enthusiasms and take them around to see the sights.

This lent itself, initially, I thought, to working as a program officer in the exchange of persons business, to help foreigners enjoy their visits and get more out of their trips to the United States. So I talked to the Meridian House operation and others about the exchange business and found it was very hard to break into. Most of the jobs as program officers were held by people who had been in this business for thirty or forty years and started out as clerks in the business and had risen to the top as program officers. There were a few Foreign Service officers doing it, but most of them were ladies of a certain age who had been working forty years doing this. This was the culmination of their careers to be program officers to be called up and arrange trips for professors and teachers.

Q: Of course they depended on a vast network of volunteers all over the country.

COBB: Well, I could not break into this. So I decided to reverse it. I would see if there was any opportunity to help Americans to appreciate other countries so I wrote to a friend of mine in the Mexican tourist office and said I am about to retire and that perhaps you might be able to use my services to stimulate more Americans to visit Mexico, especially in Washington where there is a big association community which is always looking for a place to have a convention that is attractive and competitively priced. I got a response from him saying, yes, we are interested, make us an offer. So I offered to work for them. We reached a satisfactory arrangement.

Q: Essentially you established a Mexican Tourist Bureau? None existed before?

COBB: Yes there was one that was operated by the Mexican Ministry of Tourism, down on Farragut Square, it was largely a front office operation, they did not do much for people other than hand out brochures. My job was to cultivate the association community and stimulate meetings and actual business. Also I had to evaluate critically the importance of the various travel agencies in town with reference to Mexican travel so we would know whom to invited to come to Mexico and who the top twenty-five agents were, who was producing the business and what airlines were they producing for, and the like. So I worked very closely with the airlines and their government relations vice presidents. It was a new departure for Mexico. I was the only American running a Mexican tourist office. It caused some comment in the Mexican embassy. People wondered why. Some of my employees would come to me and say they were having difficulty with the Mexican embassy, some want to know why you are the head of the office. I asked for instructions as to how I should reply to that? They said that Mr. Aleman had appointed me and if they wanted to discuss the matter he was available. That was the end of it.

Q: You did that for eight years?

COBB: Yes, then I ran a little association called the Association of Travel Marketing Executives for a couple of years. It was an association I helped establish when I was working for the Mexicans.

Q: These were essentially travel agents?

COBB: No, these were people who represented destinations and or the vice presidents of the various airlines. We did not have ticket sellers as such. It was an individual member organization, not an organization of organizations. There is something called the Travel and Tourism Research Association in which I had been active, and was on the national board, but that was an organization made up of other organizations. My little one was a private member organization. We had an annual convention and published a monthly newsletter. It is still going but I am no longer very active. I switched to DACOR (Diplomats and Consular Officers, Retired - a club in Washington).

Q: Do you have a commercial to put out for DACOR which has been very helpful for this oral history program?

COBB: I think it is a good idea for DACOR to be associated with this program, and to support it as best we can. I hope we can be useful to future generations in learning a little about what those of us who labored in the vineyard without achieving the top ranks were able to accomplish.

Q: That is right. Most of the people's most interesting jobs were not in the top ranks. Thank you very much.

End of interview