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

FRED A. COFFEY, JR.

Interviewed by: G. Lewis Schmidt

Initial interview date: September 14, 1990

Copyright 1998 ADST

Q: This is Lew Schmidt interviewing Fred Coffey at his home in McLean, Virginia. This the 14th of September 1990.

Fred, I'm going to ask you to start out by giving us a brief background, sort of a brief bio-sketch as to where you came from, what your education was, and then from there we'll take your career item by item and we'll cover the general types of subject matter that I indicated in the material I sent you.

So will you begin right now and give us a bio sketch and how you got into the agency, also.

Bio-Sketch

COFFEY: Well, I'll begin at the beginning, Lew.

I was born in El Paso, Texas in 1930. My father was an associate professor at New Mexico A&M in Las Cruces, up the river. His career took us all around the United States and to South America as I grew up.

From Texas; New Mexico; Cornell, where he got his Ph.D.; Denver, Colorado; Asuncion, Paraguay, where I had a couple of years in high school; came back, graduated from Denton High School in Denton, Texas; went on to the University of North Texas in Denton for two years, where I studied economics and international relations; then transferred to the University of Texas; finished up in economics and international relations with a degree in business administration.

Following two and a half years in the US Marine Corps during the Korean period - and there I was in Amphibious Reconnaissance - I heard about the United States Information Agency, because I wanted very much to serve in the foreign service.

Rather than to have a military career, where one must neutralize one's enemies in very stark terms - I chose to work with ideas and concepts within foreign cultural frameworks drawing upon our United States cultural framework, meanwhile promoting our good international objectives. So I wrote to Washington. After writing a couple of letters and not getting answers, I came to Washington and talked with the personnel people.

Well, the agency was in its formative stages in 1954, the fall of 1954 at that time, and the personnel people said that officers, new officers, usually were journalists with several years' experience, or people with Master's degrees - minimum, Master's degree.

1956: Foul-Up on Initial Entrance Examination; Then, Finally, Entrance into USIA

So I decided to go back to school and get a Master's degree. I went to Louisiana State University and got a degree in economics and international finance. While there I took the foreign service exam or its equivalent, in December of 1955, and I was positive that I had really creamed that exam because it was material that I was teaching as a teaching assistant, especially in the economics area.

It was the time when you needed special No. 2 pencils to make your marks on the exam.

Q: Was this a true and false type of exam?

COFFEY: Well, part of it was narrative, and part of it was multiple-choice, true and false, and short answers. We were told they wouldn't give us our scores if we had failed the exam. Well, I flew out of there feeling that I had really done very well.

Four months later, when my colleagues were getting their reports, I found out that I had not even been graded. Failures were not graded. However, I insisted on a regrading, because a friend and I who were sitting in the last row had realized that when they ran out of the No. 2 pencils, they'd given us No. 4 pencils. The hard lead wasn't picked up by the machines.

Anyhow, the Department, rather than regrade the papers by hand, gave us new tests. I had no trouble -

Q: With the proper pencils?

COFFEY: With the proper pencil. I went to Washington and USIA for an oral interview. I told the panel that I needed an answer right at the time. The panel, after talking with me for an hour, said yes, I had passed subject to a security clearance. In August 1956 I reported to the agency, very much dedicated to the idea of working in cross cultural communications.

I'd seen communism in fairly stark terms in Paraguay as a kid, when the communists took the streets, broke a lot of windows, caused a lot damage. During the Korean War, of course, we saw communism move from the north to the south, and eastern Europe at that time was already under Soviet domination. So the concept of competing against communism and contesting our system against theirs was very appealing to me.

Q: So, we'll take it from there, then. Your first assignment, I know what it was, but for the record, will you tell me about it and we'll go on with an explanation of what happened there.

COFFEY: Well, after -

Q: Did you - you went in as a JOT, didn't you?

COFFEY: Yes. Yes, I did. I was an early class of the JOTs (Junior Officer Trainees). There were about 14 of us. We came on in August of 1956 and learned a little bit about what this fledgling agency was about. We did learn that the information instrument was a new one out there in the field, along with economics, political instruments and the other elements of statecraft, but no one knew too much about it. It was largely in the experimental stage.

We had ten weeks, as I mentioned, of learning about whatever the agency knew of dealing with this capricious - or what did we call it - an inexact science, very inexact. At the last moment I was told I was going to Asia, because they didn't need somebody who already spoke Spanish at that time in Latin America. But I came in one morning just before the final assignments were made and was told that I was going to Brazil, which was quite a shocker.

1956 Surprise: First Assignment to Brazil as Junior Officer Trainee (JOT)

I was happy about the assignment, but asked the personnel officer about it. "Fred," he said, "I went to a cocktail party a couple of nights ago and we were joking about your name, Coffey, and somebody said, 'Well, there's only one place for Coffey, Coffey to be Brazil.'" I guess assignments have been made on ever more shallow grounds than that.

I came to Brazil in the fall of 1956. Jack Vebber was the PAO, Lew Schmidt was the deputy PAO - you - and Jim Opsata was the executive officer. I had 10 months in Brazil, and I think I had just an outstanding training program.

As a junior officer I was not treated as a freshman. I'd been a captain in the Marine Corps and had had considerable responsibilities during that period and at other times. And I was very pleased with the treatment and the training I got. One of the events that stood out, though, in Brazil, made me realize that the leftists were very strong and growing.

I was assigned to a mobile unit trip in the state of Espirito Santo. The mobile unit operator from the United States Information Service in Brazil was Alcibiades, and we were -

Q: Would you spell that?

COFFEY: A-l-c-i-b-i-a-d-e-s.

Q: Transcribers sometimes need assistance on these foreign names.

COFFEY: Sure. And we had been about four days in the backlands of the state, showing films about health, how to boil your water, prevent certain diseases, a little bit about United States policies in Latin America, some general films about the United States, what makes it tick.

Then one morning Alcibiades came rushing in and he said, "Fred, we've been very lucky." A policeman came in with him and said that the local communists had blown a bridge about half a mile down the road, but the timer had gone off wrong. We were supposed to be approaching or on that bridge when it blew, so we were very fortunate. But it underscored some of the problems that the United States was undergoing.

Brazil at that time, though, was a very interesting place in which to serve because it had been under a rather firm dictatorship, Getulio Vargas, who had recently died.

COFFEY: And Brazil was moving into democracy, as they called it, at the time, in 1956, 1957 and 1958. Cafe Filho had been vice president to Vargas, then president. But he died and Juscelino Kubitschek won the elections. Kubitschek had an exciting plan to build a new capital in the interior of Brazil. Brazil seemed to be on the move.

And we did have what Brazilians, then the United States, recognized was a special relationship, largely based on our long association with Brazil. We were the first country to recognize it when it became independent. And during World War II Brazil had participated with its expeditionary force in Italy against the Nazis. We became firm allies at that time.

Our program there was a broad one. Looking over the tools and the programs that we had, I would say that the best dollar spent was the promotion of binational centers throughout Brazil.

We had an outstanding officer by the name of John Ewing, who was promoting and establishing these centers. Many had been in operation for a number of years, but he established many others, usually with the help of an American, a local director and a binational board.

These people, over the years, right on to the current time, have reached tens of thousands of Brazilians with glimpses of what the United States is like, its culture, what makes the society act as it does.

In addition to teaching English, these centers have established great groups of friends for the United States, scattered throughout all Brazil. And this residue of friendship has stood us well during some very trying times during the "70s and "80s.

Q: There was also a pretty strong local communist movement, as you alluded to earlier, because I remember some of their vicious propaganda that was being conducted at that time. They were also making a great issue of the assumed oil resources which Brazil thought they had and of which they really didn't have very much.

COFFEY: Well, that's true, and the communist party at that time was still legal. The labor movement, which was largely leftist, was growing in leaps and bounds. There was a great ferment in the political development of this democracy.

Q: What aspects of the program did you get into, besides your tours on the mobile units into the hinterland?

COFFEY: Well, I was programmed in a number of areas and, as I said, it was an excellent program. I worked with the book translation activity under Paul Rothman, who taught me a great deal about developing appropriate material for translation within the local cultural context.

I had a fine experience with administration, where I was given the job of drawing up the budget for the year in the country plan, at least the draft to be approved by my superiors. I worked in press and radio; television was fledgling, but we had a small television operation at the time.

The exchange program based on the Fulbright educational concept had just started, but it was launched. The other educational exchanges, students, leaders, was in full flow. I thought that was a very exciting program. I got to write a few press releases. All in all, I had an excellent training period.

And as I look back on the trainees that I supervised later on, I did try to draw on some of my own experience and broadness of training in their development.

Q: So you spent - is there anything else you want to say about Brazil? You said you spent 10 months there and then moved on, but you had a fine spot in Brazil.

COFFEY: Well, it was an interesting time family-wise, too, because our first-born, Rick Coffey, was born in the Strangers' Hospital of Brazil. So that was a highlight of our period, too.

Brazil's Practice of Claiming that Anyone Born in Brazil is a Brazilian Citizen Causes Coffey Family Some Difficulties

Q: He was born there; you're lucky you didn't have to go back when he was of military age, because the Brazilians would have assumed he was a Brazilian citizen and would have tried to draft him into the army.

COFFEY: Well, actually that did come up. We were back when he turned 18, on another tour, and the military attachï¿½ made a few calls and told us after that we didn't have to worry because he was born of parents with diplomatic passports.

But when we had left Washington to go to Brazil for this second term, the Brazilians bounced back his passport and said he had to travel on a Brazilian passport because he was a Brazilian. Again, it took a letter from - or intervention from the State Department to get that sorted out.

Q: I've had two other friends who had to come out of Brazil or else send their children back to boarding school in the United States because of that fact, and I didn't know - I'm surprised you were able to get out of it as easily as you did.

COFFEY: Well I think Ricky was even happier.

Q: I'm sure he was.

1957: Assignment to Nicaragua

Q: So where did you go then, from Brazil?

COFFEY: I was assigned to a small post in Managua, Nicaragua. There were two Americans and eight foreign service nationals at the time.

Nicaragua had also had a type of special relationship with the United States. The czar, the dictator, Tacho Somoza, was a close friend of President Roosevelt, and he was considered a staunch anticommunist, amongst other things. He ruled Nicaragua like a fiefdom, but he did stand up strongly against communist infiltration and made it very tough on them, although he trod all over any kind of democratic principles.

Nevertheless, our policy at the time was to support the Somoza family and their application of government. It made it very difficult for us to talk about democracy, to talk about the openness of a system with that kind of a policy.

Which brings to mind a point that a former PAO, John McKnight, kept impressing on all of us when I was a JOT in Brazil: You cannot work a successful information policy when our policy is bad, and I considered our policy wrong at the time, as many officers in the embassy did, too. But the State Department saw fit to promote our relationship with the Somoza family because they were in power at the time.

Brief Historical Sketch of Somoza "Dynasty" in Nicaragua

Q: My recollection of Nicaraguan history is pretty foggy, and I know about the Somoza regime, but at what point had "Tacho" come to power? Was that back in the "40s, then, during the Roosevelt era?

COFFEY: Well, Tacho was a member of the military in the Guardia Nacional in the late "20s and early "30s; and he, himself, was chasing the so-called rebel, Sandino, around the hills in the early "30s. There was US Marine intervention at the time, supporting the government in place in Nicaragua. In the early "30s, when Sandino was brought in to meet with Tacho, it's reported that Tacho had him killed.

So the regime stayed on. Tacho died in 1955, if I'm correct. We flew him to Panama, trying to help him. He was shot by some irate Nicaraguan. His son Luis took over, the oldest son. Luis was rather a benign authoritarian who was educated in part at Temple University in Pennsylvania, if I recall, and had ideas of opening up the system.

He told us many times at the embassy, through Tom Whelan, our ambassador there for seven or eight or nine years, told us that he was going to try to open up to the system, the democratic system, but if his brother ever came in, to beware, because his brother, Tachito - little Tacho - would be ruthless, in humanitarian terms and in greed. They were not great friends.

Well, as it happened, I was there during the period of Luis as President. Tachito, in charge of the national guard, would frequently, it was rumored - and I had one bit of evidence myself - bring in people and toss them into a cage with jaguars (tigers) as a way of putting a little pressure on them to talk. I talked with one Nicaraguan who said he'd been in the cage with the jaguars.

Ambassador Whelan Censures Coffey for Giving a Party Mainly of Members of Opposition to Somoza

COFFEY: At one point, as a matter of fact, I gave a fiesta, a party for the media, for student leaders and members of the opposition. Some of them were important people and wanted to promote democracy. So I had about 50 guests and invited Ambassador Tom Whelan to the party. We had a good time, a lot of rum, and my guests met a number of embassy people for the first time, because the embassy was steering clear of the opposition to Somoza.

Next morning I was on the carpet before Ambassador Whelan, who said in very definite terms, "Fred," he said, "We're here to deal with the Somozas and no one else, and I want you and your program never to forget that."

Q: And had Whelan attended your party?

COFFEY: Whelan had been at the party, had a couple of drinks.

Q: He didn't know what the guest list was when he came, or -

COFFEY: Well, he'd known. I'd told him I was inviting a wide array of political views, and he said, "Well, we'll see." He came and seemed to enjoy it. He talked with a number of people, but I don't know what happened during the night. He must have had a reassessment, and so he let me and the program know.

At the time I was acting PAO; we were between PAOs. Bill Thoman had been there when I first arrived, served about 10 months and was transferred, to be replaced by Stu Ayers. There was about a four or five month gap between them. So I devised programs to reach these potential leaders. I felt it was useful to keep contact with all groups, which USIS figures is fundamental anyway. I received firm support from USIA, however.

Q: Did Tachito ever become the president? The only time I was in Nicaragua, Luis was the president, and I attended - I can't remember the occasion - I attended some session at which he was presiding; I got a look at him at that point; I never was there when anybody else was president.

COFFEY: Well, yes, that happened, much to the disadvantage of Nicaragua. I'd already been assigned to Indonesia at that time, but the former minister of education - I believe his name was Schick - was elected president in a so-called election about 1962-63, and was president for a year or so until he died. Of course, he was much the hand servant of the Somoza regime.

Then Luis died and Tachito did come into power, about 1963 or 1964 - I stand to be corrected there - and remained in power until the Sandinistas and the other groups, the anti-Somoza groups, overthrew him in 1978 and 1979. So Luis's prediction was fulfilled: he was a ruthless man.

He dominated Nicaragua and every element in it: the airlines belonged to him; the shipping lines belonged to him; the radio and media, except for a little bit of the opposition media, belonged to him. The Colorado party and something like one third of the land, the arable land, belonged to the Somoza outreach. It was not an enviable situation in that country for democracy, nor for US foreign policy in going along with it.

The Exchange Program in Nicaragua. Department of State Refuses to Allow a Leader Grant to a Young Communist Leader (Tomas Borge) Whom USIS Thought Might Be Turned Away from Communism. Borge Later Became a Power in Sandinista Regime

Q: Did you have an exchange program there, too?

COFFEY: Lew, we had a - I thought quite a good exchange program for the size of the country and the size of our budget. USIA and the exchange program, which was allocated then out of the State Department, was quite generous. We had a steady flow of student leaders and adults in a number of professions, not only - and here we prevailed against the ambassador - not only to select pro-Somoza people, but people who were in the moderate opposition, democratic opposition.

Q: That's what I was going to ask. Were you able, both in the student group and to some extent in the regular professional groups, to get people who weren't devoted entirely to the Somoza regime?

COFFEY: The answer is yes. It had to be done very delicately because the ambassador wanted to clear all the names with the Somozas. We didn't go along with that, and I'm not sure that he actually did, but it was his intent that we should not ruffle the feathers of the Somozas. One incident sticks out, though. The name Tomas Borge -

Q: Spell that?

COFFEY: - spelled T-o-m-a-s B-o-r-g-e - stands out. And Tomas Borge was a student leader at the time, and he, if I recall, was educated at the University of Leon, in the city of Leon. He had also had some experience with a communist center up in Mexico led by Toledano, an international Latin American communist. T-o-l-e-d-a-n-o. He came back to Nicaragua and I got to know him.

I nominated him for a student grant, and my boss had agreed. A number of other people said, "This is the kind of young man we're trying to reach." He was 21 or 22, still very impressionable, still had not made his final decision in life which political route to travel. Well, the State Department turned him down, saying, "We will not issue visas to communists." And so Tomas Borge didn't get to go.

As you know, Tomas Borge was the minister of interior under the Sandinistas, and one of the most ruthless communists in the group. There are others that we backed away from because of the same prohibition, that, had we been able to reach - who knows whether they would have been - had a different outlook in their later years. But that's one of the reasons I felt during my career that the exchange program is one of the finest and most enlightened programs that the United States government has.

By and large, the people who experience these exchange programs have learned somewhat about our country and our intentions, that we're not a threat, we're not an imperialistic nation, we're not trying to grab off other peoples' territory, and that we have lots of problems, but that our democracy somehow works.

Coffey's Work with Labor Union Leaders Opposing Communist Takeover Leads to Assassination Attempt by Communists, Reports of Coffey's Death Greatly Exaggerated

Q: How long were you in Managua?

COFFEY: I was there a little over two years, maybe 25 months. One program I'd like to mention, though, Lew, which I thought was very interesting has to do with unions. The communists were trying to take over the stevedores' union in the major port of Corinto, C-o-r-i-n-t-o. Most of the union members, though, were anti- if not noncommunist.

So I put together some labor films about the US labor movement, some materials that we had written and that USIA Washington had provided, and that the local labor attachï¿½ had provided, on how to conduct union meetings, how to control the meetings in some kind of order, and took this material over to Corinto.

We had to go by train because the highway was bad the last 40-50 miles, but a train did run from Managua to Corinto. The first night we had about 70 or 80 people there, and a good discussion, and the second night a similar format but a lot more people attended.

We talked about basic things: how to control a meeting, in other words, the president took over the microphone and the PA system and when he was ready to release the microphone he passed it on in an orderly fashion to somebody else of his selection. He who controls the PA system ...

One of the tricks of the communists, always, is to outlast the good guys. When everybody else is tired and starts for home, then they speak up and take over the meeting, and vote in and vote out who and what they want, and assume power - a very simplistic technique, but effective.

Well, after our second session the union people asked me to come back with more material and a speaker from Managua, perhaps the labor attachï¿½. That was scheduled for a week or so later.

On Saturday morning, then, two weeks later I had sent the projector and the films and material down to the railroad station to be put on the car with me. I was to arrive about an hour later. Shortly - I was at the embassy getting ready - Tom Whelan, the ambassador, got a call from the port director in Corinto, expressing regrets that I'd been killed and was there anything he could do. Well, Tom, the ambassador, called me - I was downstairs - and expressed his regrets.

Q: Did he know you were dead?

COFFEY: He wasn't quite sure. But what had happened is that the communists - the leftists had planted a bomb in the projector case in the freight storage room where we had placed the projector and blew that projector and all our films and everything across the horizon, destroyed the room, and supposedly I was to be with the projector at the time. They'd stuck it in the projector case. And they called to Corinto a report of my sudden demise.

Tom assured the man that I was all right. I got hold of a new projector and what material I could get together and made the second train of the day to Corinto. And as far as I know, Lew, the union stayed out of noncommunist hands for quite a few years after that. I would consider that a successful program.

Q: The union - well, the people who were trying to control the union had not gotten into it, I mean, they had not gotten into control of it yet at that point? They were just trying -

COFFEY: The communists were trying, and they had almost succeeded when the port director had mentioned it to somebody in the embassy that they needed help. So the Embassy sent out their information man: me.

Q: The most expendable.

COFFEY: Most expendable; yes, exactly.

Nicaragua's Guardia Nacional Kills Five Students in Suppressing University Student Protest. Students' Attempt to Cancel Visiting National Symphony Concert in Protest is Averted

COFFEY: There was another interesting incident in this Somoza period, though. Occasionally the students would protest against the government and the Guardia Nacional would go into the university and knock them around. In one incident they killed five students, mostly at the university in Leon.

At that time USIS was sponsoring the National Symphony Orchestra of Washington in concerts in Managua and in Granada, a city south of there. Well, the concert in Granada was planned, all the tickets sold out and the day before the concert - the five students were killed during protests against the Somoza regime.

The student leaders came around to me and said, "Fred, we can't have this concert. This would celebrate the death of these - of our fellow students." And I said, "Well, it doesn't need to be that way. Of course, we are very, very sorry about the deaths and do not support that kind of action." But I was trapped, there again, by US policy.

Well, the students took things into their own hands. Howard Mitchell was the conductor at the time. They decided to kidnap Howard Mitchell and prevent the concert.

Q: Which students, now, the anticommunists or -

COFFEY: They were of mixed ideologies, I suppose, but their fellow students had been killed by the Guardia Nacional and they didn't want us to support the Somoza government and appear to be doing so with this concert in Granada. They didn't want to give the false impression that all things were okay and peaceful and tranquil, when they weren't.

So they grabbed off a member of the symphony and then they called me and said, "All right, we're ready to bargain. We'll release him if there's no concert."

I went down to Granada and talked with a couple of students, and I said, "Well, I've got a little surprise for you. Number one, you grabbed off the third trombone player, not Howard Mitchell; he's safe in his hotel and security is keeping him safe. However, we want the concert to go on, and we're very, very sympathetic with what happened to the students."

They wanted me to make a condemnation speech on the platform and I said, "No, I can't do that, but I can call for a couple of minutes of silence, and everybody will know exactly what it's about." They agreed. They released the third trombone player, who joined his fellow musicians very happily; and at the concert we had two minutes of silence. So our objectives were partly met and Howard Mitchell had another successful performance.

Medical Facilities in Nicaragua Less Than Satisfactory

COFFEY: Another event that was very important to us was that the second Coffey son was born in the Baptist Hospital.

Q: You were spreading them around the area.

COFFEY: Oh, we were. He became a Nicaraguan. My wife, Jane - Ruby - was supposed to be - well, I'll clear that up now. Her name is Ruby Jane, and one part of the family calls her Ruby, and the other calls her Jane. So my wife Jane was supposed to be in the hospital for about four or five days, and rest.

However, there was a crazy man down the hall; he came bursting in the door. Well, I happened to be there, fortunately, as he started throwing chairs. So we decided at that time that home was a better place for Jane.

Now, in many countries, and certainly in most Third World countries, medical problems are paramount. My son Jeff was born with the cord around his neck and later on developed epilepsy, because the doctor wasn't there when we needed him. He came rushing in just at the birth and wasn't able to prevent the cord situation, and cut it probably a little bit late.

Also, I lost about 60 percent of the hearing in my left ear. I had a terrible ear infection and there were no antibiotics to be found in the town. At the time it was a Saturday and a Sunday. There was no embassy doctor and the local doctor the embassy had been using, a Nicaraguan, was off on a hunting trip.

So I suffered through, and later testing showed that I'd picked up some damage that would be with me the rest of my life.

Well, I would say that's about it for Nicaragua, Lew.

1959: Assignment to Branch Post in Indonesia, Assumes BPAO Job in Medan After Some Complications. Then, in November of 1960, Assigned Branch PAO in Surabaya

Q: Then you were moved on to Indonesia? And your first position there?

COFFEY: Well Lew, you were deputy area director at the time, if I recall, and came to Nicaragua.

Q: Yes, I remember.

COFFEY: And you asked me what assignment I would like, and I said I would like to try another area, Asia. You said you'd see what you could do. Well, you fulfilled that; I was assigned to Battambang, Cambodia, as films officer.

Only the USIS post there rejected me because they wanted a full-fledged, professional film producer, and I'd never gone beyond the Kodak stage. So then I was assigned to replace Fred Rein as branch PAO in Medan, Sumatra, Indonesia.

I arrived in January 1960. Fred met us at the airport, took us to a crudely built house on the edge of town, and I said, "I hope this is temporary." And he said, "Well, what do you mean?" I said, "Well, what kind of quarters do you have?" He said, "Well, that doesn't really have anything to do with it." He had a wonderful house with a big garden. So I puzzled on that, went into the office that afternoon, and he said, "Well, come on in and bring your steno pad." I said, "I beg your pardon?" He said, "Yes, I want you to take notes. My other assistant always took notes." I said, "Fred, I don't think you understand. I came to replace you, and I'm not your assistant."

He went over to the files and pulled out a letter from personnel signed by Steven Sestanovich, saying that he had been extended to Medan for another two years. So I immediately called the PAO in Jakarta, Tom Flanagan, who said he'd had other problems with personnel assignments like this and with Sestanovich.

When he called to Washington Sestanovich had already left and had arranged for his own assignment as a branch PAO in Singapore, a very lush post. So we sorted out the confusion. Rein went on home leave at that point. So I ended up, we stayed in Medan until 1960 and were joined there by Jim Anderson, who was waiting to go to Jogjakarta as branch PAO.

Sukarno Allows Indonesia's Economic and Political Condition to Lapse Into Chaos, But Did Overcome Separatist Movements and Unified His Far-Flung Nation

COFFEY: Indonesia Had Recently Been Freed From the Dutch and was an immensely rich country in natural resources, but very poor economically. They had not managed their resources well and were not in a position to manage them well, with the lack of trained civil servants and the deterioration of the infrastructure.

Also, the communist party was growing in leaps and bounds. It was the third largest party in the Third World, after the Soviet Union and China. The leftist groups that were auxiliary to the communist party were huge - in the labor movement, in the cultural movement, in the educational movement - so that even then Indonesia, with a population of roughly 125 million people, could call - the communist party could call some 11 million people to the streets and completely disrupt the country if they wanted to.

President Sukarno, President for life, dominated Indonesian political life. He paid little attention to domestic needs and had huge ambitions to lead the Third World. His fiscal irresponsibility with government funds and government finances was criminal. His personal and political proclivities seemed to align him with the socialists and the leftists.

Actually, in the mid-"50s there had been a number of separatist movements, and covert US assistance to these separatist movements - if that was so - was highly resented by Sukarno, who was trying to maintain the integrity of this huge island country: some 13,000 islands, some 300 languages, a great amount of diversity.

But US Ambassador Howard Jones Demeans Self Before Sukarno - Damages His Own and US Standing

COFFEY: He succeeded in molding this archipelago into one nation, and the separatist movements only gave him great heartburn and lots of problems. Well, our ambassador at the time, Howard Jones, who actually had come in after the separatist movements, had more or less been defanged, wore a hair shirt during this period and up until the time he left. He was always apologetic to Sukarno and to the Indonesian government for what he assumed were wrongs against the Indonesians by the United States - far beyond political necessity. Thereby he lost his effectiveness.

Q: Do you think the United States really was assisting a bit in disrupting the country by supporting undercover these separatist movements? And who was the President at that time, and under whose policy would that have been?

COFFEY: Well, the President of the United States was Dwight Eisenhower, but we have a number of agencies that deal in foreign policy, and I suspect one or two of our agencies dealing in foreign policy had supported, perhaps not openly, some elements of the separatist movements.

Q: Who was our ambassador during that period, before Howard Jones came in?

COFFEY: I believe it was John Allison. I'm not sure of the dates, and then Howard Jones came in in 1957 or 1958 to Indonesia.

Q: I don't know. Allison was in Japan, still, in 1956 when I left, and I think he was there for some time after that. I don't know whether there was somebody else between him and his successor or not.

COFFEY: Well, that could be, that could be so. When I got to Indonesia Howard Jones had already been in place for a couple of years.

Q: Then it couldn't have been Allison, because Allison was still in Japan as late as 1957.

COFFEY: Mm-hmm. Well -

Q: Anyway, it's not that significant.

COFFEY: Howard - Howard Jones set the policy for the US government at that time, which influenced our local operations.

And his dealings with Sukarno were of no great benefit to the United States, in that Sukarno would lambaste the United States frequently and publicly as being an enemy of Indonesia and meanwhile, in the same breath, praise the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Republic of China as being great friends of Indonesia.

We lived under this apologist policy during the four and a half years I was serving in Indonesia. When it became necessary to deal toughly with Sukarno, we sidestepped. Indonesia and the free world paid dearly in 1965 and 1966 for Sukarno's unlimited and unchecked policies.

A case in point - and sort of jumping out of context - was during the visit of Attorney General Robert Kennedy to Indonesia. His entourage was, at the time, in the Javanese city of Jogjakarta in central Java. I was branch PAO in Surabaya and worked Eastern Indonesia, from 1960 to 1964.

The communists had been hitting us with demonstrations and damaging raids quite regularly, once or twice a month. One night had been particularly vicious, when windows were broken in one of my colleague's house, doors were smashed, paint was thrown on the porch, a car or two was burned. I had my family under a bed in a back bedroom. Finally the police came to the rescue.

The night during the Kennedy visit saw the Communist squads sack USIS, in downtown Surabaya. We tried to get word to Bobby Kennedy through our branch PAO, Jim Anderson in Jogja, about this damage.

Meanwhile, Howard Jones, the ambassador, issued a public statement saying that those actions of the communists did not represent the true feelings of the Indonesian government. I take great exception to that, then and now. Those actions would not have taken place unless the Indonesian government, and probably including Sukarno, had given its permission for them to go ahead.

Q: I think while you were discussing this off tape that you said Bobby Kennedy never got down to Surabaya. Had he planned to go there before this ruckus occurred, or was his itinerary never conceived to include Surabaya?

COFFEY: No, it really didn't include Surabaya. For one reason, Surabaya was more or less the center of communism for that part of the country and a hot spot, and I think they wanted to see the cultural sites of Jogja and the great Borobudur and also meet the sultan of Jogja. So there really wasn't time in his itinerary for a visit to Surabaya.

Years in Surabaya Turbulent - Much Communist Violence But Post was Enjoyable - Wide, Profitable Contacts Established

COFFEY: Well, at the end of December 1960 we were transferred to Surabaya. Jane had just broken her ankle, so she left Medan on crutches, and we had a couple of kids under our arms and all of our luggage. We then had a great period in Surabaya for the next three and a half years, in terms of personal enjoyment, and friends made and feeling of accomplishment with our USIS program.

I had a deputy there, Barbara Harvey, who was absolutely superb as an officer. Not only did she speak Indonesian well, but her ability to communicate in the soft cultural context of the Javanese environment enabled us to promote programs in a politically difficult setting.

Surabaya was a tumultuous place in terms of the communists and the economic deprivation of the area. As I mentioned earlier, we were having demonstrations against USIS right along.

One of the things the communists didn't like was our library; we had some 16,000 books in our library and some 500 to 700 visitors every day, ranging from students, government leaders, military, professional types, labor leaders, etc. It was a very effective operation and one of the few windows to the outside world available to these Indonesians, young and old, important and not so important.

We worked very hard with the military, made extremely good contacts with the military, with the marines, with the army, navy, air force, and with the police. And I might say those contacts served me very, very well when I went back to Jakarta many years later as PAO. Then many of them were national leaders, and we already had established a first-name relationship, to the advantage of USIS programming.

Q: Now the people that you're talking about, who were great users of your library, were of course the educated class, I suppose the elite, and they presumably were quite literate. What was the general literacy rate in Indonesia? I understand it was very low at that time; this must have been a smaller segment of the population.

COFFEY: Well, Lew, east Java in general - and Indonesia in general at that time, had an illiteracy rate of above 75 percent. Of course, the people who did come to us, many of them were multiple language people. They had learned Dutch and of course Indonesian and Javanese, and many of them had studied English in their primary and secondary schools, which led on to another element of our program.

There was visible economic, political, and social deterioration. All of us could see that one of these days there was going to be an explosion of some kind.

Sukarno's Anti-US Stance Taxed USIS Abilities to be Effective. Establishment of English Language Clubs Widely in Indonesia Helped and Laid Groundwork for US Acceptance in Later Years

COFFEY: Sukarno was closing the windows to the outside world through censorship, throwing opposition in jail, and practicing intimidation. Various things were prohibited - the press was extremely inhibited - I could only place articles through personal relationships, and then these editors would usually get their wrists slapped, whereas the Soviets would put in this harsh stuff against the United States and nobody would blink an eye, certainly not our ambassador.

We decided that we wanted to provide some windows, albeit modest, opened to the outside world. We also had few funds. Exploiting a great interest in learning English, we established some 200-plus English clubs throughout the major towns and villages of east Java, part of central Java, and in Sulawesi, and each club might have 15, 20 members in each town.

They would consist of the leadership of that town: the appointed government leader, the head of the local police, the head of the local military, the head of the local schools, and some of the professional people in the town who wanted to maintain contact with the United States and also to learn English. They joined at considerable political risk, as the US was considered the nasty imperialist.

We scrounged everything we could find in materials, even tapes, and made lots of visits to these English clubs. By the time the explosion did come in September of 1965, and Indonesia was isolated for a couple of years, these clubs were in place, even though USIS had been thrown out of the country. This left us with some residue of ongoing activity there, which we picked up in later years.

Communists Mark Coffey for Assassination, but He Survives

Q: What happened to all the books that were in the library when the shutting down occurred?

COFFEY: Well, the shutdown was after I left. The communists had made a big raid on USIS, threw many of the books into piles on the front porch and burned them. This infuriated the Agency, of course; books are not meant to be burned, although we may have had some experience in that in earlier years. And Carl Rowan, then director, ordered USIS Surabaya closed, which we did.

I might say that - again on a personal basis - there was some excitement, too. When I first got there and we started working with the military and the English clubs, the undercover police of the Surabaya police force came around and told me that the communists had marked me for extinction, and that I either had to leave or be prepared for a tough time, that they would try to provide me personal security, however.

I opted, of course, to stay, and I had guards with me, in front of the house, escorting me to work, staying around our building, for many months. The communists, of course, were not successful in getting rid of me at that point, but I had another little bit of a trial with Javanese mysticism.

Coffey Also Survives Witch Doctor Curse

COFFEY: We found that two of our mobile picture people were charging to show films. They'd go out to a sugar factory some place and charge people so many rupiahs to see the films, something which we didn't know about and which was prohibited. A man came in one day from a sugar factory to pay his bill, which exposed the whole problem.

Well, we had to fire two people, which led to firing of two others who had been stealing equipment. And about a week later one of the people who had been fired told me that they had done a terrible thing and I was in grave danger. They had gone to a dukun, a witch doctor, and had paid him so much money.

Q: How do you spell that?

COFFEY: - d-u-k-u-n- ...and paid him so much money to remove me from the scene and he was going to use his powers to do so, and that his powers included that I would either be dead or out of the country in 30 days.

Again I chose to weather out this little storm, and I was told later that had I been a believer I might have succumbed you know, of mental illness because that's the way it works. Of interest is that the man who told me about the dukun was a Catholic and a friend. I had helped to arrange his wedding.

One program which I think was very useful in USIS influence at that time was, as the rest of Java and Indonesia was becoming more leftist, a very remarkable colonel who commanded the military in South and Central Sulawesi and Sulawesi, (Celebes), asked us to supply him with a mobile unit with operator for a couple of months, to show US films and distribute our material amongst his troops and townspeople in his area.

After checking with USIS Jakarta, we agreed, and this man transported our mobile unit operator with material to Sulawesi. Repercussions were very interesting. The colonel got his wrists slapped by the central government for doing this, and at the same time he was so impressed with our messenger, and wanted to maintain the anticommunist outlook of his area, that he asked us to build a branch office in Makassar.

He would pay for it, we would design it, and we would operate it. Jakarta agreed. An architect from the University of Kentucky happened to be in the country. He and I spent a week in Makassar, he drawing up the plans for a new building.

The building plans were approved by the colonel, Mohammed Jussef, and by USIS Jakarta, and then disappeared into the bowels of the Foreign Building Office, the FBO, for approval, never to emerge. So that project sort of died before it was born, due to government lethargy.

Q: This leads me to a couple of questions. If it was a colonel in the military who was doing this, and Sukarno was really in the other camp, and if not pro-communist at least a socialist, does this indicate that the military was out of sympathy, generally, with Sukarno?

Or does this indicate that there was so much autonomy given to different military commanders in different locales that they could get by with this and largely get out from under the domination of the Sukarno intent?

COFFEY: The latter part of your question, Lew, is what holds - the further away you were from Jakarta, the more autonomy you seemed to have.

But at the same time, this particular individual was more than just a colonel, he was royalty, and the Buginese prince of the area. Buginese (B-u-g-i-n-e-s-e) is the ethnic group in the southern Celebes. He had a great deal of power; later on, he had become the minister of defense when I returned to Jakarta in the "80s, and we carried on a good relationship.

USIS Involved in Thwarting Sukarno's Effort to Take Over Western New Guinea (Called West Irian by Indonesians) By Military Action. Transfer Finally Accomplished Diplomatically

COFFEY: Another interesting event where USIS was involved with history was the claim by Sukarno and most Indonesians that West Irian, called Irian Jaya, or West New Guinea, belonged to Indonesia. The Dutch had their flag there for a couple of hundred years, and as the Dutch pulled out, Indonesia claimed everything that the Dutch had had in the former Dutch East Indies.

And after a number of years of saying West New Guinea was Indonesian, Sukarno decided to take military action and a number of military fiascos took place. The marines had dropped in some 500 paratroopers into a panoply of jungle, where many of their parachutes were hung up in the trees and they died.

They lost a lot of people, and launched a couple of abortive coastal raids, which never really amounted to much. Finally Sukarno declared that Indonesia would occupy West Borneo by the time the cock crowed on August 17, 1962, August 17th being the Indonesian Independence Day.

Well he set up the Mandala Command in Makassar, where Colonel Jussef was the regional military leader; the head of the Mandala Command was a general called Suharto, who later became president.

And Suharto, and his lieutenants organizing the Mandala command, promoted the invasion of West New Guinea. The ships moved out of Surabaya - that was the big naval base - and regrouped in Makassar, and went east loaded with troops, loaded with water and war material for one way. The fleet was a polyglot of ships, some semi-modern warships, pre-World War II vintage, an old Russian frigate or two - and all carrying Indonesian military.

Well, we made this known quickly to the powers that be, and apparently our U-2s confirmed that the fleet was out there and moving, and it's purpose was invasion.

As I understand it, this gave Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, who was then negotiating with the Dutch under UN auspices, more power, more effectiveness. He persuaded the Dutch to agree that Indonesia would take over West New Guinea, so that in effect there was no real fighting. Indonesia did occupy West New Guinea by August 17, 1962.

And because of this concentration of military in and around East Java, I got to know many officers of all ranks. And as I said earlier, several of these friendships continued on in Jakarta fifteen years later.

Excellent Relations in Surabaya Between USIS and Consulate Accounted for Much of USIS Success There

Q: Well, when you said that we, or the embassy and the appropriate people, you mean USIS did, because of your position in Surabaya? You knew that they were on the way, or was it - when you say "we," who were you talking about?

COFFEY: Well, I think it was a team effort in this case, because we had contact with many of the navy people and with many of the marines. I'm a former marine and had maintained contact with some of the Indonesian marines.

It was told to us in our personal relationships that this was about to take place, and it was pretty obvious anyway, just by driving around the port and seeing the warships out there, and then suddenly -

Q: Yes, but did you have a consulate in Surabaya or were you - was the USIS -

COFFEY: Well, I should have turned that up earlier, Lew. Yes, we had a consulate staffed with some six Americans representing the State Department and other organizations.

It was very much a team operation in Surabaya because of the closeness of all the Americans professionally. I enjoyed a great personal and professional relationship with the people in the consulate.

Q: That's very fortunate, because even as late as the mid-"60s, not every place in the world were we on that kind of wavelength with the State Department representation.

COFFEY: Well, I know that before I arrived and after I arrived, good relationships with the consulate continued. Even today I talked with Barbara Harvey, formerly with USIS, who later became consul in Surabaya, returning a couple of years ago. And she had the same excellent relationship with the USIS people there.

That's been one of the main factors of our success in an area like East Java. We have maintained a continuity of our first rate program directed by high quality people. We've kept it well staffed with good people and it shows.

Q: Did that pretty well cover your - that particular tour in Indonesia?

COFFEY: Well, I might tell you a little anecdote, there, showing the difficulty of communicating across cultural lines even within the same cultural framework.

One day as I was leaving for the office I happened to look at our private car, parked in the driveway, and the tail pipe was dragging the ground. I made a mental note to call and have something done.

When I got to the office I then called back to the house, talked with our Javanese houseboy in the Indonesian language, telling him the tailpipe of the car was dragging the dirt and that it should be wired up to the bumper strut. "Take the end of that tailpipe and wire it to the bumper so that the other end won't break out of the muffler." Otherwise, that car would be out of commission for six months as I had to order parts from the United States.

Well, I got back home at noon and looked underneath the car. It was still sitting in the driveway, and there was a big gap in the muffler. The tailpipe had fallen off causing a big hole in the muffler. I rushed into the house, pretty steamed up, to find out what had happened. Jane pushed a tonic water in my hand and said, "Cool off before you explode. Come on back here and let me show you something."

I went back to the living room and there was the telephone; it had been wired to the table. Then I called in the houseboy and said, "What's this?" And he said, "Oh, Tuan, this morning a man from the telephone company called me and told me that the telephone should be wired to the table." "Well," I said, "the problem was with the car, not the telephone."

And I forgot to say that after I talked to him in Indonesian from my office I asked my assistant in to the office and asked him to explain the same thing in Javanese. He did. Nevertheless, the telephone got wired to the table and the tailpipe fell out of the car.

Q: How did it get ripped out? Was Jane using the car during the day, or -

COFFEY: Well, apparently she had used it once, but the tailpipe, just dragging the dirt, had popped out of the muffler. And my message never got through, in Indonesian or Javanese, because of the technical comprehension of this man - what is a telephone, what is a tailpipe were - two different things, but his culture hadn't had much experience with either.

Q: Well, "tail-aphone" - taila- taila- pipe and taila - telephone - not all that different.

COFFEY: Well, there wasn't for him. Anyhow, that's just sort of to point out communications obstacles when you're dealing in a different culture and a different language, or languages. The Indonesian language was the overall language, but the real language for most of these people was Javanese or even dialects of the Javanese.

1964: From Surabaya, Transfer to Agency in Washington and to VOA

Q: So where did you go then, from -

COFFEY: Transferred from Surabaya in July of 1964. I was sent back to the Agency and told I was to be a desk officer for Chile and Peru, because of my Latin American experience. But once back in the Agency I heard that Henry Loomis had made a demand to the director at the time, Edward R. Murrow, that he wanted language officers to run the language services at the Voice of America.

Henry was director of the Voice of America, and there were some 38 or 40 language services at the time. And the Indonesian language service was a strong one.

Coffey Made Head of VOA Indonesian Service - Predicts Indonesian Uprising against Communism: is Directed to Formulate VOA Contingency Plan

COFFEY: So my orders were changed; I reported into the Voice of America in the fall - November of 1964. At the time I gave a briefing for the VOA people and I said, "I'm giving you my personal opinion, but there's going to be a blowup in Indonesia and we'd better get ready for it, because traditionally the communists move in and take over all the media.

"They grab the radio stations first off, and then clamp a hand on the press. And in Indonesia there's a fledgling television activity, and if they try to take over, then we need to act as a surrogate radio to tell Indonesians what's going on within their own country."

A number of people scoffed at this, but I had a very enlightened division chief, Dick McCarthy, at the time, who said, "Fred, you may be right. Whatever, draw up a contingency plan." And then things began getting worse in Indonesia. USIS was closed out in east Java after the book-burning that I mentioned earlier, and the outlook was very gloomy.

The deputy director for programs for VOA and I then went to Australia, in August of 1965, to try to talk the Australians into lending us transmission time on one of their transmitters, because the Australians were putting a strong signal into Indonesia.

The Voice of America signal was very, very weak for West Java and Jakarta and Sumatra, but relatively strong right underneath the Philippines in Eastern Indonesia in the north- south transmission direction. But we wanted to reach West Java and Jakarta.

The Australians wouldn't have anything to do with it, and we weren't even successful in persuading the Australians to quit just broadcasting Beatle music and light stuff and pump in some news, hard news, to Indonesia, what's going on in the outside world, and news about Indonesia.

Q: Was this before the uprising had occurred or -

COFFEY: This was a month before the uprising occurred. Then we tried to convince the US Army to lend us a 50 kw transmitter, a portable, to put on an Australian island called Christmas Island, which is something like a hundred miles south of Java Head. That would have put a beautiful signal into West Java. That particular transmitter was located near Khorat, Indonesia - excuse me, Khorat, Thailand - and the military wouldn't release it, so we failed there.

But then I went on to visit Indonesia about the end of August, with the coup coming on the 30th of September of 1965, so I was there four or five weeks ahead of time. Marshall Green was the new ambassador, and Ambassador Green said, "Fred, you know east Java very well. Please go out there and get me a reading on what the political situation is, from your own viewpoint."

I talked with journalists, religious leaders - a lot of people, and came back with two points: yes, an explosion was imminent as far as the Muslims were concerned, and they had huge lists of communists and communist sympathizers they were going to eliminate when Sukarno left the center of the stage, and at the same time the demonstrations and the raids against the American Consulate were continuing, but this -

Q: These were the communist demonstrations?

COFFEY: These were the communist demonstrations.

Q: But the Muslims had the lists of the people they were going to eliminate from the communist group?

COFFEY: That's correct. The Muslims had the lists and they were prepared to react if the communists tried any move or if Sukarno suddenly lost power for any reason.

Meanwhile, the communists kept mounting demonstrations in front of our consulate, and we had noted in a couple of instances where - well, in Jakarta, when the British embassy was destroyed, that - the matter of a fence, for the first two or three demonstrations in front of the British embassy, had kept the demonstrators from storming the embassy. Just a big metal fence.

And the consulate in Surabaya had kept asking for money for a fence. The administrative office in the embassy was procrastinating and nothing was happening. So I told Ambassador Green, "In my opinion, a fence is absolutely necessary if we're going to avert a real major problem - sacking our consulate or a takeover."

Well, needless to say, the fence was authorized within hours. Surabaya did get the fence, and the building still stood, and there weren't any major rushes on the building and then burning it out, as the fence kept the mobs in the streets.

History will show that the communists did try a takeover, and there was a very harsh reaction on the part of not only the military, but the Muslims in Central and East Java, and West Java, where a lot of people were killed, eliminated, not only communists, but communist sympathizers and frequently innocent people. But the reaction by the Islamic leadership was very tough.

Q: Let me ask you: a lot of these were Chinese, actually, weren't they, who were being eliminated by this reaction on the part of the Muslims?

COFFEY: Well, it's true that the Chinese weren't loved, but they weren't the main thrust of the elimination. Those that were involved with the P.K.I., the Indonesian Communist Party, yes, they were on the list, and they were wiped out in ruthless fashion.

But the Chinese in the villages were the storekeepers and the moneylenders, and so forth. And occasionally people who didn't want to pay their debts, or didn't like the Chinese in general, would take it out on them. But the thrust was not against the Chinese. The thrust was against the leftists.

Blowup Occurs in Late September, 1964. VOA Broadcasts to Indonesia Greatly Expanded;Reported Gradual Communist Defeat, and Given Credit By Indonesians for Playing Important Role During Crisis Government

COFFEY: Well, I returned to VOA, though, in the first part of September, and got out the contingency plans. The explosion came at the end of September, and by mid-October we had gone from one-and-a-half hours to five hours. The communists had taken over the media and several locations in West and Central Java.

At VOA, we had started increasing personnel from 11 Indonesians to ending up with 22, and tried to maintain a surrogate-type of radio into Indonesia, telling Indonesians where the military was, what they were accomplishing, the failures of the communists, how they were losing ground. They were rolled back from the city of Samarang, and they finally lost their hold on the city of Jokja. They were rolled up by the Indonesian military.

And 8 months - 10 months later the Indonesian government and military told us that we'd played a very, very useful role in our Voice of America broadcasting during the crisis.

Friction at VOA Between Civil and Foreign Service Personnel

COFFEY: One element that made life a little bit uneasy at the Voice of America was the friction between the foreign service officers and the civil service people, who were permanent employees of the Voice of America. The foreign service people would come and go, and the civil service people were the professionals who maintained the programming.

A number of the jobs were reserved for foreign service officers because they knew the broadcast languages, they knew the culture of the audiences, and understood cross- cultural communication. This knowledge made a huge difference in the quality and the effectiveness of broadcasts.

Many of the civil service people did not recognize this advantage, this attribute, and resented our expertise. They made life a little bit difficult for some of the foreign service officers. Especially the people in Worldwide English, which was all civil rather than foreign service.

At one time a former director had said that all of our broadcasts should be in English. This points out the arrogance and narrowness of a number of the civil service people. Clearly, broadcasting to foreign audiences must be done in their language and within their cultural context if the communications are to be acceptable. We were not broadcasting to Washington audiences.

Q: This was George Allen.

COFFEY: It was George Allen, and of course a lot of people disagreed, but Worldwide English still had the best transmitter time, the best - and the best part of the - a large part of the budget, usually at the expense of the language services. So this carried on, and I suspect there are elements of it active even today.

1967: Thai Language Training, and 1968 - Assignment to Bangkok

COFFEY: Well, after some three years at the Voice of America, I was assigned to Thai language training and had a year at the foreign service institute, then assigned to Bangkok, to Thailand, where initially I thought my assignment would be to work with an upcountry radio activity that was co-sponsored by USIS.

Principal Assignment was to Cultivate Thai Press. End Results Quite Successful

COFFEY: But because of the reactions of the Thai press to the US presence, the public affairs officer, G. Lewis Schmidt, and the ambassador, Leonard Unger, had agreed that more attention should be paid to the Thai press. Therefore, I was given the job as press officer or press attachï¿½ to the Thai press. We had another American of the same rank working within the embassy itself as the press attachï¿½. He worked with the foreign press, of which there were many.

So, my efforts then, with my staff - and I had another American and some 22 foreign service nationals - were to work with the Thai press on a personal basis, improve our press placement and content, and improve the Thai attitude a little bit concerning the American military presence.

We had some 40,000 Americans in the country, at various bases around Thailand. This bothered the national sensitivities of a lot of Thais, and quite rightly. But the Vietnam war was going on, and we needed the bases and the space that the Thais provided.

Q: You were entirely, as I recall, concerned with the Thai press - and the press attachï¿½, who was operating out of the embassy, who at that time I think was Hugh Woodward, was dealing with the foreign press pretty much, weren't they? You didn't have a great deal to do with the foreign press, as I recall.

COFFEY: Well, I did. When the - one of the programs that we revved up was to bring the Thai press into see AID projects, to see the projects that the United States government was working with, to enlighten Thai attitudes, to show that we were supporting Thai aspirations and not just US government aspirations. And in that context we did bring in a lot of American and non-Thai foreign journalists to join in press trips and interface with the Thai press.

And at the time, too, we promoted a number of seminars with the Thai press, bringing in American journalists to talk with them and to exchange views with them. And we became quite "clubby" in this way, with the Thais realizing there was a language barrier but still they could communicate with their fellow journalists from overseas.

We held a number of receptions - sport shirt - for the ambassador to meet the Thai press. At the time I took over this task there were something like 14 newspapers in Bangkok alone, of which 9 or 10 seemed rather hostile to the United States, with a couple of them being communist papers, or supported by communists. In about a year, or a year and a half's time, we counted only two or three that maintained this level of hostility. The answer was, we'd paid them a lot of attention, worked with their journalists, supplied them useful material, brought them in to Embassy press conferences and answered their questions quickly and truthfully.

We set up a club of young journalists, and met regularly with these young reporters, the best and the brightest, and promoted a lot of personal visiting in our homes. This personal contact paid off. Also, we paid a lot of attention to the upcountry press. There were something like 70 newspapers that appeared on a weekly basis throughout Thailand, in the small towns and cities outside of Bangkok.

A "Cute" Trick with Thai Press Misfires

COFFEY: However, you never can take things for granted. And you can't be too cute with the press, especially with a press from another cultural background. At one time Dr. Kissinger visited Thailand. Actually he was on his way to Peking for his first visit.

The plane landed on the military side of the Don Muang air base, and there were three or four US military guards with dogs, big police dogs, around the airplane.

Q: These were American guards.

COFFEY: These were American soldiers. I took a contingent of the Thai press out to see Kissinger when he got off the airplane and, if possible, to have a quick press conference. One of the Thai reporters, a little fellow - by Thai standards, average size - walked up to this burly American southern boy with a huge police dog and said, "Oh, what's that dog for?" and his interpreter went ahead and interpreted very literally.

The man - the sergeant said, "That dog is to bite you if you try to get close to this airplane." Well, a photo was taken of that dog, that sergeant, and the diminutive Thai journalist. It appeared on the front pages of three major newspapers in Bangkok that night. The Buddhist religion of Thailand finds dogs offensive and the picture caption said, "Yankee mastiff threatens Thai reporter on our national territory."

Well, in a damage control effort, a friend of mine from the Embassy said, "Hey, Fred, the Thais have a great sense of humor. Why don't you turn this around? Why don't you take that dog and show the Thai press what a friendly dog he is, and that he wouldn't bite anybody. We might be able to get a laugh out of this."

So without too much careful consideration I said, "Let's do it." I called the base, got the burly sergeant and his dog to come by USIS, and we told him what we wanted. And then my press assistant took him over to the principal newspaper, where he showed that he was just anybody's lap dog and not a ferocious beast, as the press was trying to call him.

In fact, he did a big yawn, and the social editor, a petite, pretty Thai lady, even put her head close to his mouth at the time he opened his mouth. Well, that was when the next picture was taken, and that picture went all over Thailand, all over the interior. The caption read, "Ferocious American Police Dog Tries to Snap Head Off of Thai Editor."

And this even was broadcast on the Chinese communist radio in southern China. So our plan boomeranged, and this story kept being played back to us for about three or four months. At that point I learned a good lesson: Don't try to be too cutesy with the press.

USIS Role in Attempted Interdiction of Drug Traffic from the So-Called "Golden Triangle"

COFFEY: One program that I thought was very useful at the time, because Nixon had made it a point of US government policy to try to close down or to diminish the heroin export out of the Golden Triangle. As you remember, Lew - you were there - the Golden Triangle was increasing its exports through Thailand, through Burma - this golden triangle being Laos, Burma and the northern corner of Thailand - shipments went out to Hong Kong and eventually - much of it to the United States.

In 1971, as deputy PAO at the time, I decided that this should be a plank of our country program. I was supported by the new PAO, Jack Hedges. Washington resisted, but the Embassy and Ambassador Leonard Unger supported us. Washington caved in and said, "All right, make it a country objective in your country plan."

We worked very hard for about a year with a major exhibit, with book translations, with radio broadcasts, with local production of film, with press conferences, personal contact, the whole bit. We pulled every arrow out of our quiver.

In about a year's time, the Thai people realized - and our message was - that they had a problem. It wasn't just the US consumer - that they had a problem with addiction, with these drugs coming across their area, because a lot of the drugs didn't go clear across. They stayed in Thailand. And in a country, then, with some 32 million people, they figured that they had close to 750,000 heroin addicts.

So therefore it was their problem, it was a national problem. And the Thai government became very, very concerned about it. So USIS did play a role in turning around the drug issue, pointing out that it was a local problem as well as a US problem. The Thais then did bring about greater resources. The problem was never eliminated, although it was improved, as far as the US was concerned.

Q: Too many of the police were on the take up there, anyway, letting those drugs come through and supplementing their rather meager salaries on the basis of money from the drug lords.

COFFEY: I expect that continues today.

Q: I'm sure it does.

COFFEY: Well, it was a great experience in Thailand. I had three jobs while I was there: as press officer, then chief information officer, and then deputy PAO. Five years in country. When the PAO was being reassigned, he had asked the ambassador to support me for his job. Washington said I had been there too long, five years was enough. And so, I was then transferred to Brazil as deputy public affairs officer, as deputy to Tom Tuch, or Hans Tuch, as he was known.

1973: Transferred to Brazil as Deputy PAO Headquartered in Brasilia

Q: By that time the capital had moved up to Brasilia.

COFFEY: Well, that's true. Kubitschek had actually built a capital city in the interior, upon the high plains of Goiania, and it was growing.

Q: Were you about 50 percent in Brasilia and the rest of the time in Rio, or were you most of the time in Brasilia by that time?

COFFEY: Well, in the division of labors...

Q: Oh, so you put as a deputy, you were in Rio?

COFFEY: No, the headquarters had been moved to Brasilia, but Rio was considered a branch post, although the largest of the branch posts. There was some seven Americans, with the information officer located in Rio; supervision came from Brasilia. We had seven posts, including Brasilia, six branch posts, of which Rio had some seven officers and Sao Paulo had five officers. There were other posts from Porto Alegre on up to Recife.

So my job was really to keep an eye on the branch posts, to supervise them, work with them, as well as develop national programming and oversee the general direction of the program.

Q: This was what, in '70 -

COFFEY: I arrived there in late August, early September of 1973, after a two months' refresher course in Portuguese. I was told I was assigned there as the first full-fledged deputy. Before there had been an administrative officer as acting deputy, but not a program man per se.

So I was assigned there to help on the program, to toughen the program. There were accusations that the program was too fluffy, too many piano players, and so forth. And so I spent the next two years - I was there three years, but spent two years working with Tom Tuch, doing exactly that.

USIS Plays Significant Supporting Role in Promoting US Assistance to Brazil'Development of Nuclear Energy Plants But Congressional Veto of Contracts Supplying FueEnrages Brazil - Diverts Supply Role to Germany

COFFEY: For the first year I was there, however, I was acting PAO, because Tom became acting deputy chief of mission, and so the day-to-day operations of the program were left to me. One of the most exciting and controversial programs I got involved in had to do with the nuclear development of Brazil.

Brazil had built one nuclear reactor, but it wasn't quite finished, and started building a second nuclear reactor with plans for a third. And the United States government had agreed to supply them fuel for the second nuclear reactor and also, as required, for the first nuclear reactor.

At this time, President Nixon had visited Israel and Egypt, and assured them that we would supply them with fuel for their nuclear reactors. Brazilian officials then had traveled to Washington and made an agreement, a firm contract, with the Atomic Energy Commission for fuel.

Congress took exception to President Nixon's commitment to supply fuel to both Egypt and Israel, and placed all such contracts on hold. We could not honor them. Brazil was infuriated. We had spent the preceding two or three months trying to bring down three Atomic Energy officials to talk with the Brazilian nuclear energy people and establish a relationship, one which hadn't existed. And then the storm broke.

Several of the nuclear scientists from Brazil had been educated in the United States, but still, on a government-to-government relationship, there really wasn't a linkage. So after developing this program of talks and interchanges, just as the first three men came down, the announcement came that the fuel contract would not be approved, after Brazil had put down its deposit.

This turn infuriated the Brazilians and their sense of nationalism. Our talks went on very well, and personal relationships were established, but shortly thereafter Brazil made an agreement with Germany to start dealing with Germany on nuclear development. Things in that area then got very gloomy.

Q: I had left the agency by that time, but was that part of the general worry about nuclear proliferation? Did they suspect that the Brazilians had had any designs on producing the capability of producing nuclear weapons?

COFFEY: Not at that time. Brazil later claimed that they could build anything they wanted and when they wanted it, and they would work with anybody that they wanted to. But at that time the issue was purely fuel for the nuclear reactors that they were building for peaceful energy purposes.

Q: I must confess that I had somehow missed that particular episode, and I wonder what was motivating Congress at the time.

COFFEY: They were unhappy with Nixon treating Israel and Egypt in the same way, and seeming to ignore the political realities of the Jewish lobby in the United States. At least, that's how I interpreted it.

USIS Work in Water Pollution Reduction Efforts and Depletion of Amazon Rain Forest

COFFEY: But there were a number of interesting areas that we worked in. One of the most obvious was the pollution in the lake around Brasilia, plus the fact that a number of us had visited the Amazon and seen some of the horrendous things taking place with the new Trans Amazon Highway going in, leveling thousands of acres with the-

Q: The rain forest.

COFFEY: - the pioneers going in, destroying the rain forest, so we asked the people concerned with environmental control in Brazil if they wouldn't like to develop relationships with our environmental protection agency, and proceeded to bring down people and promote Brazilian visits to the United States. The leadership there today has largely evolved from those visits. And as of course all of Brazil and all the world knows about the tremendous problems they have with the loss of the rain forest.

USIS Not Able to Divert Embassy's Miscue in Dealing with Brazilian Army's Arrest of American Missionary. US Loses Face

COFFEY: To point out a little episode where the United States lost great favor and the USIS could have had a role in changing this, but didn't, was an incident in Recife where an American missionary, who had had very questionable relationships with some of the leftists in the area, was picked up by the Brazilian military and made unavailable to the American consul.

Our officer in Recife, Carl Schultz, had gotten word from the wife of this American missionary that he had been locked up and no one could see him. So Carl immediately contacted the consul, Rich Brown, who then proceeded to bring pressure on the military to be able to see this missionary. But they weren't making him available, so Rich of course called our ambassador, John Hugh Crimmins. John had been active in our diplomacy for human rights. He decided to make a demarche to the foreign ministry about this case.

An AP reporter in Rio got wind of the problem up in Recife, and called the embassy. Well, I was acting PAO at that time. The ambassador took the call himself rather than referring it to me or our press people. And he told the man, "Yes, I'm going to make a demarche to the foreign ministry."

Well, this came out on the wires before he got over to the foreign ministry, and infuriated the Brazilian foreign ministry and military. They felt that this man had been a friend of theirs, but had let them down. Had he worked through channels properly and made the announcement after the demarche it would have been much better. In my opinion, this act lessened his effectiveness for the rest of his tour there and hurt - certainly didn't help any of our programs at all.

Q: How much longer was he there?

COFFEY: I think he was there about a year longer.

The military had taken over in 1964, after the civilian administration appeared to be veering left and the military felt that the civilians were leading them into economic and political instability. They took over and appointed the president, a military leader. Military leadership continued during the time I was there, from 1973 to 1976.

There was a good deal of stability then for the country, and the economy was starting to grow. Things were getting better for the middle class, especially. The people who wanted to criticize the military did so, but not with such vehemence, because the military were actually helping build an infrastructure in education, roads, health, and so forth.

USIS Takes Part in Building American Studies Programs in Brazilian Universities and Binational Centers

COFFEY: This fact was recognized by most people, by the media and by the educators. And so there were a lot of things open for us to do. One of the principal areas that we felt was useful was building and promoting American studies throughout Brazil and encouraging universities to build American studies activities.

This was directed by a very able officer by the name of Nate Rosenfeld. When he arrived there were something like six or seven American studies, small English-teaching activities in some of the universities. When he left there were some 28 or 30 American studies activities.

Now, having said earlier that in my first tour in Brazil there was some 26 major binational centers, by 1973-74 there were not only the major binational centers but a lot of smaller ones. We called them the B and C level binational centers.

So all over the country, then, by 1974-75, there were literally tens of thousands of people studying English, learning a little bit about the United States. And then we added to that these American studies centers at the universities by helping them with materials, seminars, and getting their teachers together with some of our educators.

I thought that was a very useful program, because at this time the special relationship that Brazil had with United States seemed to be withering. We realized it couldn't continue for long as some of our policies - nuclear energy, the democratic governments, and so forth - were diverging, and it was then that we realized that we must rely on the residue of friendship and good will developed over the decades.

Q: I've got a couple of questions before you leave Brazil. Whatever happened to the missionary?

COFFEY: Okay, finally we saw the missionary. The consul in Recife got to see the missionary, who was locked up a few weeks and then expelled from the country. He ended up in Nicaragua, as I heard, with the Sandinistas.

Q: Good place to go. I had another question. What was your reading, in the earlier days of the military takeover down there, about the peoples' attitude toward the military takeover and the military government? Did you find that because of the chaos that preceded it there was a considerable degree of acceptance, which of course later diminished somewhat, but what did you find out at that time?

COFFEY: Well, essentially that, Lew. The governance of the country was in chaos and inflation was runaway, the educational system was crying for reforms and a lot of people were - especially the business community in Sao Paulo and the other industrial areas - were afraid that they would be losing their markets, that the labor unions would take over.

They basically welcomed the military takeover at that time. They didn't realize that it would last so long, but it was more or less a benevolent series of regimes by the military presidents, with the military calling the basic shots. But most of them seemed to be in the general interest of Brazil. However, there were many cases of human rights abuse.

The takeover in 1964, according to what I learned later, was designed by a group of officers in Brazil's Escola Superior de Guerra and put into play towards the end of 1964.

Agency Held Preconceived Notion That Brazilian Program was too Lightweight. Engineered Inspection that Coffey Felt Programmed Inspection Team to Ignore Evidence to Contrary and Produce Adverse Report

Q: Anything further you want to say?

COFFEY: Tom Tuch left in the summer of 1975 and was replaced in September by Lyle Kopmann, who had been head of the former IPS, the press service in Washington. Lyle had had some experience in Bolivia and other countries, and was one of the best-liked, most decent officers, men, individuals that I've ever known, so it was a great pleasure for me to serve my last year as deputy to Lyle.

I suppose, egotistically speaking, I also enjoyed the fact that Lyle basically left much of the program operation to me, and he trusted my judgment. And I appreciated that. Lyle had been very concerned, too, after hearing in earlier years about the so-called "lightweight" programming.

He was reassured when he got to Brazil that our program wasn't light, it was balanced, it was hard-hitting, there was a lot of political and economic content to it, not only through the so-called cultural programs, "writ large," but through the wireless file, our personal contact, our media activity.

When I got back to the States, assigned to the national war college, I was called by our inspection people, who were going to inspect Brazil. The comment over the telephone by one of the inspectors was that they thought our program down there was too light, too much fluff.

Q: Was this during the period of Shakespeare's incumbency?

COFFEY: No, this was later. John Reinhardt was the director at the time. And this call, which worried me very much, sounded as if the decision had already been made that the program was too lightweight, too much in the fine arts.

I called Lyle to inform him what they were looking for, and suggested that he go to the files in terms of our wireless file, placements, our press contacts, our total radio/TV placement, our whole operation, which I thought was very balanced. We'd been commended for that balance by a number of people from Washington. And the ambassador was very pleased.

Well, it seemed that in August of 1977, when the inspection was in full play, Lyle was also concerned that they were dwelling on this aspect and that they wouldn't accept the evidence he was presenting them.

That's just a lead-up to say that I know that the report that later came out contributed to Lyle's frame of mind, and he died of a heart attack around December of 1977. I'm sure that that inspection report, which reflected on him and his program, was a factor of some type in his whole outlook.

Q: I knew Lyle best when he was a director of IPS, and I thought he was a superb person.

COFFEY: He was. Q: It was a great shock to hear about his death. I don't know whether he had any previous heart trouble or not, but -

COFFEY: He'd been warned. He came back up to the United States in the summer - excuse me, the fall of 1976, for a heart examination at the Department of State, and he'd been warned to take it easy.

War College in 1976-1977

COFFEY: From Brazil I had the chance to go to the National War College as a student. I was a little bit old, for the most of the students were in their early '40s and I was 46 at the time. Actually, I'd been nominated by my former PAO in Bangkok, Lew Schmidt. I was told that there was a good chance that I would have been sent in 1970 to the War College, but that was overruled for program reasons in Thailand.

Well, I'd like to say that I had a tremendous year at the National War College at Fort McNair in 1976 and 1977, that it was a great learning experience, and addressed important national security issues and were offered interesting travel. The athletics kept the waistline down - the lectures, the required reading, all of a very high level which provided me great help for the years to come in other tours with USIA in understanding global movements and international relationships.

1977: Back to VOA as Chief of Far Eastern Division. Again: Frictions Between Foreign Service and Domestic Personnel

COFFEY: After one year I was moved over to the Voice of America as chief of the Far East Division. This Division had seven language services, with some 165 professional broadcasters, both Americans and foreign service nationals.

Again there existed the friction between foreign service officers and civil service people, especially in competing for medium wave transmitter time against the Worldwide English operation. The civil service officers felt comfortable in promoting English language broadcasts because they had little background for realizing the value of foreign language broadcasts. Well, we were successful at last in persuading the Voice of America management to give us transmitter time on the medium wave apparatus in Thailand, to broadcast to Burma, and to put a good, clear signal into that country for the first time in many, many years.

Also, the management at the Voice of America had, for resource purposes, wanted to eliminate the broadcasts to Cambodia. We galvanized support to continue the Cambodian broadcasts because we felt that they were extremely important, as all the windows had been closed on the Cambodian people, who had little access to the rest of the world. We were supported by the State Department and by the field elements of USIA, and Cambodian broadcasts continued.

I think that points out one of the reasons why foreign service officers should be deeply involved in the operational decisions at VOA, because they understand the political necessities more than the professional civil service broadcasters.

Q: As a matter of fact, didn't you tell me when we were off the record that you later got confirmation from Sihanouk that this had been a valuable thing for them?

COFFEY: That's correct. Prince Sihanouk made a public statement that the Voice of America broadcasts were extremely important to Cambodia in bringing the news of the world and some of the events happening within Cambodia to the attention of those Cambodians who needed inspiration and hope, that it had served a very useful purpose.

1978: Coffey Appointed Country Public Affairs in Indonesia

COFFEY: Well, am I in Indonesia yet?

Q: No, I think -

COFFEY: Okay. John Reinhardt, the director, assigned me to Indonesia as public affairs officer.

Q: And this was when?

COFFEY: This was in the fall of 1978, so after a month of Indonesian brush-up, shortly after Christmas, early January, I arrived in Indonesia and participated in quite an active program, an excellent staff, some 13 Americans and some 65 Indonesians, with two branches, one in Medan and one in Surabaya, and some smaller activity in Jogjakarta and elsewhere.

It was a wide-ranging program, trying to reach students, educators, military, professional people, and the media. We were concerned with human rights problems, promoting US foreign policy elements, of which human rights was important. We worked very hard in a number of areas.

During American Hostage Episode in Iran, Indonesian Muslims' Initial Hostility to UMitigated by USIS Campaign Among Muslim Leaders

COFFEY: I might point out that in 1979, when the hostages were in Tehran, Indonesia - being the largest Islamic country in the world, of course - had great interest in what was happening in the Islamic world. Our hostage situation, the Muslim raid on our embassy in Pakistan, the incidents in Mecca - all of these things seemed to be based on the premise that the United States was hostile to Islam.

Of course that was not true, but it was becoming the accepted understanding in Indonesia, at least, among many of the educated Muslim leaders. We decided we had to do something, and here is where the information instrument of the USIS, I felt, was very effective.

We targeted two or three key young Islamic leaders as door-openers, and from them we moved on to the major element of Islamic leadership. We sent several of them, the younger leaders and the major educators, to the United States on two or three different trips to see Islam in action in the United States.

They visited the Islamic centers, the mosques, the Nation of Islam, the Smithsonian, which was promoting a big exhibit on Islam. The VOA cooperated, giving us more material about tolerance for all religions. We were putting material into the press, television, our own publications, and word of mouth. The binational centers were promoting scholarships for Islamic leaders.

We promoted more contact within the Islamic universities and USIS, the whole broad array of things. And within one year the initial young leader that I'd started working with, L-u-k-m-a-n H-a-r-u-n, became deputy head of the Islamic Education Foundation in Indonesia. He called me and said, "Fred, the Islamic leadership here is very sympathetic to the hostage situation, and our national religious leader is going to make a trip to Tehran. Is there anything we can do? He will see Khomeini; can he carry a message?"

There was a flurry of cables between Washington and the embassy. He indeed went to Tehran; he indeed, he said, passed on our messages. Yes, we were very glad to get Indonesian support. Nothing happened as far as the hostages were concerned, but Indonesia itself had turned the corner and was looking on the United States with a much more open and objective viewpoint than earlier.

The Islamic publications weren't hammering on us, were accepting our material, and the Islamic radio programs were including some of our materials. And the Islamic schools welcomed our visits, encouraged them. We had definitely turned the corner there.

And just last month, Lew, October 1990, Lukman Harun paid a visit to Washington, the last visit being when we sent him here in 1979, early 1980. We had a good visit, and he emphasized the value of our initial program in influencing public opinion in Indonesia with the support of the Islamic community as we got them on board.

Q: Didn't you also tell me, a while back, that there was a great expansion of the general exchange program between Indonesia and the US during your period there?

COFFEY: Well, we -

Q: You said when you got there, there were only about 17 or 1800 Indonesian students in the US.

COFFEY: Oh, that's true. When I arrived there Indonesia had some 1700 students in the US Some countries, like Thailand, had 15,000 students; Malaysia had some 8-10,000; Indonesia had 1700. This is the fifth most populous nation in the world and a major player in the Far East.

So we went to work. The consulate section was very helpful in improving their visa process for students, in smoothing it up. The universities - we encouraged US universities to be far more open to Indonesian students, because the Master's degree or the bachelors degree from Indonesia didn't match easily with those in the US

It was an apples and oranges with the academic requirements, but in almost all cases an Indonesian student would excel here, go to the top of his class, be accepted in his US academic circle. So as the universities learned that Indonesian students were pretty darn bright and capable, they made their facilities more available to them.

When I left in July of 1982, there were some 4,500 Indonesian students studying in the US And I understand now there are close to 10,000 in this country.

Q: How are they being financed? Are some of them coming at the expense of their own government, or - that seems like an awful large number of people to be handled by the USIA exchange program. COFFEY: Well, ours was just a very small slice of that. When I arrived we had something like six or eight students under the Fulbright program. When I left, we had probably 25 or 30. The Indonesian government did have a number of programs, through their oil company and the foreign ministry, to support scholarships for the children of employees of those organizations; and other major enterprises, usually state enterprises, in Indonesia also had programs.

Then of course there's a fairly wealthy upper middle class, an elite class in Indonesia, and they would send their sons and daughters to the United States for study, usually after they'd finished their first four years of university study in Indonesia.

Q: Did you have any - did you and/or the embassy have any role in counseling these students who went under auspices other than USIS exchange programs?

COFFEY: We had a full-time counselor and installed counselors both in Medan and Surabaya - and made it known to the Indonesian educational community that we would like to counsel these students before they went to the United States, to help them prepare. So it was spotty, but yes, we did.

And by the time I left we werwe had encouraged, and the International Institute of Education had agreed to place a full-time representative there, in Jakarta, to process students. I think they closed the office in Hong Kong, or maybe closed the office in Thailand. They pulled one out to put him in Jakarta, because they're the ones who do most of the placement, anyway, into US universities. It's a big activity.

Establishment of American Studies Center at University of Indonesia

COFFEY: Another activity which I thought was important stemmed from experience in Brazil and our aborted attempts to establish an American Studies Center at the University of Sao Paulo. It didn't succeed because the concept wasn't vetted properly with the University leadership.

I suggested an ASC for the University of Indonesia after arrival. A year later, the University leadership turned to USIS and asked for such a Center. With Indonesian and USIS committees working in tight cooperation with the Ministry of Education and the American Chamber of Commerce, we launched a campaign to raise $250,000 to build the Center on the UI campus.

The purpose was to train graduate students in "Americana" to prepare them for careers in foreign relations, international business, and academia. A full time Fulbright professor was committed to direct the Center, its library and academics. The venture was highly successful and plays a useful role today in US - Indonesian relations.

Alan Carter as East Asia Director Misdirected USIS Programs in Area

COFFEY: One problem which affected all the posts of East Asia was the Area Director, Alan Carter. Alan knew little about genuine intercultural communications and tried to focus all efforts and resources into two or three limited USIA objectives. With broad societies talking to each other, as was the case with Indonesia and the United States, such a tight focus makes a wide-ranging informational and cultural program nearly impossible.

I resisted some of his outlandish staff and program reorganizations and paid the price with his annual evaluation of my work. Nevertheless, we suffered little program damage and in fact had what Ambassador Masters called, "easily one of the best USIS programs in the world." A footnote to the story is that Carter was dismissed from USIA after less than a year in that assignment.

Q: Well, did he - was he dismissed or did he leave the agency voluntarily? Or was he just told that he - his time was up, or what?

COFFEY: Well, I was told that he was - they suggested he resign, that the Agency director suggested he resign.

I mentioned earlier on that a lot of the people I had known in Surabaya in the early "60s had moved on to national prominence and helped our program considerably because we had known them at an earlier - in an earlier period. Several of the military commanders, the navy, the marine corps and the army, are old friends of mine, first-name friends, and they immediately were open for programming in their areas of responsibilities, which we found very advantageous.

The head of the Central Bank I had known much earlier, and he made the Central Bank supportive to us, so when we had problems regarding tariff barriers and economic issues to be discussed with Indonesian officials, this man would help USIS organize seminars to bring these problems and issues out into the open, and the Americans and the Indonesians felt they were very valuable.

In a couple of cases, immediately after our seminars, Indonesian laws were changed to set aside certain tariff barriers which had been discussed at our seminars. What I'm trying to say is that continuity over the years is very, very important for USIA and the field, and I think there are some very good examples that I have experienced myself from two tours in Indonesia and two tours in Brazil, knowing people that have moved right on up the ladder from junior to senior levels.

1982: USIA Representative on National War College Faculty

COFFEY: Well, following Indonesia, I was assigned to the National War College faculty to represent USIA, and while there I had a great experience from 1982 to December of 1986. I taught international relations and spent a lot of time teaching what I called the information instrument, in other words, what USIA does.

Our students were 160 military and civilian field grade officers. My specialties were the military and the media and Southeast Asia. Some of the people that I invited to talk to my class I found very impressive, and so did the student body. I include Walter Cronkite, Pat Buchanan, Sam Donaldson, Ted Koppel, Hugh Sidey, Bill Plante, a communist defector from the Soviet Union, and others.

I wrote one long paper based on my knowledge of two generations - my friendship with two generations of Brazilian and Indonesian military. Some had very spotty knowledge about the United States, even though they had lived and traveled - had done military training in the United States, and others knew something about what the electoral process is in the United States, the freedom of the press, and other aspects and other values of our society.

Why the difference? After investigating and traveling around various bases in the United States, I found out that the Department of Defense and Congress had agreed that the Pentagon would administer what is called the Informational Program. And that is to give foreign military visitors, of which there are 14,000 or 15,000 every year, a good view of the United States and what makes its institutions successful: press, the open market, the Pentagon relationship under civilian direction, and so forth.

So I had a good opportunity to write this paper and present it, both to the military and to USIA, hoping that USIA experience in administering other informational programs would come to bear with the military. They rejected that aspect, but they did strengthen up their informational training programs in the various military facilities around the United States, so I was pleased that that seemed to be useful.

187: PAO In Argentina

COFFEY: Well, following the National War College, I was assigned as PAO in Argentina, which was an outstanding experience for me. Argentina was struggling to establish a democracy, meanwhile keeping the military in their barracks and under civilian direction while hoping to improve its economic conditions, which were in chaos, and are in chaos.

Argentina had always looked towards Europe as its major guide, beacon, because most of the immigrants in Argentina came from Spain, from Italy, France, Germany, the United Kingdom. So their culture and blood relationships were slanted toward Europe, but that relationship had never really sustained them. Certainly in the last 40 years, under Peron and post-Peron, the Argentine economy had gone into a tailspin and the educational system was in a state of disarray; great problems in that country.

USIS Efforts to Expose Military to US Concepts Re: Civilian Control of the Military

COFFEY: And after the return of democracy under Raoul Alfonsin in 1983, the concepts of democracy were there, but the practice was not. And it was our USIS role, then, to consolidate democracy with our programming. We worked very hard in the civilian-military area, hoping to enlighten Argentine military to work under civilian controls and civilian direction, and to demonstrate that in the United States the system works.

We instituted a training institute for the Administration of Justice. Argentina at the time - and still does, but it's changing - did not practice oral testimony. The jury system was not used. Moving trials to the appellate court levels was very, very cumbersome, taking many, many years.

Anyhow, we, with AID participation, managed to get $200,000 from AID, and to establish a training institute in Buenos Aires. I'd like to say something about the civilian- military program, though. I considered it very important, because if the military decided they wanted to take over, they could, any day.

So we instituted a program of broad-based activity, with civilians and military traveling to the United States, these civilians being from the Argentine congress and the defense committees, and those working in the Ministry of Defense. The military selected were cutting-edge colonels, navy captains, and air force colonels, who still had a number of years to go and would make contributions to the Argentine defense establishment in the future.

We sent three groups to the United Statefive civilians, five military in eacand they visited the Pentagon, observed the civilian direction, met with the civilian secretaries of the forces, talked with people on the Hill, and visited ROTC programs to see the civilian aspect of US military. They had quite a wide range of things to see and do concerning the civilian-military relations.

We considered that program extremely successful, because these groups came back to Argentina, wrote reports, had discussions and established their own organizations. Men in these civilian-military exchange groups didn't even know each other when we would say goodby to them at the airport. When we received them at the airport after two weeks in the United States they came back arm in arm, saying they could work together, and they have.

Recent testimony is that last montin August - the Minister of Defense, who was a senator then and an old friend of mine, called me and said he wanted to have dinner and discuss this program. I got together the people who had programmed them here. We had dinner, and he lauded these programs.

He was very, very strong on them and wants more. He said his program had changed his outlook and his career to have this insight. And now he's the top civilian directing the Argentine military. That sort of speaks to what we were trying to do.

USIS Promotion of Linkages Between US and Argentine Universities, Business and Professional Organizations

COFFEY: Another area that we felt was important was to promote all sorts of linkages between Argentine institutions and the United States: universities, professional groups, wherever there was a possible linkage, because, as we all know, the information activity is not necessarily a straight shot, but it's a cobweb of many interrelated things. By the time I had left we had something like 28 university linkages; when I'd arrived there were something like four.

I felt this was the right way to go, The Argentine student levels in the United States in 1987 was something like 800 students. Now there's something like 3,000 students, and that number is growing, which I consider indicative of Argentina turning towards the United States.

Their major problem is with the economy. The Argentines are moving towards the open market system, of which we're the best example. So, of course, many of our programs worked that area assiduously.

In winding up the Argentine experience, I felt that our educational exchange program was perhaps our best dollar spent, the most useful for both countries, as the Argentines needed middle-grade management, people with business and other graduate degrees from the United States. And to do this we needed to double or triple the Fulbright scholarships, of which there were 15 to 18 graduate scholarships to the United States. I wanted to see that number at 50 or 60.

It occurred to me that perhaps we could use some of the "debt paper" that is owed to the United States. The US banks hold some $20 billion of debt to Argentina, although their overall debt is over $60 billion. We brought two bankers onto the board of Fulbright, and they helped us devise a scheme.

We got the Minister of Education on board, highly supportive, a former Fulbrighter, and we got the Minister of Economics, and the head of the Central Bank, all agreeing that if the United States banks would lend a certain amount of paper, in other words, say five banks, each lending a million dollars' worth of paper in face value to Argentina, that paper would be deposited in an account at the Central Bank, and the Bank would pay a fixed rate of interest based on the face amount of that paper.

That interest, then, would be donated by the banks - - they still own the paper - to the Fulbright Commission. Well, we had this project approved, accepted, by the USIA and by the banks and by the Argentine government, when all of the key Argentine officials were changed.

They were changed twice during the Alfonsin administration. We had to start again from scratch, getting all these officials on board. The third time was with Menem, when he was inaugurated as President in July of 1989. We started again, and got the new Minister of Education, who was also a former Fulbrighter, and the Minister of Economics, the head of the Central Bank and the people handling the debt issues in the Central Bank, all on board.

But at that moment, the US banks decided it was not in their interest to lend this paper. The Brady plan in Mexico had changed the banks' outlook towards making their debt paper available. They said they had such huge debts to write off now, with the Mexican agreement, that they would not lend paper for the Argentine experiment.

Anyhow, our idea I think was sound, and it could be moderated a bit or changed. But I think the agency should follow up very, very strongly on using debt paper for some of its programs overseas.

1989: Retirement: Final Tributes and Observations on Role and Value of Public Diplomacy

COFFEY: We left Argentina, and I retired in September of 1989, one year ago.

Fred Coffey's Tribute to His Wife for Her Contribution to Career

COFFEY: I can't conclude this interview, Lew, without paying strong tribute to the role of my wife in our 33 years' experience in the foreign service. For much of this period, USIA and Uncle Sam really got two officers for the price of one. My wife not only raised a family under extremely difficult situations overseas, but contributed immensely to the success of USIS operations.

She helped me entertain frequently both formally and informally. She joined women's groups and was an important source of contacts and information. She taught English to wives of key officials. She wrestled with serious health problems when we nearly lost one child and I had bad cases of hepatitis and dysentery. She withstood assaults on our house by communist squads.

She bore up well when communists had put me on their hit lists in both Managua and Surabaya, and she never faltered in moving from one place to another, even with a broken ankle or a six week old baby. She dug into the local languages and became functional in four of them.

The role of the wife or the spouse in the foreign service has changed drastically in the past few years, but in my career, my wife and her positive attitude toward our work were essential to what I consider a successful experience with USIA.

Summing up, I'd say that my 33 years of experience with USIA confirms what my early PAO, John McKnight, had said regarding the information instrument. It has great ability to affect public opinion and to affect attitudes towards the United States on an individual level, on a group level, or on a national level, but its success depends on our policy.

If our policy is bad, then USIS can only try to cut our losses; there's no way of promoting our USIA goals with success. If our policy is good, then we have a very good chance of achieving our objectives if we use our heads, if we work within the cultural framework of that country and select the proper information instruments.

And always the best instrument to work with is personal contact; all the others are relevant to acts of personal contact. I would say that information and public diplomacy, and I use this term "public diplomacy" in the broad sense of dealing beyond the official government-to-government relations, are at last becoming accepted as a major element of our foreign policy of overseas outreach.

This was not so when I joined the agency in 1956. Whereas the traditional diplomatic components political, economic, military, and even intelligence continue as major, the information instrument is the newest, perhaps the least understood, and probably the most under-utilized instrument in our international relations.

I know that we've come to the end of this decade with a pack full of experience and experimentation in the psychological dimension. One given is that a decent respect to the opinions of mankind is essential in the execution of our foreign policy. To me that means working in a host country with their best aspirations in mind.

Another given is that specific information planning and execution are necessary, for the most part, if this respect for the opinions is to be followed with the informed communication that we seek. Increasingly we have learned that we cannot take supportive and/or understanding attitudes for granted, especially those which relate to the United States.

That means that as you work in a country context in the bilateral relationship, often you must reinforce goals that you think are well understood and are not important, but you suddenly find you can't take for granted. You have to turn around and work on that issue while reinforcing another specific objective.

Our audience is capricious man. Our program still remains very inexact, but I think we've made strong gains in the last 30, 40 years.

Q: Well, thank you very much, Fred. I wanted to ask you one question, though, with reference to Argentina, before we quit.

You got there some years after the Falkland business. Had the antipathy toward the United States for being on the side of Britain in the last analysis dissipated somewhat, or was there still a lot of residual difficulty?

COFFEY: Lew, there was a lot of residual resentment. Many Argentines realized the lack of logic of attacking the Falklands, the Malvinas, as they call them. Nevertheless, we were supposed to have been their ally, as a member of the Interamerican Club and a western hemisphere country.

They thought it only proper and justifiable that we support them in this outreach of their own national sovereignty, because from 1820, when the Spanish left the Malvinas, the Falklands, and left Argentina as an independent nation the Argentines have felt the islands were theirs.

They teach it in their history; the kids learn that the islands belong to Argentina, and the military swear to regain them, so it's a very hot emotional issue. Yes, they felt betrayed by us, and the resentment is still there, not as hot as it was earlier, but it exists.

Q: It will probably be a long time dissipating.

Well, again Fred, thank you very much. I think it's been a very fine interview, and I'm grateful to you for the time.

COFFEY: Well, I'm sorry to have been so long-winded, and I know that.

Q: No, no, not at all. I'd like to be as thorough as you are, so don't apologize. So with that we'll lose the interview.

End of interview