

AMBASSADOR THOMAS J. CORCORAN

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Mr. Ambassador, what inspired your interest in the Foreign Service?

CORCORAN: I suppose it was my major studies in college, in the first place, largely centered on history, and the fact that I did not want to be a schoolteacher, after taking an education course which included teaching high school.

Q: Where were you being educated?

CORCORAN: St. John's College in Brooklyn, New York. Part of the education course that you had to take to qualify as a high school teacher included actual teaching of classes. After a bit of that, I decided I didn't want that. Then I went into the Navy in World War II and spent one tour in the South Pacific, one in the Mediterranean, and another one in the North Pacific. During the Mediterranean tour, which covered the invasion of southern France, I then went on to another stay in Italy. We went to the Soviet Union, to the Black Sea, to stand by for the Yalta conference, and to provide communications and support the delegation.

Q: What were you on?

CORCORAN: I was on the ship called the USS Catoctin. It was a combined operations headquarters ship, later called an amphibious force flagship. During the first tour, it was Admiral Hewitt's flagship for the invasion of southern France, and then it was made available for this trip to Sebastopol during the Yalta conference. The delegates were at Yalta, of course, across the peninsula. We did have the President on board one night before he flew back to the Middle East and back to the States. My role was purely non-diplomatic. I fired the salute on arrival in port. But it was an interesting experience.

Then, of course, I added to an earlier tour I'd had in the South Pacific, a voyage largely to the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, and New Zealand, working back and forth on that circuit for a year. That was in an evacuation transport, a ship which could carry in a battalion of Marines, and was designed to remove the wounded from the battleground. Later on, they found airplanes could do it better. So these ships, all named for surgeon generals of the Navy, became regular transports.

Then I had another tour in the Catoctin in the North Pacific at just about the end of the war. We took Admiral Barbey in to accept the surrender of the Japanese in Korea, and then later, of the Japanese in North China. We took Marines under General Rockey into Korea, and Chiang Kai-shek's troops up from the south to north China. We covered the coast there for a few weeks, stopping in various ports. I even made one side trip to Peking, just for a couple of days, and a few days in Shanghai before starting back to the West Coast with a lot of American servicemen being repatriated.

Then I stayed in the Navy for a while. I had a regular commission for a few years. I was navigator of a transport, the USS Noble, for a while. Then I went into the naval intelligence school here in Washington, DC, which has since gone out to the West Coast.

About this time, I had taken the Foreign Service examination, which I had taken once before, just before the war started, when I was 20 years old. I decided at this point, I was getting to be about 26 years old, that I'd better decide what I wanted to do. At this time, the amphibious force looked less attractive than the Foreign Service, which was more of my earlier interest. I took the written examination on board ship, in Norfolk. I took the oral examination here in Washington and was notified of my appointment, and the Navy released me. I went back into the Naval Reserve.

I came to Washington for the Foreign Service course. This was early 1948, the time of the "do nothing" Congress. We weren't commissioned in the Foreign Service until about April '48. At that time, the Foreign Service had about 600 or some Foreign Service officers. This was the end of the old period. The next Act was just being set up.

Q: The new Foreign Service Act, yes?

CORCORAN: Of 1946. But my first post, more or less just picked out of a hat, I guess, was Barcelona, Spain. I was told that I could go to Lisbon, Barcelona, or Canada. Canada didn't seem like the Foreign Service. Barcelona seemed more interesting, so I went there. I spent a little more than two years in a small traditional consular post. At that time, we had files going back to the Spanish Civil War in the consulate. They had the background of the Catalan independence movement and of the Carlist monarchist movement which had a long history there, plus the largest American chamber of commerce outside the United States, although it was inactive and had been inactive since the civil war. Its membership was still open because of the textile production in that area.

We also had a lot of dual nationals with very complicated citizenship, because they or their fathers or grandfathers had been born in Puerto Rico. The Treaty of Paris, which meant to the United States and Spain the end of the Spanish-American war, had a special provision for people whose fathers or, I think, grandfathers had been natives of the Iberian peninsula. They could take an oath of allegiance and retain their allegiance to the crown of Spain, and some of them did. So eventually, they and their children were both American nationals and Spanish subjects. This made for some great complications if they traveled back and forth, and would maybe spend too much time in one place or the other. So that was an interesting part of the work there.

We had the usual run of consular work. I recall that a train fell off an embankment, about 90 meters, landed on the walk below and killed 22 people, one of whom we heard was an American. I had to go down there and retrieve his body, which I found by looking at shoes, which seemed to be the best way to tell an American in those days - rubber heels on a pair of shoes. That became a very complicated matter, because the man was a commercial traveler and his company and his next of kin both had an interest in what had happened to him and the disposal of his estate. That took some time.

We had not much trade with Spain in those days. We had things like capers in brine, for example, and plaster images of saints and things of that sort, which were exported in great quantities, largely to Puerto Rico.

We also had the French and the British consulate generals involved with us in the preservation of German assets in Spain, which were the spoils of World War II. So we had to administer, collect rents, and that sort of thing.

We had a small amount of visa work. I think the Spanish immigration quota was something like 200 a year. That was a pretty long waiting list.

Q: I want to concentrate mainly on your time in Indochina, because this is where you did spend, I can almost say, an inordinate amount of time for a Foreign Service officer. How did you get into this particular corner of the woods?

CORCORAN: That started in Spain. The consulate was inspected by Foreign Service inspector Wilson Flake, who asked me where I would like to go next. I said that having started in a consular post and learned Spanish, I'd like to go to a diplomatic post where I could use French, which I had already studied in school for many years. He said, "Fine." Shortly thereafter, I got orders to Saigon, which had not been a diplomatic post when we were discussing this, but which had been converted from a consulate general to a legation right about that time in 1950.

Q: I'm confused. How was Indochina divided up then? I thought Hanoi was sort of the center.

CORCORAN: In the French period, Vietnam was really in three parts. You had the empire of Annam, the middle, which had a French resident.

Q: That was Hue?

CORCORAN: The capital of Annam was Hue. You had North Vietnam (Tonkin), which was largely under military administration, although it was technically under the imperial crown, but was run by the French Army. Then you had South Vietnam, which was a French colony, Cochinchina. So you had three different administrations there.

But with the French reoccupation at the end of World War II, after the Japanese had taken it over, the Chinese Nationalists in the north and the British in the south, had accepted the Japanese surrender. The French went back in. There was a very complex period of negotiating with Ho Chi Minh, who was the leader of the Communists, who had come out of the bush and taken over Hanoi initially at the end of the war. They followed on the Chinese Nationalist occupation and coexisted with them for a while, but then the French moved in there. It was a very complicated period of negotiations between the French and the North Vietnamese, first starting with the French admiral, D'Argenlieu, who was General de Gaulle's representative and commander in chief. Then he was replaced eventually by General LeClerc. General LeClerc was the Army commander in the north.

All of these details have to be sorted out, because I've been in that area three times over a period of 30 years, actually four times, with three desk tours. It needs sorting out of the different periods.

The original sort of *modus vivendi* which the French worked out there began to break down in 1946. Jean Sainteny, who had been in the French colonial service, and who was the son-in-law of Albert Sarraut, who had been the governor general of Indochina and a French cabinet minister, went back in and tried to deal with Ho Chi Minh and re-establish the French presence in the north. For a variety of reasons, that broke down in 1946, and that's when the war really started.

Q: I want to come back now to what you were doing. This gives an idea that it was a complex situation. You were sent to Saigon as what?

CORCORAN: Initially, there had been a consulate in Hanoi and a consulate general in Saigon. As I understand it in the old days, during the hot season, the government moved to the north, and consular representatives would follow them there. But when the war ended, we maintained a consulate in Hanoi and a consulate general in Saigon, two consular posts. Then in 1950, when the French union concept was being established, the other two countries, Laos and Cambodia, had their own problems. Laos had also been divided into three parts, Luang Prabang, the kingdom in the north, Champassak, the kingdom in the south, and Vientiane, a sort of expired kingdom, in the middle, which was under direct French administration. The French union concept was that these three separate countries, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, would be members of the French union, each with its own monarchical form of government, a king in Laos, a king in Cambodia, and the ex-emperor of Annam, who was supposed to be accepted as the ruler of Vietnam.

As part of supporting this, in 1950 we agreed to diplomatic recognition of each of these countries, and we sent one minister, Donald Heath, who resided in Saigon. He kept a small branch office with a junior officer in Vientiane and one in Phnom Penh. So I first went to Saigon when it was a legation, and I was a political officer. I was, at that time, a third secretary. But after a few months there, I was sent up to relieve the man who was in Vientiane. I became the *chargé d'affaires* of legation at Vientiane, with the proviso I didn't get any extra pay because the Department realized this was a special situation. I spent about eight months there.

Q: What sort of work were you doing there?

CORCORAN: The whole general work of the embassy on a small scale. The minister would come up there from time to time to call on the King and Prime Minister. In the meantime, I, as the *chargé d'affaires*, kept in touch with the government and with the French commissioner, who was also there, and occasionally saw the King on ceremonial occasions. I also coded the telegrams and typed the letters.

Q: So you had an exalted title, but you actually were doing everything.

CORCORAN: A one-man post. I had one Thai National, who was sort of a general messenger and office clerk. After a while, I got a couple of USIA people there. But all the rest were local employees of a custodial nature, except the clerk. Vientiane then was a pretty quiet place. My telegrams went to the post office. They would be written up, put on blue forms and sent through the post office to Saigon, and I got telegrams back the same way. We had a courier every two weeks who would come in and take mail out. We had a generator for electricity, which meant importing gasoline, an old US Army generator of World War II. We eventually were able to buy some copper wire, and the electric company strung it on to the main generator for us, so we'd get sort of a low-powered general current. There was a strange mixture of sort of very primitive working conditions plus sort of exalted contacts with the government and the royalty within the administration from time to time.

Q: What was our interest in the area at that point, we're talking about 1951?

CORCORAN: Actually, it started out with the end of World War II, when the policy, as I recall it, was that the former French and British colonies should be put on the way to independence. As part of that, we arranged for the three countries in Indochina to sign the Japanese peace treaty in San Francisco. That tied in with us sending diplomatic representatives to each of them, but this was complicated by the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.

Q: June 25, 1950.

CORCORAN: This, of course, meant that there was really a major US involvement in Asia, and the Chinese were involved. The Chinese, in those days, were the main suppliers of the Vietnamese Communists. So the French, of course, had a rather large army on the scene that they sent in at the end of World War II. They sent in an army which was largely composed of what they called the Army of Africa, which was the Foreign Legion, plus North and West African troops. As I recall, they never had any French draftees there; they had French gendarmes and career officers and the French Navy and Air Force. But the Korean problem tied in pretty closely with this because of the French commitment in Indochina, so they sent a small token force to Korea, but they also kept this rather large force holding on in Indochina.

Our main effort, as I understand it, was to persuade the French to go along with various agreements they had with the Indochina states toward more and more independence, which the French were inching along at. They, of course, never forgot they had this big army there and a question of security of their own forces. So we were giving them military assistance in France with the Russian threat, the beginnings of NATO, and also for the use of their armed forces in Indochina, a separate military defense assistance program for Indochina.

As I said, the idea was to progress towards independence for the three countries, which was easier said than done, because Laos had a tradition of not only the three monarchies, but of being in between Burma and China and Vietnam and Thailand and Cambodia. It was an underpopulated country, rather long and strewn out, and really sort of at the mercy of just about anybody.

Q: During the time you were there, did the Lao government there, the King or his ministers, try to use the United States as sort of a surrogate protector against these other forces, including the French?

CORCORAN: Initially, of course, the Lao got along with the French better than either the Cambodians or the Vietnamese, because they were the weakest. The French went in there in 1893 when the Thai were getting ready to devour the country, and the French stopped that. At the end of World War II, of course, the Thai had taken a big chunk of Cambodia, and the French made them give that up. But the Cambodian problem was a little more complicated. The Lao having a very small population, having been traditionally vassals of both Thailand and China, were sort of resigned to getting along as best they could, but they had an independence movement which had fled into Thailand, headed initially by Souvanna Phouma's eldest brother Prince Phetsarath.

Q: How were they using you? Were they coming to you, or were you sort of a bystander?

CORCORAN: We dealt with the Lao government in those days as an independent government, but within the French union, recognizing that the French were responsible for their defense. The French had very small military forces in Laos at this time, but they had military and gendarmery training missions, and they had a small civil service, teachers and doctors. But the Lao, both in the south, under Prince Boun Oum, and in the north under the King and Souvanna Phouma's family, had aspirations of their own. A lot of these people, of course, were French educated and some of them had gone into the maquis against the Japanese with the French. So they had sort of a mixed feeling there, but they all agreed with the King of Luang Prabang being the King of Laos, and accepted that, under French tutelage.

In those days, while I was there, Souvanna Phouma became Prime Minister for the first time. That was the result of a long parliamentary struggle, where all sorts of explanations were given about what was going on.

Q: Were you reporting this in some detail?

CORCORAN: Oh, yes, in as much detail as you can when you have to write something out, type it, code it, and send it.

Q: Were you able to talk to some of the participants in the maneuverings and all, to get an idea?

CORCORAN: To talk to them, the participants, to get the inside details directly, would take a long time. You'd have to get them over a period of time, and you would get some views from participants, some from people outside what was going on. You'd occasionally get a French position, so you'd have to sort of cut and paste it, but you could usually find out what was going on in a general way there.

Souvanna Phouma became the Prime Minister for the first time, and then on and off for the next 25 years, he was in and out of office. He was originally considered as sort of the French choice, but as time went on, of course, circumstances changed, and he, like everybody else, had this nationalist persona which came out, despite the French education and all that.

He had a half-brother, of course, who is today the Communist chief of the state of Laos. His elder brother, Prince Phetsarath, was sort of a super royalist and a super leader of the independence movement against the French in the old days, who went into Thailand and lived under Thai protection for a while, as did Souvanna Phouma. But the younger brother was a half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong. He was the son of the same father as Phetsarath and Souvanna Phouma, but his mother was not a member of royalty. He also was trained as an engineer and he acquired a Vietnamese wife, an early association with the Communist Party of North Vietnam. As I say, he's still there.

Q: I'm trying to get down to how does a young, junior officer, given quite a bit of responsibility, albeit in a small place, operate?

CORCORAN: The diplomatic corps there consisted of just the American chargé d'affaires and the Thai consul. The French added on the apostolic delegate - actually "apostolic prefect," senior missionary there.

Q: From the Vatican?

CORCORAN: In my day, he was a Canadian missionary. I don't think he was part of the Vatican diplomatic service. He might have been. Others were in Vietnam. But normally, these three people came out on parades and other social events of the diplomatic corps. But they had a foreign ministry with protocol, political and international organization sections, in it. We were in touch with the foreign minister, and a chef de cabinet and a director de cabinet, and we handed in notes and spoke to them. We saw all the cabinet quite frequently on social occasions. But most of the business we did was with the foreign ministry. The Prime Minister, when I first arrived there, was a man named Phoui Sananikone, from a Vientiane family. We could see him at any time.

When I first went there, I called on all the members of the cabinet and talked to them, so I could talk to any of them at any time. I would see them when anyone gave a big party there. Just about everybody was there in the foreign community. The French community was very small. There were a couple of American missionaries there. That was the American colony. There was one American chargé d'affaires and one or two USIA people by that time. Then we had the British American Tobacco Company and the Air France group. The rest of the foreign people there were French teachers and doctors.

Q: At that time we had, I take it, no real economic interest in the place.

CORCORAN: We were beginning an economic aid program. In addition to the establishment of diplomatic relations, we established an aid program with each of the three countries, and a military assistance program. I was present there when the first military assistance was delivered to Laos. It was the Garand rifle.

Q: Ah, yes.

CORCORAN: There was a symbolic delivery and then the rifles were put back into stock, taken back to Saigon and put into stock, because there weren't enough Lao trained to use them.

Q: They're pretty big rifles to be carrying for rather small people.

CORCORAN: Some of the French thought that the carbine was better for people their size. But eventually, we also had people coming up from Saigon to discuss the aid programs. Initially, we were largely thinking in terms of public health, food production. Later on, we got involved in currency support.

Q: But on the economic side, one of the controversies is what was our interest in the area. Economics, in other words, were our commercial interests driving this? Was there anything of that nature there?

CORCORAN: No. We had no commercial interests in Laos. We really had none in Cambodia. I think that in Vietnam maybe to some extent in Cambodia, we had oil companies marketing gasoline products and that sort of thing. But that was on a small scale. Most of the exports from Indochina in those days were rice and rubber. Rubber was controlled by the French rubber plantations. Rice, initially, was exported through traditional markets, although Vietnam usually didn't have much of an export. Traditionally, they had an exportable surplus. Cambodia did have an export.

Q: After you left Vientiane, you went to Phnom Penh. What were you doing there?

CORCORAN: I was chargé d'affaires.

Q: Here you were an FSO-6, which is the equivalent in those days of a second lieutenant.

CORCORAN: It was entry level, yes.

Q: You were representing the United States to one kingdom, and then you moved to Phnom Penh, which was also a kingdom.

CORCORAN: But you must remember that the minister, as he was then resident in Saigon, was accredited to the kings of both countries, and he would come up from time to time to visit. I, the chargé d'affaires, was assigned by the Secretary of State. When the minister, as he was then, arrived, he became the minister to Laos and Cambodia.

Q: You were in Phnom Penh when?

CORCORAN: I was there for a period of only about, I guess, eight months in 1952. This was some time after the French commissioner had been assassinated, and there was a French general there also acting as the civilian commissioner for a while. Then he left and was replaced by another French general, and they split it up again.

The French forces in Cambodia at that time were pretty small. In Laos, there was very little fighting in those days, except in the south, and around some of the fringes of the very northern mountains. In Cambodia, there were two, as I recall, Cambodian movements, one Communist and one not Communist. Then the Viet Minh were also active. But it was still possible to drive from Phnom Penh to Saigon in those days. It took about four hours. You didn't want to stop everywhere en route, but you could drive back and forth in the daytime. They had watch towers.

Q: What were your personal relations with the French military, both in Laos and in Cambodia?

CORCORAN: Well, the personal relationships in Laos were very good. The French commander-in-chief of Laos was a colonel who had previously been Delattre's operations officer in North Vietnam. Then there was the chief of the gendarmery mission, and I was on friendly terms with both of them.

Q: They didn't resent American influence or intrusion into their area?

CORCORAN: They didn't, because they realized they were dependent on the American support in the main fighting in those days, which was in Vietnam. But also, most of these people had been graduates of World War II, and the gendarmery commander, whom I knew up there, had been liberated from a prison camp by US Army forces. There was also the French commander-in-chief in Laos. He was a colonel, Redon. The commander-in-chief of the Lao National Army, as it was called in those days, was a French officer with the remarkable name of Stanislas D'Otton-Loyewski, obviously one of the Frenchmen of Polish ancestry. He, of course, wasn't very popular with the Lao, but he was the commandant of their Army.

Q: Did you have any contact at all with any effort made by the Viet Minh or any of the forces opposed to try to gain some support from the United States? It's well known that certainly President Roosevelt was adamantly opposed to the reinsertion of the French into Vietnam, before he died.

CORCORAN: He was. But of course, as I've mentioned before, the least opposition to that was Lao opposition. But certainly you'd have some Lao who would complain about some of the French from time to time, but it was no great big thing in those days. You'd hear more of it in Cambodia, of course, where you had the Democrat Party, which was in opposition to the French and also in opposition to Sihanouk. The thing came to a head there, and Sihanouk dissolved the Huy Kanthoul government. This was something called the *Partie Democrate*, which was the party in power.

Q: Would they be coming to you to try to get America on their side?

CORCORAN: Not as plainly as that, but they would be giving me their views on things from time to time. As I say, I was there for just about four or five very crowded months. It was clear that the main struggle was between the Democrats and the French. The French were being pretty tough, because they had small forces there, and they were afraid that if they weakened, they'd be finished. The Democrat Party was composed of a lot of people who were very tough on their side. They weren't much interested in bargaining; they thought it wouldn't get them anywhere. But they would take a pretty strong position. They got into a deadlock with the then-King Sihanouk. One day, he dissolved the government, and French troops fanned out.

Q: This is while you were there.

CORCORAN: The French did send troops up there at the request of Sihanouk to protect the French civilians and Europeans. The net result was that most of the people who represented the Democrat Party in the streets were high school students, teen age students. They weren't anything like the Korean students, you know; they were just French high school students. They were not that much of a physical threat. Then the king set up a royal government. One of his relatives was the foreign minister, and he presided over things for a while. But then it must have been a year later, maybe in '53, that Sihanouk, in turn, split with the French. I think it must have been in the beginning of 1953, in the winter. He took off into the Angkor Wat area, which was then occupied by a dissident, a non-Communist, in protest against the French not giving him full authority. Actually, at one point he went over into Thailand as a self-invited guest of the Thai Government, which embarrassed them. They didn't do much for him. It was a publicity effort on his part to try to get the French to give him a little more leeway, so he would be better able to deal with the elements who had formerly supported the Democrats. Nothing much came of that. Then, of course, we drifted into the Geneva period.

Q: Outside of meeting on a social occasion, no one was coming to you particularly through the side door and saying, "Give us some help," or "We want to get rid of these beastly French," or anything like that?

CORCORAN: No. Actually, they were pretty quiet about it. There were some people who had been in the Democrat leadership, certainly after the boom was lowered on the Democrats by Sihanouk. They complained, but they lived through it. Some of the Democrat leaders blamed the French for it, but then again, after a period of time, they got diplomatic posts here and there. Huy Kanthoul went as ambassador to the Soviet Union at one point. But he was sort of an amateur. I always felt that you had the Democrat Party, which had gotten control of the Parliament and didn't quite know what to do with it. But out in the bush, there were a couple of bandit groups and also people who later became the Khmer Rouge. Nobody quite had a hold on them. Sihanouk would talk about them.

Q: When were you in Hanoi?

CORCORAN: I was there from about the beginning of September 1954 until about December 12, 1955. I was there about 14 months.

Q: We had some trouble on the previous tape. Some of this may be repetitious. How would you describe your principal job there?

CORCORAN: The main thing was to point out that we were not pulling out, we weren't prejudging the Geneva Conference as the end of everything. It was an armistice. We were going to wait and see what happened. We were supporting the government in the south, but we were keeping consular representation in the north. According to tradition and custom, the people holding the real power in the north, the Communists, could have expelled us if they had chosen so to do. But they chose, instead, to say that they just did not recognize us. But of course, we did exist, and we had employees, we had our buildings, two buildings which we owned, and for a while, a couple which we leased just as an anchor to windward, and had people spread out. We obeyed the curfews and we paid our electricity bills and things of that sort. But our main purpose there was to wait and see what happened, rather than just climb aboard airplanes and get out. They did, in effect, deal with us through the municipal Military and Administrative Council of Hanoi, which was, in effect, a municipal government with both military and civilian functions.

At one point, they actually sent troops into my house during preparation for a parade. My house was on the big Place Ba Dinh, a central place where Ho Chi Minh's tomb is now. I was awakened in the middle of the night by my house boy who said the Viet Minh had arrived. They explained to me that in preparation for a parade the next day, they were putting troops and machine guns on the roofs of the building. I said, well, I couldn't argue with that, I suppose, and they could go up there on the roof. I couldn't stop them. I said, "Please use the back stairs and stay out of the house," which they did. They stayed there until after the parade. They did the same thing on some other buildings in the area. Actually, when the parade came by, I went out to watch it, and a French-speaking Communist policeman gave me a running description of what was going on, obviously part of the propaganda department. So there again, they knew who we were and what we were up to.

As I say, we were very careful not to try to do anything clandestine or subversive or anything of that sort. It would have been hopeless in that situation. Our main purpose was just to stay there and then keep the possibility of dealing with whatever came up.

As time went on, a difference developed between the way they treated us and the other non-Communist representatives. You had the British consul general, who, as I said, was an ipso facto agent of Anthony Eden, who was the co-chairman of the Geneva Conference. You had the French Sainteny mission (his nom de guerre) and he was accredited by Mendes France personally to the government of North Vietnam.

Q: Mendes France was the prime minister.

CORCORAN: Yes, who had forced the Geneva Conference in 1953. There was also the French military mission, actually a liaison mission with the International Control Commission, headed by General Groot de Beaufort. There was the Indian chairman of the international commission, Mr. Desai, who later became number two in the Indian foreign office. And there was the Canadian delegate, Brigadier Sherwood Lett, who was a war hero, who took part in the famous Canadian landing at Dieppe, was a lawyer, and who later ended up and died as Chief Justice of British Columbia. He was the Canadian representative on the commission. Then there was a Polish delegation headed by a man named Ogradinski. He was a complete Communist doing the bidding of the North Vietnamese. At that time I don't think you could expect anything else.

On the other hand, the Canadians, who were trying to defend the free world's interests, were not in the same relationship with us at all. They were trying to help us out as much as they could, but they had their own standards of propriety.

The Indians were somewhat in between. The Indians represented the personal policy of Nehru, which was that the important thing was the end of colonialism and the independence of former Asian countries, and the Communist thing wasn't to be worried about too much; that it would sort itself out later. Actually, Nehru came through on a visit. I met him briefly on this one occasion. He came through early on and talked to everybody.

Then, of course, the Indians also had a consul general. They had a vice consul there, and they sent a consul general, who was a man named Sahay, Anand Mohan Sahay, accompanied by his very beautiful daughter. He had an interesting history. He had been at one point the private secretary to Rajendra Prasad, who later became vice president of India. He had also been involved in the Indian National Congress of Subhas Chandra Bose, a Japanese collaborationist, and he had actually fled to Japan and was caught by the British and sent back to India to be tried for treason. But Nehru was his lawyer, the lawyer for all of these people, and they could handle that. So he was a nice man on the surface, very friendly, but he wasn't too realistic. At one point, I guess I can tell you this now-is this going to be published?

Q: It will be in transcript form, and researchers will be able to use it.

CORCORAN: Well, then, he wanted to give a reception for all hands, including me and the government officials of North Vietnam, and they, of course, wanted to receive the invitation list in advance. They saw my name on it and they wouldn't come if I showed up. I told him, well, forget it, I wouldn't come. I didn't want to embarrass him. But he said, "Yeah, but that's not good enough. I've got to be able to prove to them that you're not coming." I said, "Okay, I'll write you a letter saying I'm diplomatically ill," which I did, and that solved that. This man's background was general good will for all occasions, but he didn't realize what he was dealing with. Some of the people in the Indian delegation to the control commission were a lot more sophisticated, and they had a certain range of opinions.

Q: I'd like to go back, if we may, again, because I'm concerned this might not have come out on the previous tape, about your knowledge of and reporting on the land reform, which was reportedly quite a bloody affair.

CORCORAN: The real details on that didn't come out until much later, when a Frenchman wrote a book, and when the government itself admitted they had made a mistake and killed a lot of people they shouldn't have killed. But it was just beginning to come out. In some cases, there were trials of people reported on in the press. There was one trial, which I saw part of in Hanoi. But we had to rely largely on the press for those reports, and in some of them, the main charge was being a rich exploiter of the poor, a capitalist exploiter. But this varied. The main problem, I gather, was that standards varied from province to province and district to district. Somebody who might be a cruel, wicked landowner in one area might be just one of the people in another, because the property values and income values varied. This may have been the root of their problem. They had an open-air application of the land reform on the Chinese model, but it became clear that some people were being punished for what other people were not being punished for in a different area.

Q: You mentioned that you tried to attend one open-air meeting and were sort of run off.

CORCORAN: Yes. I couldn't have really understood, anyway. I didn't have Vietnamese. But I was recognized as an outsider.

Most of the other trials were held out in the countryside, and you'd get reports on them in the press. As it emerged later, I didn't realize it at the time, but I realized later that one of the main problems was an awful lot of people were killed and the standard kind of varied from province to province. So this had a general unwholesome effect on the people themselves, because some of them could figure out that somebody was being punished for being a poor miserable landowner, instead of a rich landowner. The standards were off.

As I say, the government recognized this at one point. But some experts who followed this more closely than I did later on took the line that they really got in trouble when they eased up on the land reform program. There were some demonstrations in the countryside, really tough ones. Some reporting by some of the French writers indicated that there was a pretty violent uprising. But some of the Sovietologists took a look at these things and said that they had the real trouble after they pulled back on the land reform, in other words, when they showed signs of moderation. That encouraged people to protest more. I really would have to go back into the files.

Q: How did you leave?

CORCORAN: We were there for a total of 14 months. We left in early December. But in September, we could see signs of tightening up. For example, they required all of us, including Americans, to register as aliens with the government. They sent a big form about the size of that map.

Q: Pointing to a large map.

CORCORAN: Filling in all your personal history and whatnot. We could see this was the initial step of closing in on us. Then they wanted to come and interview us, each individual American. I said yes, but I would sit in on all the interrogations as though they were my own, and they agreed to that. They were asking sort of nuisance questions, and I would intervene after a while. They said, "You said you didn't speak Vietnamese." Well, I didn't speak Vietnamese, but I could just see the way they were going, just wasting time and harassing people. We filled out these forms, and they inspected the place and saw we had a lot of radio equipment, which they obviously knew we had. We had been broadcasting every day for the last year as our only means of communication. We couldn't use the mail. So I could sense by the tone of this, something was going to happen.

Early on, after the British started making trips, we had applied for permission to send people in and out. None of them were accepted or refused, but we had gotten a bad publicity campaign as our only reply, so we let that ride; figured that could wait; we'd rely on the radio. But at this point, with the detailed census statement things became tough. At one point, they came in and the Army tried to inspect the place. We asked them out, and they left. When they moved into my house, they had a really plausible pretext, security for the parade. They were doing it to the Russians and the Poles and everybody else, so I couldn't complain. But it became clear that on this occasion, they were getting ready to do something. I could sense that things were tightening up.

What we did was make a plan, which we just sent in by telegram saying, "if this happens, we will do thus and so," and try to destroy classified material, of which we had very little. We would try to communicate by other means, a very simple code.

Sure enough, I suppose it was not more than a week or so after that, I was summoned in one rainy day to the municipal commission, and I had to walk through a flooded street to get to my car. The committee was sitting behind the table there, and they said, "We brought you in to tell you that you're not authorized to use your radio. Stop using it."

I said, "I don't know, this is interesting. When did this become effective?"

"Right now."

I went back and did not use the radio to report that, because that would have been a technical trap I'd have been walking into. What I did was draw up a telegram and send it through the post office, PTT, thinking that if we could survive in that old-fashioned way, that would be all right, too. They held the telegram for several days and then returned it unsent, said no route existed, which was quite false, because they had routes through Peking and Moscow, and then on to the outside world, and to Hong Kong. So what I did was send copies also to my various colleagues and the British, who were supposed to be our protecting power if we got out, sent theirs off, and the French sent theirs off, and the Canadians sent theirs off, so Washington got the news. They wondered why we'd gone off the air, but they got the news pretty quickly.

Then it was a question of getting out. I thought the appropriate thing was not to act in terms of just slam, bang, everybody out. It's easier said than done in a case like that. I said, "We ought to go slowly." In fact, one of the Indians told me, "I'm sure they don't really mean this. You ought to just hang on. Maybe they want you to stay." I said, "Well, I'll try." My other reason for trying it that way was I didn't want to show any signs of desperation to get out. I think I tried to hang on, they would be less likely to keep us there. So we sent out people one at a time until I got down to one vice consul, who was also the administrative officer and the cashier. He, the man I wanted to keep with me, and I left together, turning it over to the British in due form. We had the regular transfer of the two buildings we owned, and a transfer of our consular function. With the approval of the foreign office, the British consul and I cosigned this. We went out to the airport and left.

Q: Were these done under instructions from Washington? Were you able, through the other British and French Canadians, to keep some . . .

CORCORAN: After this initial report, we narrowed it down to the British, since they traditionally, we understood, would represent us. I did it through the other people just to make sure the word got out. But it was pretty clear that we would have to do this. We developed the details with the British, and we left the two buildings there. They were taken over, I gather, later on. My house was used by some Communist diplomat, I think, or by some Communist agency. The office became the headquarters of the liberation front of South Vietnam for many years.

Then, strangely, when I was in Burundi, I was asked by somebody in the department for information about property. This is when Jimmy Carter was thinking of reopening there. I said, "Look in the files for 1955. It's all there." They did. They kept the files in Milwaukee or someplace. They got it quickly, and they had all the documents, inventories, titles for the two buildings, and the Department said the Vietnamese would let us have those two back. These were the two we owned. We had rented some others just to give us alternatives. They had progressively moved foreigners out at different times. But the rented buildings they took over pretty quickly. These two buildings, which we turned over at the end, which we retained title to, we made it clear that we did, otherwise, there was no way we could have them back. I think the plans were proceeding to move some sort of diplomatic representation in there. Then, of course, the North Vietnamese moved into Cambodia.

The only suggestion I gave to anybody immediately when I left, and also at this much later date, was if you do go in there with any sort of representation, you've got to insist that you have your own territory. A lot of European countries were operating in hotel rooms for years, and considered it a great victory if they got a second hotel room. This is preposterous. You can't function unless you can have a certain degree of . . .

Q: Space.

CORCORAN: Certainly a degree of space, and a certain degree of security, even though the security would always be a problem. So there it is. This goes back to the last days of the Carter era, about 1980.

Q: I'm going to make a massive jump, because this is talking to you as a senior officer on this. Though you've had a series of interesting assignments at interesting times, I hope we can pick up another time in doing something on our involvement in Vietnam. But I would like to go to the time that you were chargĳ½. This is 1975. You had been consul general in Quebec.

CORCORAN: Yes.

Q: We're talking about 1975. You were picked to be the DCM (chargĳ½) in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Was this at the time when we had evacuated Saigon, the fall of Saigon?

CORCORAN: Yes.

Q: So you were there to pick up whatever pieces there were to be picked up.

CORCORAN: I think they decided that Saigon was evacuated and Cambodia was, too, but there were indications that although there was a certain amount of harassing of Americans in Vientiane, we were getting the mission way down from the huge size it was. There were indications that they weren't going to kick us out. I suppose it was assumed by Secretary Kissinger that maybe they'd learned something from the other experience or maybe they just realized that despite all the brilliant talk about being able to supply themselves through Hanoi, that railway down to Bangkok was pretty good, and if the Americans left, maybe the Thai and the other people would leave, and they'd be landlocked for sure. That's my own interpretation.

In any event, I was in Quebec-in fact, I expected to retire from there-when I was called and told they wanted me to go out to Vientiane again, 25 years after I'd had the same job. I said, "okay, I'll go." And I went. I relieved Christian Chapman, who had been the DCM during the last days of the struggle. Charlie Whitehouse had been the ambassador but had gone to Bangkok. I took over. It was still nominally the kingdom of Laos, although the Communists really had control of it. Souvanna Phouma was the prime minister, as he had been near the end of my earlier stay. But an awful lot of water had gone over the dam in the interim, and we had mushroomed out into this big presence. We'd gone through the Geneva Accords in '53 and also '62, Laos, and we'd gone through the secret war in Laos. The North Vietnamese never accepted the terms of the '62 agreement. They were continually operating. Each dry season, they'd move into the Plain of Jars and we'd help chase them out. This went on and on, until finally with the collapse in Indochina, they more or less came to stay there.

I got there again in about September or October. The situation there was that the King, the son of the original king, was still king. Souvanna Phouma was the Prime Minister. But most of the other ministers worked for the Communists. There were still one or two holdovers whom I'd known in earlier days who were in the capital, both of whom intended to stay there, because their families were gone-dead.

So here again, I went around and called on all the members of the Cabinet, including the Communists. The only one I did not see was the Minister of Security, but I saw the head of government who was also the Secretary General of the party (Kaysone Phomvihane, the longstanding leader of the Communist Party). I saw his deputy, Nouhak. He was the Minister of the Economy and second to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister, of course, was Kaysone Phomvihane. But the initial problem I had was we got down to a rather small group, 30 people, and we had Marine guards, but our funds were frozen, because they seemed to think that an agreement to turnover some aid funds to them, part of the aid program, included all of our funds, including the embassy funds. We were operating by selling automobiles and whatnot, and getting money to operate on.

Q: Were you able to have communications and all that while you were there?

CORCORAN: Oh, yes, we had communications.

Q: So you could talk to the budget and fiscal people who were probably not very understanding.

CORCORAN: Actually, it was out of their hands by that time. But from my own point of view, there's no point in starting a long-term operation if you can't function. Some time went by there, but this happened rather early on. I got a chance to make a call on the Secretary General and the Prime Minister. I mentioned to him that I'd been there before and I knew the people. Of course, he knew all about me. I'm sure he had a file on me. I told him we were trying our best to get along, but we had a strange problem in which somebody in the government seemed to think that our administrative funds belonged to them, obviously an impossibility. I gave him a little sheet of paper in explanation of this. He said, "Go see Mr. So-and-so at the bank." And I did. Mr. So-and-so at the bank had gotten instructions to resolve it, so it was resolved. We were back in business, and we could get our frozen money out of the bank to operate on.

Q: There were some anti-American riots and takeovers and real problems.

CORCORAN: This was just before I got there in '75, at the American School, at some other buildings and the aid housing project. But all we retained were the embassy and the residence which Ambassador Godley had built on the outskirts of town, which is quite big, with a swimming pool and tennis court. Some people suggested we should all retreat into that, and I said, "No, from my experience, you can't operate that way. You've got to keep the embassy, too, the embassy and its administrative compound across the street. Otherwise, there's no point in pretending you're functioning." This was not a consulate; this was an embassy. There's a big difference.

There were other strange things. Through the years, our generator in our embassy was generating power for part of the city, and until this could be sorted out, at one point, an agent of the electric company would come in, with our permission, and check the generator. Eventually it got sorted out and they rewired it, and we were out of their network.

I'd see the Foreign Minister quite frequently, and I would see the Secretary General of the Foreign Ministry, the Chef de Cabinet, and the real deputy. The Foreign Minister was a Communist, but he was an old man, sort of old-school enough that you could deal with him. He had a young assistant who would have to do the dirty work, but was quite polite. He later ended up in the U.N. in New York and now is Vice Foreign Minister. The point was that I went around and called on all the ministers except the Minister of the Interior, who was busy and didn't want to see me. Some of them, actually, rather naively asked me to get more economic aid. But in any event, we were on a talking basis. They would come to social events and entertainment and vice versa. I was invited to almost everything they did.

The British had an embassy there, a small embassy. Australia had an embassy, the Thai, and the Filipinos were there. The Burmese were there, and the West Germans and East Germans. The Russians, of course, were there, and the Chinese. The Russians we dealt with, and the Chinese we didn't. This was when Mao Zedong was still alive.

Q: Although we had begun the opening to China at that point.

CORCORAN: Yes, we had.

Q: It was just getting started.

CORCORAN: Yes, we had, but still, it wasn't until I was in Burundi that the Chinese diplomats became friendly with us. We had no contact with them in Vientiane. The Russians, of course, we did see a little of them. The Russian Ambassador, of course, was not somebody whom I would regularly see and talk to and call on, except when on very formal occasions including national holidays, we'd exchange hospitality. We did see some more of the junior people. There again, some of them came up from Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge had given them a rather rough time. But it was obvious to me then that it was the North Vietnamese who occupied Laos, who had troops in the countryside, and that the Head of State and Secretary General and one or two of his leading men were longtime members of the Indochina Communist Party. And so the Russians had the main influence there. The Chinese were there, and they were there, I expect, until the later split with the Russians.

Our daily work was largely that we had a lot of hostile press criticism, and they wanted me to stop putting out our daily USIS bulletin after a while. We kept that up for quite a long while. But we actually took part in the That Louang annual fair, which I'd first taken part in 25 years earlier. That Louang is a big Buddhist monument on the outskirts of town which they used as fairgrounds. We participated in that. We'd go to ceremonies and we went up to the boat races in Luang Prabang shortly after I got there. Some people were surprised, but it seemed normal to me. The king was still there.

Then in December of '75, they started having secret conferences in the old AID housing area, and rumors leaked out that this was the plan; that they were going to dump the monarchy and proclaim the Democratic Republic. We reported that very briefly. We didn't have details on it.

Q: How did you get this sort of information?

CORCORAN: Rumors. Then finally two people told me, two old-regime types who were getting ready for the worst to happen. We sent that in, and it happened. There were other rumors going around. They were making sounds about killing the King, and that sort of shocked everybody, but that wasn't going to happen, though he was sent off to exile in the north, I gather, and did die up there. Those are things that I might have been prone to think when I first went there. But the King gave a sort of party, really a farewell party. A week later, they gave another party to celebrate his overthrow. I think the King knew it was coming and was sort of taking his leave in a very polite way.

Then they inaugurated the Lao People's Democratic Republic(LPDR) and then they began to become a little more difficult. They eventually made us get rid of the Marines. They didn't want them around. I think you'll find the Chinese had done something similar, earlier, claiming that the wearing of T-shirts with a Marine Corps emblem while jogging violated a ban on wearing uniforms. The Lao Communists just said they weren't getting any military aid from us, and they didn't want any military presence. The French in Vientiane, as I recall, handled it by noting that their embassy guards were CRS, civilian policemen, really trained by the Army for this, a national police force. They kept theirs. We replaced ours with security officers. We didn't replace all of them; we replaced the six Marines with several security officers, who also did administrative work. As time has gone on, I've had five replacements since I left Laos eight years ago.

Q: So we've kept a presence there. What were your instructions from Washington or the guidance from Washington? What did they want from you when you went out and when you were there?

CORCORAN: Pretty much just try to stay in business and play it by ear. Of course, I had good communications, and if I had a problem, I could talk it out with the Department, but they always agreed to whatever I wanted to do. It was just a question of staying in existence there, keeping an eye out, and learning what we could. We could pick up all sorts of things there from various people. But mostly the LPDR wanted us there for the reason that I mentioned earlier - they didn't want to be cut off. They would have spats with the Thai from time to time, and at times the Thai closed the road and railway, and, actually, it was done more often by Kukrit Pramoj and Seni Pramoj, the Thai civilian prime ministers. It was done by the Thai military later on. But the Thai just kept it as a reaction when they got too many unreasonable demands made on them, and they would turn off again to the communications. But that's been thrashed out through the years by several crises and agreements.

Q: Did you have problems keeping up morale at the post? Did people like it?

CORCORAN: What we did was to encourage travel. We'd let people go to Bangkok. When we started out, we'd have people carry the mail down to Bangkok and take a little leave, and we'd let them go to Hong Kong on Christmas leave and visit families in the US. We encouraged that. Most of the people we had there liked it pretty well. We also had this community of Australians, Americans, British, French, Filipinos, and Germans, which they could mix in. There was very little mixing with the Lao, because most of them were afraid.

Q: Any great crises while you were there?

CORCORAN: We had a number of minor crises. We had, for example, usually roadblock problems. The communicator going to the embassy to answer telegrams would be grabbed by the police for violating a curfew. Or on one occasion, somebody was pursued to his house, and the electric company militia, which was a union-type militia, tried to force their way in. Fortunately, we were able to thrash that out, because the embassy security officer stayed at the scene and just by word of mouth discouraged them from barging into the place. We talked to the Foreign Ministry all day, and I finally told them, "Now, look, you know, two things have happened here. You've got this guy who you say didn't stop at a roadblock and you chased him home, but you have this other guy who did stop, and he was manhandled. We've got to sort both of these problems out. You've got to make up your mind what you want to do. You can't operate this way."

This dragged on all day and then, finally, I was told it was all right. I went out to the house, and the militia were still there, so I went back to the Foreign Ministry and said, "I'm going to tell the Department this thing can't be worked out." They said, "It can be worked out." I went back again, and it worked out. So I guess they decided the electric company militia people might have had a theoretical cause for complaint, but they had so botched it up in the other case at the same time that they decided they'd work it out.

That was probably the last real crisis I had there, although they did sort of tighten up rules about driving down to the river port. We could cross over on the ferry and get on the train to Bangkok. You were supposed to fill out a form each day if you were a diplomat, but there was nobody to collect the forms. We agreed we'd always carry a form, though there was nobody to hand it in to.

Q: Just keep it in the car.

CORCORAN: That faded out after a while.

Q: While you were there, did we get involved in any efforts on stopping drug trafficking, or was that an issue at the time?

CORCORAN: No, that wasn't really an issue at the time. The U.N. had a man there following that. I'm not too sure how successful he was or how important the problem was at that time. There had always been talk about drug (opium) production in western Laos, and some people thought the Chinese were controlling it. They had troops in the area, and I think they still have. But it never became a real issue in my time. We had so many other things to worry about.

Q: The obvious question is how, after all your time in Indochina, did you become appointed ambassador to Burundi?

CORCORAN: I had been, of course, DCM in Ouagadougou in upper Volta back in '62 to '64, and I had been the chargé d'affaires in Haiti for about a year, from '73 to '74, a little over a year. So I had some African background. Frankly, I think that since things turned out so well from their point of view in Laos, they were giving me a reward. I guess that's the way these things happen.

Q: How did you feel about this? Obviously, Burundi is not the center of civilization. It's not a major capital, and also the same thing is true of Ouagadougou and Vientiane. I take it you liked these.

CORCORAN: No, I sort of had the old-fashioned idea that you're supposed to go where they send you. One of the conditions of your employment was that you were available on a worldwide basis. Most of my assignments were almost unplanned. Most of the planning didn't take place in advance.

Q: You were ambassador to Burundi, whose capital is Bujumbura. You were there from 1978 to 1980. What was, at that point, American interest in Burundi?

CORCORAN: The only American interest in Burundi was the same interest we had in all of the other small African countries, partly humanitarian, public health and food aid, partially U.N. contacts, although that hasn't really worked too well in recent years. Most Africans did not vote along with us in the U.N. I think it was just probably force of habit. I think it was Loy Henderson, as under secretary, who went around and surveyed Africa back in the early '60s, and decided where we were going to put posts, because Africa became important because there were so many people there and so many raw materials and so many new political entities.

Burundi is a small country, and their only raw material is coffee, of which all that they exported to the United States was taken up by Folger's coffee company. Most of it went to Europe. I gather even now coffee represents a small portion of the total world market, even though it's mountain-grown, isn't all that important. I gather the main source of income for Burundi is foreign aid of one sort or another.

When I was there, we were trying to get a program started which would stress public health, food production, and education. We had a number of these programs in the planning stage, and we were starting some of them when I left. But they also had the European Economic Community's aid program. The Belgians had a big educational program, the French had teachers, doctors and a small aid program, plus they took over the military training program when the Belgians dropped it after the great massacre in 1973. I understand they are starting a police program. The Russians had a military assistance program, which was mostly a lot of equipment. The Chinese had a public development program. They were putting up buildings and factories. The North Koreans had a program which, as nearly as I could figure out, was training people on how to conduct demonstrations. The Egyptians had a small program there.

Q: It certainly appears that the Burundis were working the aid business from left, right, and center.

CORCORAN: They were. Their official policy was neutral. They claimed that they were free world oriented. Most of them were educated in Belgium and France, and most of the senior people there had university degrees, even the Army officers. President Bagaza, who was the president when I got there, was deposed last year. He had succeeded a man named Micombero, who had been the first president after the monarchy ended there. Micombero was the man who had been president during the great massacre of 1973.

Q: Could you very briefly explain what the great massacres were?

CORCORAN: In both Rwanda and Burundi, you have two ethnic groups of people. You've got the Tutsis or "the tall ones" in shorthand and the Hutus, who are "short ones," and you've got a very small number of Twa, the pygmies. They're not much smaller than Hutus. In Burundi, when I was there, the total population was something like 14% Tutsis, 1% Twa, and the rest were Hutus. But the Tutsis ran the place because they had inherited the monarchy, and they had the key positions. In Rwanda, it's the other way around; the Hutus dominate.

In that part of the world, the Burundians and the Rwandans are sort of different from many of the other people across the river in Zaire. They've been pushed around through the centuries, and they're very suspicious, even by local standards of everybody. The Tutsis in Burundi, being in the minority position, were even more suspicious. As I gather, they got the idea in '73 that the Hutus were going to make an attempt to massacre them. I guess they tried to beat them to it. The stories written about that are very strange, because the Hutus apparently submitted rather tamely to the massacre. A lot of missionaries, both American and European, were accused of being pro-Hutu, I suppose since there were so many more Hutus and therefore that many more Christians they got a bad time out of it. Then it was all over, and the man who had done this eventually was eased out and went off to Somalia, on a sort of a permanent scholarship, where he died a couple of years ago. Nobody wanted to talk about it, the Tutsis or the Hutus, after that.

Q: So when you were there, this was not a topic of conversation?

CORCORAN: No, except among foreigners who would talk about it, but the locals just put it aside, as, "well, it was a bad thing and it's over."

But as I say, when I got there, Bagaza was the president, and there was a prime minister. But they changed the format, and Bagaza became president and the head of government, in effect, and the former prime minister became foreign minister. They were developing an organization for the party and were having conferences for the party. But obviously, some opposition to Bagaza was building up, partly because in any country where a young man can become the head of state and head of government, especially in a military context, there are a lot of other people who ask the question, "Why not me?"

But also Bagaza apparently got a lot of people upset with him, including the Catholic Church, because the church was trying to get organized, too, and they had bishops all over the place, but it's my understanding that most of the native Burundi clergy wanted to work in the bishop's office, so to speak, be in the cities and be administrative and run the church affairs, which meant that a lot of the parish priests were people from Spain, France, Italy, Austria, who were sort of old-fashioned European parish priests, and not exactly part of the new world of the Catholic left or anything like that, not terribly well educated, and they had some really old-fashioned ideas. You would hear stories about them getting into personal confrontations with the parishioners. Some of this might have been toned down in Europe, but in Africa, you had the added racial input, so a lot of these people, from time to time, were kicked out, as were evangelical missionaries charged with-well, they didn't have to be charged with anything; they'd just be expelled. In many cases, it was an internal feud where the native Christians wanted to run things and felt that Europeans or Americans were standing in their way.

Q: Were there many American missionaries?

CORCORAN: Yes. The Assemblies of God were there in a big way, and some of them had been there for 35 years.

Q: There was sort of a major expulsion in June of 1979, when you were there, of 52 missionaries. Any of these Americans?

CORCORAN: Oh, I'm sure some of them were. We reported extensively on this.

Q: What would you, as ambassador, try to do?

CORCORAN: I would never protest and say, "You can't kick out these missionaries." I would never speak to the president about it. I would speak to the foreign minister and the other people in the foreign ministry, and point out to them, "You can understand how this is being taken abroad. You have a good position in the world and you're in sort of an aid and cultural relationship with the European countries, and then you kick people out without making it quite clear why you're doing it. This is not very smart." And they would either agree or disagree. I thought the worst thing I could do for any missionaries would be to go to the president and say, "You can't do this," because then they would do it. But I was trying to point out to them that these people were contributing something to the infrastructure of the country, and that at least if you're going to kick somebody out, you ought to tell them why and make it easy for them.

The Quakers, I understand, who had sort of an agricultural thing going, when they were asked to get out, said, "Sure," and turned it over to their legal representative. Each of these missionaries had a legal representative who was a Burundian. The Quakers got out. Some of the other people struggled. The Catholic Church struggled.

I think that it's hard to trace the origin of these problems, but I think maybe one of the main problems that the Catholic missionaries had was that initially the church had appointed one man as apostolic delegate to both countries, which is bound to lose when you have to travel back and forth among these two countries who despise each other. Then they remedied that by sending a very experienced man to Burundi, who had served for years in Europe and was very good, but at the same time, other things had happened. Bagaza went on a trip to Rwanda, which was an unusual thing in itself. Some member of the Rwandan establishment conducted a propaganda campaign against him, personal attacks, and this spoiled his visit. Then he came back to Burundi, which was right next door, and the Catholic bishops chose to hand in a protest about injustice being done to them. Nobody, I'm sure, could convince him this wasn't a concerted effort against him, so he responded pretty firmly on that, and he expelled more people.

Like many of the former French and Belgian countries, Burundi made the papal nuncio ipso facto the dean of the diplomatic corps. Well, they made a change in this case and went back to the usual system, which made the senior ambassador the dean. This turned out to be the Chinese. The nuncio didn't like this at all, and he kept arguing about it. I suppose he had a good historical basis, but that really doesn't get you very far once the government has made a public decision.

At one point, the Pope made a statement about what Bagaza was doing to the church, and I suppose that Bagaza just didn't take that very seriously. So I don't know what happened then. I don't know whether he made enough personal enemies or whether people decided that he'd made himself vulnerable. I wouldn't try to guess.

Q: There weren't any major American interests at that point?

CORCORAN: No, except that the Russians and the Chinese were everywhere, and the Western countries were, and we were part of that. Plus the importance of humanitarian aid, trying to develop food supplies and public health aid. We did have a big outbreak of cholera, and our aid system just couldn't cope with that. We did take it up with the people from the central disease control center in Atlanta, who could really do that sort of thing. They had their own rules, which I knew would not work. They had to have charge of it, and they had to go in there and do it. Well, in a country where you didn't have much of anything else, but you had a lot of European-trained doctors, native Africans who were also tropical medical specialists, that wouldn't work.

We told the Burundi to devise a project for one area of the town, on the outskirts, where most of the travelers came in and would bring contamination. We would equip and finance cleaning up that area with germicidal sprays and food for people. As I understand it, cholera is a disease which is caused by a germ, but it apparently only affects people who are pretty badly off to begin with. Even cholera shots for most Europeans and Americans aren't given anymore, because if you're well fed and in good health, you're not going to get cholera. At least that's the current public health view. So we worked out this program, and it was a modest success, I suppose.

The president once asked me why we weren't giving them more aid. This was on July the first, at his National Day party. I told him, we were. I just happened to be making up the list of this, and I would send it to him. Before the Fourth of July, we got, in French, a list of all the programs we had, ones which were approved and ones which were being planned. It added up to quite a bit of money. The total program-I've forgotten the figures now, but it was in the millions of dollars. I gather somehow or other that hadn't come to his notice. He was quite happy when we presented it to him. Some of these programs were agreed to, and they would eventually become projects. Others would be proposed and discussed, and experts in Washington would decide what to do. But the point is that we were in these two fields, essentially of food and public health, and later on, a lot of training.

Q: How did you deal particularly with the Soviet Union? Was it friendly competition? Were they trying to undercut you? Were you trying to undercut them?

CORCORAN: No, we didn't really have much competition. There was an interesting rather elderly Soviet ambassador there who had been rather high up in their system. I don't know what happened to him. There were all sorts of stories, one that he was in charge of Egyptian affairs at the time things went wrong.

Q: When the Soviet experts were expelled from Egypt.

CORCORAN: Yes. I don't know, but in any event, he was no particular problem. We saw each other only socially. I'd invite him to dinner and movies, and he'd invite me to parties. Most of the times when you gave a big thing, you had just about the entire diplomatic corps. I even had the Libyans in those days. But the Chinese we did not have, because they resisted us. But at some point, when they apparently got a signal, it was on Christmas Eve of 1978, it must have been, a Chinese whom I had seen only at a distance before, came up and grabbed me by the arm and insisted I sit in the same pew in church. I was unwilling to physically fight him off, so I did. I sat with him. I assume he'd gotten a telegram of instruction.

Q: In church.

CORCORAN: The government or the papal nuncio was putting on this Christmas mass. So thereafter, he entertained me and my whole staff, and we saw one another. We saw an awful lot of them. As I say, this factory they were building was about a 1927-style textile factory, which was quite dandy for that place, appropriate to the type of labor they could get and the kind of cloth they needed.

The Russian aid program was largely dumping a lot of military equipment which I don't think they quite knew what to do with. But then they had other things, scholarships. Our relations with the Russians were purely social, except, of course, when they invaded Afghanistan. I had to tell him I thought that was kind of a stupid thing to do. He said, "Oh, well, you know, it's very complicated." I think he gave up trying to explain it.

The only people we did not have any contact with were the North Koreans, and even the Russians found them difficult. It's sometimes hard to tell the North Korean from the Chinese if you see them in the dark at a social gathering. But they could tell and would recoil. There was hand-shaking, but nobody really took them too seriously. They were part of the allegedly even-handed policy of the government at that time.

The Egyptians were sort of friendly to us and to everybody. I guess they were there largely because the Libyans were there. The Libyans were financing some of the university construction, a mosque and a university. The Egyptians were keeping an eye on that.

Some of the other African countries who sent representatives there were Zaire and Rwanda. Occasionally they had expulsions of Zairians, which were minor flaps.

All in all, I saw my time there as gradually trying to develop an aid program and getting it on paper and agreed to by everybody before we started putting in the aid mission. The aid instinct is sometimes to get everybody in there and do planning on the spot. I think that's disastrous. If you can convince them that there are certain things you can give them if they will agree to your terms, they can see it down in black and white with dollars and cents, it's easier for them to take these people coming in at once, who want import and export privileges and all the rest of it. But I gather now that we have a Peace Corps there. The Peace Corps wouldn't touch it in my time, because it didn't fit into their program.

Q: Why wouldn't it fit into the program?

CORCORAN: I guess I'm thinking of upper Volta now. They'd have to have something which was interesting enough for them to get a number of people in and have something to work on. They wouldn't just send people in there to sing folk songs.

In Burundi, where they have a large university, I think it might have been easier for the Peace Corps to get into that, because they could do teaching. I don't know quite what they're doing now, but they're there. I hear we also have Marine guards there. I heard that the other day from somebody.

Q: So your major work was aid. How did you deal with Washington on aid? Were they supportive? Was it a problem?

CORCORAN: I had a very active AID officer there, and he had one or two assistants who were busy developing programs. He would get the programs, and they had regional people in Nairobi, who would come over from time to time to work on the production. So I think that we didn't have any great problems with Washington that he couldn't solve by going back on trips or going to Nairobi and thrashing it out. The program was getting really well developed. There again, my only difference with him was that I wanted it really well formalized before we started building a staff. He might have agreed with that; I'm not sure he did. Certainly the aid people in Washington didn't, because it was their instinct to get in there. Certainly in the history of Burundi, the Burundi behavior to foreigners, I thought that wasn't too smart. Now we're beyond that stage. I don't know just what we're doing in aid, but I heard from a recent returnee who had been out there for an exercise, that we do have a Peace Corps.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, I've kept you a long time here. There are two things that we try to ask the men and women we interview. Looking back on your career, what could you say was your greatest achievement? Then the reverse side of the coin, what was your greatest frustration?

CORCORAN: It's kind of hard, because you're going over a period of about 30 years with different responsibilities. I suppose that one of the greatest achievements was the last tour in Laos, keeping relations from evaporating and keeping minor, everyday aggravations from upsetting our stay there.

Q: Because you really were at a critical time. It could have gone either way. So you had the feeling that you had some control over it. Had you taken too hard a stance or too easy a stance, it could have slipped down the slope towards non-recognition.

CORCORAN: Or a break in relations. But I think the Department realized that, too, and they were pretty responsive. I was assured by people that were in the Department that just about anything I recommended, they would agree with. That, of course, didn't always turn out, but at least that was the general position.

We did have a couple of visitors. We had Senator Mansfield over there, a rather helpful visit. And we had Sonny Montgomery, the man who made the Mission in Action thing his main interest, a member of Congress there. He was very helpful. Then we had the Woodcock Commission. Leonard Woodcock was going to be in China, who became the first representative in China. He was also going to visit Hanoi, and I thought, "If he's going to visit Hanoi, where we don't have anything, here we have an embassy in Laos, he ought to visit here." I think it turned out well at the end, because he came, accompanied by Montgomery and by Senator Mansfield, whom we all knew. We'd had trips from both of these people before. It was sort of a pretty prestigious group, and they listened to all the complaints, over the CIA operations and whatnot. Mansfield said, "Look, the last time I was here, I told you that if you saw anything of that sort, you would tell me and we'd do something about it, and you've never done it." If there was any CIA activity, they would have just gone hog-wild and caught the people. But this was the advantage of having people like Mansfield and Woodcock. Montgomery came to just make his presence known.

We had another committee which came in there, which was not all that good. We'll forget about them. But we also had a very brief visit one day from Jimmy Carter's drug expert, Dr. Peter Bourne. He just came in and spent the morning and had lunch, and I took him around to meet the Minister of Health. He had lunch with the Vice Minister of Health, who was a real Communist activist. It was a short visit, and I think it was a good experience for him.

Q: How about in looking at it as a career, any sort of frustration you might have had, or disappointment?

CORCORAN: No, I don't think so. I think that the rule I followed maybe made me a little old-fashioned, when I said I was supposed to go where I was sent, and I didn't get too upset, although I got sent to some pretty unpleasant places time and again. Repetition is not all that much fun, although the second Laos tour was. But I tried to avoid getting into a client relationship with any of these people. Even though the poor Lao certainly deserved all the help they could get, I never felt it was up to me to save them from whatever was going to happen to them. I deferred to the US Government, and I had the same attitude in my other posts. You try to do whatever you can of a humanitarian nature, but you don't sort of grab the flag for the little people.

Q: In other words, you don't succumb to the disease of "localitis."

CORCORAN: Yes. That's a good way to make yourself pretty useless.

Q: One last question. Looking on it today, from what you know of how the Foreign Service is today, would you recommend it as a career?

CORCORAN: I'd be very careful about that. I had a tour in the Board of Examiners, a short tour, before I went to Haiti. This was in the latter half of '72. That question came up. We would conduct oral examinations, and then we would go out to a seminar. We were supposed to go on recruiting trips to universities. I wasn't so sure I would agree to do that, because by that time, you know, the thing had gotten so botched up. The new reform act got passed, the new Foreign Service Act, which later got passed with a number of hookers in it, I thought, plus the minorities program, which, while basically good, was operated in a way which wasn't all that good, plus something called the mustang program, which got a lot of good officers who would otherwise have faded out from administrative jobs. I wasn't too sure all of those people weren't being led up or down the garden path, whichever it is.

The Foreign Service, when I entered into it, was 600 FSOs and it had a lot of faults then. A lot of them were over the hill or should have been, but still it was a basic manageable thing. Later on, after several attempts to reform it, while still using the Foreign Service Act to take in the aid programs and everything else, which was probably the only way to do it in a hurry, maybe wasn't the smartest way to do it. Maybe it should have become separate.

Q: So as a career, you don't really come down on one side or the other at this point?

CORCORAN: I wouldn't want to go out and proselytize. If anybody wanted to talk to me about it, I'd talk to them and find out if they were going to be happy with it. In my last two posts, Vientiane and Burundi, I was glad to see there were some young officers in both cases who did come in a couple of generations behind me, who were very good and did make a successful career out of it. I won't mention names, but at least one of them is a charge in a very hot spot in the Middle East. Another one became very active as a staff assistant to the Assistant Secretary, now married to a deputy chief of mission, although she still has her own career in tow. Two others have gone on to several good assignments in various countries, having started in Burundi or Laos. So these are people who really knew what they wanted to do and were of a younger enough generation. I assume they didn't come in intending to spend their entire lives in the service. So I think that might be a factor.

The Foreign Service Journal, which isn't always right on everything either, has pointed out that a number of people who signed up with this new career program, the window business, probably hadn't looked that gift horse in the mouth too well before they signed up. Some of them are going to be disappointed.

Q: This is an up-or-out program which was voluntary at the FS-1 or approximately the equivalent of being a colonel. You opted for when you'd be selected, and you have just a certain period of time. If you don't make it, you're out. By many it's considered to be a trap.

CORCORAN: Even under the original Foreign Service Act, that was based on the Navy system, that had been designed for a much larger number of officers, most of whom were pretty much in parallel situations. I think that the Foreign Service waffled around in handling it, and promotion boards did it. But later on you got a much larger Service, a much larger number of people, more bureaucratized, and the system has got to work for you. You can't have a system and not make exceptions to it, or you break everybody's morale. So I think if people go into it knowing what they're doing, knowing what the possibilities are, that's all right. But they ought to read the fine print on the Act during the recruiting.

Q: On that legal note, Mr. Ambassador, I'd like to thank you. I really appreciate this very much.

End of interview