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

AMBASSADOR WALTER L. CUTLER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Walt, I wonder if you could just give a little background before we get to the Foreign Service. Where did you come from?

CUTLER: I'm a New Englander. Born in Boston, but grew up in the college town of Amherst in western Massachusetts.

Q: Midwestern Massachusetts. I went to Williams, so that we...

CUTLER: Well, I tell you, I grew up in Amherst because my father had been on the faculty at the University of Massachusetts. Subsequently, my step-father was also on the faculty at the University of Massachusetts, my brother went to Amherst College, and I didn't want to be a "townie," so I went to Wesleyan, completing the Little Three. I thought about Williams, but it was a little too far in the woods.

Q: It was, in those days. How did you become interested in foreign affairs?

CUTLER: Good question. I think I trace it back to stamp collecting when I was a very small child. Stamp collecting gave me an interest in and knowledge of world geography, where these countries are, capitals, etc. And then the other factor was the Second World War. I was about ten years old when it started, so from age 10 to 14, roughly, I, like everybody, was caught up in the war.

Q: It was the greatest story that any young person who was interested could have followed. Every day, there was something.

CUTLER: We all had maps up in our rooms, with pins; we followed the fighting of the North African campaign, going into Europe, and then there was the Pacific. This naturally breeds an interest in world affairs. Otherwise, I really don't think I would have headed in that direction, because I had no reason to. There was no international connection in my family.

Q: What was your major in college?

CUTLER: Government.

Q: How did you get into the Foreign Service?

CUTLER: At Wesleyan this interest in international affairs continued. For example, I was President of the International Relations Club, that sort of thing. And then I went on to Fletcher, primarily because one of my professors at Wesleyan, Sigmund Neumann, who was a fairly well-known political scientist, taught also at Fletcher. He interested me in the school, and that threw me even more directly and deeply into foreign affairs studies.

I always had it in my mind that I would at least take the Foreign Service exam, so while still in the Army, in San Francisco, I took the exam. And then I was discharged and came back East to look for a job.

I think, like many FSOs, I had had very much in my mind either going into public service, that is, the Foreign Service, or perhaps going on for a Ph.D. and teaching. My father and step- father had been professors, and so that was very much in the family. But, like many FSOs, when the time came to go for the doctorate, I thought: You know, I'm not sure if I want to spend that much time, and I'm not sure if I want to teach, and so maybe I will try the Foreign Service. And so I went into it with the idea: I'll try it for a couple of years and see what happens.

Q: You came in when?

CUTLER: I came in, in 1956. I came, as I said, back to the East Coast. In those days (and maybe it's not so different now), one waited a long time just for the results of your written exam. So even though I had taken it in San Francisco while still in the military service, by the time I was discharged and returned home, I still didn't know whether I had passed it or not.

So I came to Washington, and the first Junior Officer training course for USIA was being organized. A friend of mine from Fletcher was among the entering officers, and he advised me to take a close look at this, which I did. There was no written exam required in those days for entering USIA, just an oral. So I took the oral, passed, and they offered me a place in that course. Mind you, I still didn't know whether I had passed the Foreign Service exam or not.

So I had a tough decision to make, and I decided that I might as well start with USIA, which I did. And the very day I started, I got the results of my Foreign Service exam. I had passed.

I stayed with USIA, I think a matter of five or six weeks, in their training program while I then took my oral examination for the Foreign Service. I passed that, and then I had another decision to make. And I decided: Well, if I'm truly interested in the Foreign Service, I might as well go over to the State Department now.

I had some regrets. I was already assigned as a Public Affairs officer in Laos, and that appealed to me a good deal. I had visions of going down the Mekong on a boat with a loud speaker and a movie screen.

But anyway, friends in the State Department said, "Look, you'd better come now. You never know what may happen later." So I did, I dropped out.

Q: Your first assignment was to the Cameroon. Was it Cameroon or Cameroons in those days?

CUTLER: Well, it was the French Cameroons. At least that's the way I think the postage stamp had it. Otherwise, it was Cameroun, the French way.

Q: You were at the capital of Yaoundï¿½. Could you describe the situation there at the time? How did we see it at the time?

CUTLER: As I recall, the Department, in 1956, looking ahead at what was happening in Africa and realizing that most, if not all, of these British and French colonies and trust territories were going to become independent fairly rapidly, did some prioritizing and came out with four countries, or countries-to- be, in which it was decided we had better get a foothold, because they were likely to develop into something of importance in Africa. One of them was Cameroun. And I think the decision was well made, because, as you know, over the ensuing 20 or 30 years Cameroun proved to be a quite-stable and relatively prosperous country.

Q: What was our interest there? What would have attracted us?

CUTLER: Well, we had no real direct interest. The resources were nothing like Zaire, for example, the old Belgian Congo, where we already had a consulate general. But it was just a matter of figuring that American presence... And I'm sure that it was in a Cold War context, too, that Africa was becoming independent. We didn't have the resources to set up consulates to prepare for independence in every one of those countries, so we picked several of them. Kampala in Uganda, I think, was another that was opened at the same time as Yaoundï¿½. So the decision was made in 1956 to establish a presence, a very minimal presence, in preparation for independence. And that's what I did.

Q: You were it?

CUTLER: I was it. I was it, along with Bob Foulon, I think whom you've already interviewed. But I arrived out there first, before Bob, and set up shop. I proceeded to look around, rent offices, tried to find houses. I hired a staff and so on. Bob came, I can't remember how many weeks later. And the two of us, together with an administrative assistant and a secretary (there were four of us there originally), opened the doors of the first American official presence in Cameroun. This was in 1957.

But it was also the first consulate of any kind, of any country, in Yaoundï¿½, the capital. The British, as I recall, had had a one-man consulate in Douala, the port, maybe for a few years, and they eventually moved up to Yaoundï¿½. But for at least a year we were the only foreign official presence there.

And, of course, Cameroun was a trust territory. The French were administering it, and so there was a French administration. But they were making preparations for a transition to local rule. And we monitored that, working with the French, but we also tried to get to the future Cameroonian leaders. So it was an interesting situation.

Q: Well, how did you find it? Were the French receptive to the fact that we were making, really at this point, what was an extraordinary effort for this particular area? Was it appreciated or resented?

CUTLER: I think there were mixed feelings on the part of the French. Obviously, there was some hesitation, some wariness in the private French community, as well as perhaps in the administration. On the other hand, I don't recall an awful lot of hostility, animosity on the part of the French. There weren't that many French there, really. It wasn't like Ivory Coast, where they had a big commercial interest. They had some, but not a great deal, in Cameroun. The only Americans were Presbyterian missionaries, who had been there for some years, and a marvelous character named Phil Carroll, who was known as the American Gorilla Trapper. And there was, also, shortly after we arrived, one Mobil representative.

Q: Mobil Oil.

CUTLER: Mobil Oil, yes, that was distributing. And that was it.

Q: How about with the emerging leaders? How much contact, and how did you develop this and all?

CUTLER: Yes, it was possible to do that, and the French understood that this was part of our agenda. But we did it, as I recall, somewhat in consultation with the French. We asked then to facilitate, in a way, because it was very difficult.

The first Prime Minister, who was really selected by the French, a man named M'Bida, came from the south, I think he was Catholic, and it didn't work out. He was not a successful political leader, and so he was replaced by a northerner, a Moslem, Ahmadou Ahidjo.

Ahidjo turned out to be a very good choice, and he lasted more than two decades. And we got to know Ahidjo. Bob Foulon, particularly, as the principal officer, became on very good terms with him. I played a supporting role.

We got to know Cameroonians here and there. We got to know the Mayor, Mr. Fouda. But there weren't that many educated Cameroonians there at that time. The country was not yet independent. Many of the Cameroonians were young students still in France. But we made headway, so that when independence came I think we had a pretty good rapport.

Q: Were you there at the time of independence?

CUTLER: No, I had left.

Q: What was the feeling?. The Department made this effort to open a post there, but did you get much feedback from the Department? Because at that time it was the Bureau of Near Eastern and African Affairs, and obviously the Near East took precedence over Africa.

CUTLER: Absolutely. As I recall, when I was first assigned to Yaoundï¿½, there was really only an office of African Affairs in that bureau, and a fellow named Don Dumont was the director of it. But it was a very, very thin staff.

There was interest; you could sense it growing at that time - -57, '58-as this wave of independence approached. One had the feeling of considerable isolation in Cameroun, and yet you also had the feeling that there was an increasing interest in what was going.

And there was a particular interest in Cameroun, because, in those days prior to independence, there was a movement called the UPC, Union des Populations Camerounaiss, which was believed to be heavily backed by Moscow. This was a radical nationalist group, which was not only fighting to get the French out, but was really jockeying for political power prior to independence vis-ï¿½-vis the other groups, which were sanctioned by the French.

This made for some pretty dicey days. We lived with a curfew for quite awhile. And there were some pretty gruesome massacres that occurred right in Yaoundï¿½.

Q: Who was massacring whom?

CUTLER: These UPC guerrillas would come out at night and, just trying to create a certain amount of chaos, they would go for the French. They murdered any number of French people while we were there. For example, they got into a movie theater and just started hacking people up.

There was a great deal of tension at the time and uncertainty as to whether or not the French and other Cameroonian elements could handle this, or whether, in fact, the place might be ripped apart by this movement if it really started to gain momentum.

For this reason, Washington tended to follow events in Cameroun perhaps more than otherwise would have been the case.

Q: Do we see the fine hand of the French Communist party, which was quite subservient to Moscow?

CUTLER: Yes, I think that's exactly it. Most of these had sort of shifted to the Left, because of French educations and the infiltration into their movement by French Communists, who funded them.

Q: Well then, shall we move on to your next assignment? You left in '59, is that right?

CUTLER: Yes, I left in '59. I had spent almost two and a half years in this very remote post, very much of a do-it- yourself kind of operation, but I learned a lot. And then I flipped from one extreme to the other. I went back to the secretariat in Washington, where I started out as what we called a night writer in those days.

Q: Would you explain what a night writer is.

CUTLER: Yes, he's the poor bloke who gets up at four in the morning or earlier. I think I had to report by 4:30 or quarter to five. There were two of us writers and an editor, and we were all in the executive secretariat. Our job was to produce the morning secret summary and have it on the Secretary of State's desk by 7:30.

This was probably the best training I ever had in the Foreign Service. I would arrive, not fully awake-the editor had come in even earlier and had selected a stack of cables on a particularly urgent matter-and I was told, within 20 to 30 minutes, to reduce all these cables to a one-paragraph story that was intelligible.

And I would have to write maybe two or three of those stories. For example, at that time, 1959, 1960, events in Southeast Asia were not going well, and particularly in Laos. There was a very complicated situation there. A number of players; the names were all very complicated: Souphanouvong, Souvanna Phouma, and all of that.

But, beyond that, we had an Ambassador in Vientiane who was very energetic. Energetic to the point where his messages tended to have five and six sections. He reported in huge detail. And I would get these telegrams, stacks of telegrams, with all these strange names and very complicated scenarios, and within a few minutes' time, before dawn's early light, I would have to make sense of all this.

I had two editors I remember, one was Nancy Rawls and the other one was Bill Bradford. Both of them were excellent and demanded high quality. So that was my job, and we would do this for several weeks at a time and then we would do other things.

I went from there on to what we called the line, became a line officer. From there I was asked, along with Coby Swank, who was one of the deputy heads of the secretariat, to go down to the first floor and help Dean Rusk get prepared to take over as Secretary of State.

Q: This was after Kennedy was elected, but before he took office, was it?

CUTLER: That's right. And that was, of course, interesting. In other words, I had gone from S/S for about a year, year and a half, into S at that point.

Q: S/S being the Secretary's staff to S being the Secretary's office.

CUTLER: S being the Secretary's office, right. That was just temporary at first, when Dean Rusk was named and when he set up a provisional shop down on the first floor.

As you perhaps recall, Dean Rusk was a name that was well known, but there were just an awful lot of people who thought "Dean" was a title rather than his name, because, in fact, he had been a Dean at Mills College.

So Coby and I, each day, coped with a mountain of letters from well-wishers. And it was always a question. When they would write: "Dear Dean", were they saying "Dean" like "President"? Or was this really a personal friend addressing Rusk by his first name, "Dean"? And you wouldn't know. We did a lot of drafting of nice acknowledgments and so on, but we were always uncertain as to which was the case.

Anyway, I worked for about a month for Dean Rusk, and then he asked both Coby and me to go with him to be a part of his permanent staff. Coby and I did essentially the same work, though he was the senior of the two of us. So for the first two years or so of the New Frontier, we were with Rusk night and day. A fascinating time, of course.

Q: What was your impression of Rusk? He'd been an Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs and had dealt with it. He was well prepared for this type of job. But how did he take it on, and what did you think of his operation?

CUTLER: Well, of course, I was a Junior Officer, and I was quite impressed. But, even in retrospect, I have tremendous respect for Dean Rusk. He had a capacity for work, a personal, individual capacity for work that was astounding.

The pressure in those initial days was very great. As you remember, Kennedy wanted to get a lot done in a hurry, so there was no place for a laggard in Washington. Dean Rusk kept that pace by virtue of his productivity and just plain physical endurance.

I remember one morning he came into my office and he put down on my desk a copy of Barbara Tuchman's Guns of August and asked me if I had read it. I had hardly had time to read the newspaper in those first six months or so. It was night and day, around-the-clock work with him. In the evening he would leave the office at 8:00, 8:30, 9:00, with a briefcase stuffed with papers, and I couldn't imagine how on earth he had ever had time to read this rather large volume. And only later did I discover that he was a man who needed only three or four hours of sleep at most. He would work into the wee hours, and then he would read.

He was a very measured individual. Very sharp with respect to balanced analysis of problems. Always kept his cool-almost always. Was very solid and very reliable, and, I thought, intellectually very sharp.

It was not an easy role for him to play, as you perhaps remember. He and President Kennedy had not really known each other before he was appointed. Whereas many of the other Cabinet members had been very close to Kennedy for a number of years. And, for that matter, several of the Assistant Secretaries of State had been named by Kennedy, as I recall, even before Rusk was appointed.

Q: Stephen Smith was one. In fact, Soapy Williams was very proud of the fact that he was the first person named in the department, although it was not as Secretary of State.

CUTLER: Right. And so some of Dean Rusk's deputies in the State Department had a longstanding personal relationship with the President, even to the point of being on a first-name basis. Whereas for Rusk, it was always "Mr. President." And the President always called Rusk, "Mr. Rusk," which indicated, one, respect by Kennedy for his Secretary of State, but, two, the fact that he didn't feel that close to him.

Now I was there only for the first couple of years, but, as you know, Rusk went on to be maybe the longest-serving Secretary of State.

Q: Eight years. Eight hard years.

CUTLER: And they didn't get any easier, with Vietnam. On the personal side, he was a man of, in my view, impeccable integrity: fair, honest, balanced, and personally above any kind of reproach. He was the son of a Baptist Minister, I think, in the South, and he had very high morals. But very modest. An extraordinarily modest man. And shy, perhaps. He had difficulty, for example, moving to a first-name basis. I was "Mr. Cutler" for I don't know how long. Finally, it became "Walter", and later "Walt".

He was always very nice, but I think he believed that it would be a mistake to get overly personal, overly chummy with people in the State Department. And I think he was right. He knew he had to get a job done, and there was a lot of mutual respect between Rusk and his Assistants and his Deputies. But not probably a very close or buddy-buddy relationship, even with his Senior Deputies.

Q: Did you see any tension, from your point of view as a Junior Officer there, between Rusk and the Secretary of State's operation and people like Averell Harriman and Stephen Smith and Soapy Williams? All these people had either close ties to the President or their own political ties. And you had Bobby Kennedy, who had his finger in everything. Did you see these tensions coming on Rusk? How did he deal with it in your operation, or was this not a problem?

CUTLER: If there were tensions or frustrations for Mr. Rusk, he was very careful not to allow them to show very often or to get in the way of getting his job done. He was an extraordinarily dedicated public servant, and he believed in doing his job and keeping personal elements out of it.

There was certainly a difference in style. You had a lot of very flashy people around Washington in those times. Soapy Williams, for instance, was very much of a politician. This was not Rusk's style, but I think he tried not to allow those differences to get in the way of what, for him, was always the most important thing, and that was getting the job done right for the United States.

He was very loyal to the President, from everything I could see. He had high respect for the President. He knew the President had the ultimate responsibility for tough decisions, and he viewed his role as very much a facilitator and advisor and assistant.

Q: We might move on then to your next assignment. You went to Algiers in 1962 as a Political Officer, where you served from '62 to '65. How did this assignment come about? Often, when you work for the Secretary of State, people in Personnel try to make sure that you get a job that you want. Were you able to choose that, or did it just sort of come?

CUTLER: No, I was pleased with that assignment. I can't recall that I had to pull any strings, because people were not lined up to go to Algiers. Every night on the evening news you would see billowing smoke coming out of the city as the OAS and the FLN and everybody else tried to take the place apart.

Q: I might mention here that "OAS" had a different context in those days than it does today.

CUTLER: It was the French extremists, primarily the Pieds- noir, the right-wingers, the extremists who really did not agree with De Gaulle's policy of letting Algeria become independent. They tried to resist it, and even tried to foment a revolution within France, which didn't work. And then, when it became evident that they were not going to prevail, they decided that if they couldn't have Algeria, they would lay waste to the country. So they went around doing as much damage as they could.

I arrived in September of 1962. Actually, I was assigned out there as an Economic Officer at first, because that was the only slot available. The consulate general was going through the pains of quick growth into an embassy. And so, for bureaucratic reasons, I went out as an Economic Officer, where I did serve for several months as the only Economic Officer there. And then, when a more senior Economic Officer was assigned, I shifted over to the political section.

Q: What was the situation in '62 when you arrived?. Had the French pulled out yet?

CUTLER: Yes. I arrived just after independence had been granted in July of 1962. I arrived in September. The situation was, in a word, difficult.

So many French, a million French, had left so quickly that the country was virtually on its back. Security was minimal. Most of the utilities hardly worked. So many of the houses had been blown up. A huge influx of diplomats, as all countries rushed to set up embassies. And even though so many French had left, housing was very short. The embassy didn't have the facilities to handle this rather sizeable increase in personnel. The motor pool was virtually non-existent. It was probably the most difficult environment in which I had to work, or at least to move into, in my entire Foreign Service days.

Q: What was the situation on the political side, as far as our newly created embassy? Had they been able to develop contacts with the Algerians who were taking over, or had the situation and the French excluded them from any real contacts with this group? I guess it was run by Ben Bella at the time, wasn't it?

CUTLER: Yes. You see, there were two groups, to simplify it. There was the element in the FLN which had remained outside, had set up an exile government based in Tunis. That was Ben Bella. And then there were what they called the Wallayists, "Wallayah" being the Arab word for a province or region, and these were the ones who stayed in the country and fought the guerrilla war for seven years.

The Ben Bella forces were the ones who arrived first to set up a government. And there was an uneasy coalition that was established. Boumedienne became the Defense Minister, and he was from this interior group. So the political situation was somewhat fragile.

The French had largely disappeared. They had an embassy there. They had a number of people who had a lot of things to sort out with the Algerians. For example, the whole question of housing, what they called the "biens vacants" and these were houses or commercial establishments that had been abandoned by the French. The French had left to save their own lives. And yet there was still a legal question as to really who owned the property. That problem persisted for years. Gradually the country began to pick itself up off the floor. It was not easy.

Ben Bella, who had been in a French jail for so long, had almost forgotten his Arabic. He used to speak down in the city square, and I remember his first speeches were more French than Arabic, then they became sort of half and half, but in due course, he regained his native tongue.

There was an effort made to make Algeria an authentic Islamic country and to rid the country of the remnants of the French. This went on all the time we were there.

Q: What was the attitude of our embassy? Who was our Ambassador at the time?

CUTLER: Bill Porter.

Q: What was the attitude not only of the Ambassador, but from what we were getting there? Were there any remnants of what we used to refer to as the Battle of Africa, or the Battle of Algiers, in the Department between the European Bureau, which looked after French interests and, now I guess it is the African Bureau, but those that say this decolonization is going to come about?

CUTLER: I'm sure there was some of that in the department. I, frankly, can't recall any such competition or tension manifesting itself with respect to the department's support of the post.

The environment was difficult for us, because (and perhaps quite understandably) a number of the Algerian nationalists who had taken over had very fresh memories of very bitter fighting with the French. They tended to associate the United States, through NATO, as an ally of the French, and, therefore, they believed that we were supporting the French in many ways. As a matter of fact, some of the military equipment, they claimed, was American, obtained by the French through NATO and used or misused in Algeria.

On the other hand, I just might note that, despite this very definite reserve toward official Americans, when Kennedy died there was a tremendous outpouring of sentiment. As you recall, Kennedy stood up in the Senate and spoke in favor of Algerian independence, and this had made a tremendous impression on the Algerians.

Q: What would you say was your attitude (I'm talking about you and maybe your fellow officers) toward the Algerian government? One of enthusiasm: Here's a new country coming up, it's difficult, but, boy, we're with you? Or one of reserve, because we were at that time worried about Nasser and Arab nationalism and what does this all mean? Or was there a mixture? What was the attitude?

CUTLER: I think we were a little concerned as to the direction in which that first government might go. As you noted, there was a brand of Arab Socialism that was spreading in the area. And Nasser was very much the hero to the Algerians. He had been very supportive of the Algerian revolution.

When he came to Algiers, it was perhaps the greatest festive occasion during the whole three years that I was there, even though it ended in tragedy. The very day he arrived, the Foreign Minister of Algeria, a man named Khemisti, who had been shot in the head six months before in front of the parliament building and had lain in a coma for all those months, died. Nasser stayed only a brief time and then went home. The whole country had been decked out for an extended visit by Nasser, and the fervor was unmatched, really.

But, in any case, back to your question. Yes, I think there was some concern on our part as to this new government: Highly ideological in outlook on things. Highly nationalistic. Very suspicious of the West because of the experience they had had. Very heady from the standpoint of having won their independence against all odds. And highly supported by the Soviet Bloc countries.

Many of the teachers replacing the French, who had all left, were Bulgarians. Many were Egyptians. But there were a lot of East Bloc people pouring into that country, and, in those days, that was of concern to us. Algeria had a somewhat strategic location, and it had a lot of oil.

Q: What were we, when you were there, trying to do about this?

CUTLER: We were trying to get across to the Algerians that we in the United States wanted to work with them. We understood what they had been through. And to persuade them that, if they had to align themselves in any direction, the best way to go was with the West and not the East, to put it baldly.

Q: How about your contact with them? Did you have trouble, or was it easy making contact with members of the Algerian government or the people themselves?

CUTLER: Contacts were difficult in those days, very difficult. Many Algerians felt that the better part of wisdom was not to be in direct touch with any foreigners. There was a fair degree of xenophobia.

Q: I'm told the Algerians are a rather dour people.

CUTLER: They're different. I served in Tunisia, and I've been in Morocco. And the Algerians, perhaps because of their particular history, are different. They are very conscious of their nationalism and very possessive of it, sometimes in a somewhat combative way.

Q: Then we move on. You seem to specialize in difficult, out of the way places, going from the office of the Secretary of State to Algiers. Then, in 1965, you went to Tabriz in Iran as the Principal Officer. Was it considered, at that time, a good assignment? How did one look upon that assignment then?

CUTLER: Well, I wasn't quite sure. I think the Personnel people thought it was a good assignment, because it was a Principal Officer job. In other words, I would be heading my own post, and there weren't that many of those around.

On the other hand, initially at least, I had some reservations about it, because, having been in Washington in that kind of a job and then in Algeria, which was very much a priority in that part of the world, it seemed to me going to Tabriz was very much like going on a side track. I really wondered whether, from the standpoint of career and everything else, this was such a good move.

In fact, I enjoyed my two years in Tabriz immensely. I learned a great deal, and certainly, professionally, it didn't seem to have any...

Q: What was the situation in Iran, and especially Tabriz, in 1965 when you went there?

CUTLER: It was a somewhat quiet period, at least compared to what was to come in Iran and what had been before, in the early '"50s.

The Shah was just getting his oil industry started in an important way. But, also, he was pursuing what was called in those days the White Revolution, trying to reach out to the countryside and stimulate development.

For example, many of the young Iranians serving in the military were sent to the countryside in sort of a domestic Peace Corps arrangement, where they would be social workers or medical technicians. Doctors coming out of medical school were required to spend a couple of years, or at least a year, I guess, in the countryside.

Tabriz, mind you, was not a regular consulate. It was a post that had been opened and closed several times in this century. It was essentially a listening post, a presence in a part of Iran where separatist tendencies remained strong.Located in Azerbaijan, it had the duty of monitoring political and social and economic conditions in a part of the country which, historically, had been occupied by the Russians twice. Where there had been an independent Kurdish republic set up after the Second World War, briefly. And where the Azerbaijanis were not fully integrated into the Persian nation, speaking a different language and all that. There had been troubles in that northwest corner of Iran over the decades, and, therefore, we kept a small post there.

So it was not really a consular assignment at all. As a matter of fact, we issued barely a handful of visas every year. And my job, essentially, was to be the eyes and ears of the embassy there and to keep the flag up.

Q: Well how did you do this? You didn't have Iranian training, Farsi training, you were new.

CUTLER: I had studied several months of Farsi before going out. Farsi is not that difficult a language, although, yes, I did not speak it fluently at all. In fact, in that whole northwest area, a rather difficult dialect of Turkish, Azerbaijani-Turkic, is spoken. This is a very difficult language, and I'm not sure anybody in our service speaks it. And then, of course, there was a lot of Kurdish spoken in my consular district, too. It would have been pretty difficult to have mastered any of those languages to a useful degree. So we had some good local employees, and I used to travel with my assistant.

Q: Were there dissident groups coming and saying: Where does the United States stand on this? Or were your contacts pretty much with the Shah's officials?

CUTLER: Political ferment at that particular time in Iranian history, in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan, really was not at its height. The Shah's security apparatus was pretty prevalent. If there was political dissidence (and I'm sure there was), it was pretty hard to establish contact with it, because the Iranians figured it was the better part of wisdom not to make such contacts.

Nevertheless, one could keep a thumb on the pulse in a general way. I think it was probably useful to have had a presence there. Not only because of the potential for political unrest, but also because that part of Iran is considered the country's bread basket. So, economically, it is of some importance.

We had a very small staff. It was very much of a do-it- yourself post. I used to spend about one week to ten days every month on the road. It was very primitive going in some parts.

Q: Sounds like a hell of a lot of fun.

CUTLER: It was great fun. It was great fun. I enjoyed it. I was one of four Consuls in the country, and of course, we used to work with the embassy. But I enjoyed the distance between me and the embassy.

Q: The Ambassador was whom at that time?

CUTLER: The Ambassador at the time was Armin Meyer. He would come maybe once a year, I don't think more often than that, maybe once or twice a year. But he had a lot to do, there were four posts. The Political Counselor, Martin Herz, would come more frequently.

Q: Did you gather that the embassy, including the consulates, the mission there, were doing everything we could to encourage the White Revolution and getting the Shah out? Or were we more or less passive bystanders?

CUTLER: One of our jobs was to try to assess the real effect of the Shah's White Revolution: Was it having any impact, both in economic and social terms? Was it having any positive political effect, particularly in an area which traditionally had not been too supportive of central governments?

My general assessment was a positive one, that slowly but surely the central government, through these outreach programs, was having a positive effect on the attitudes of the people and on their living conditions, but it was going to take some time.

I might say that the idea of establishing any kind of effective contacts with the religious elements, the Mullahs, was extremely unlikely to happen, because they were keeping their heads way down in order to survive. They were highly surveyed by SAVAK, the intelligence and security organization. Contacts with foreigners were probably not a healthy thing to pursue. We would have to do our reporting on the religious attitudes through second-hand sources. I'm not sure that these attitudes had begun to crystallize into highly anti-Shah attitudes at that time.

Q: Was this an area that later turned anti-Shah?

CUTLER: Oh, yes. When the revolution came, the Azerbaijanis were right with it. It's a conservative part of the country, and the religious elements are strong. They were just way underground when I was there, very difficult to ferret out.

Q: Well, moving from one authoritarian state, you then went to another authoritarian state, this was South Korea, 1967 to 1969, and to Park Chung Hee. Again, you jumped around more than most in the more difficult parts of the world, but also with no particular geographic focus.

CUTLER: Yes, that's right. I think, like most Foreign Service officers, I was quite affected by my first post. I had ideas of going back to Africa. And, of course, Algeria at that time was part of the African Bureau. So, in effect, when I went to Tabriz it was my first step out of the African Bureau abroad.

The assignment to Korea was about the last thing in my mind. That came, quite frankly, because Bill Porter, with whom I had served in Algeria, by that time had become Ambassador to Korea. He needed a Political-Military Officer, and he asked if I wanted to rejoin him there in that capacity, and I did so.

Q: What was the situation in Korea in the '67-'69 period that you were there?

CUTLER: It was before the great economic takeoff. In some ways you could sense it coming, but I don't think any of us had any idea that Korea was going to become, in just the next 20 years, what it has become. It was still very much of a struggling, developing country. We had a very large AID mission there.

And it was still fending off the mischief-making (to put it mildly) of North Korea. In other words, security was very much a central element in our relationship with the Koreans. And I was the embassy's Political-Military Officer attached to the Political Section. It was a frustrating job, probably the most frustrating job I'd had in the Foreign Service.

Q: Why?

CUTLER: Because our own military presence was huge, headed by a four-star general, as I recall. I was a middle-grade officer, and it was very difficult to shoulder your way in and become a part of the political-military dialogue. The Ambassador and the Political Counselor were deeply involved with that. And, in effect, I was supposed to be reporting on the Korean military capability. In Korea, most of my contacts were with American military officers. I did develop some useful contacts with Korean military Generals and things like that, but it was tough sledding.

But it was an interesting time to have been there. Only a few days after we arrived (as a matter of fact, I was living temporarily in some embassy apartments), the whole sky lit up, as a band of North Korean guerrillas tried to attack the President's palace and assassinate him.

Q: The Blue House.

CUTLER: The famous Blue House Raid. And I had been actually involved in tracking the progress of these 31 commandos, who in January, in bitterly cold weather and snow, had tunneled their way under the DMZ, had emerged in South Korea, and had been reported by a woodchopper.

They had run into a South Korean woodcutter, and they had held him for a day (why they didn't kill him, I don't know), while they hid in the woods. And then when nightfall came, they released him and they headed south toward Seoul. Thirty-one of them, in full combat uniform, heavily armed. Well, the woodcutter went to the nearest police station and said, "I've just been held by 31 North Koreans, and they're on their way south." And he was hardly believed.

I spent a lot of my time at the command center in Seoul, at the Eighth Army Headquarters, and the reports started coming in regarding these infiltrations. There were others, by boats and so forth. But I spent the weekend trying to figure out what was going on with these reported commandos. Other reports came from additional sources.

The South Koreans set up blocking lines. But this band of 31 commandos moved so fast at night that they were actually south of the blocking lines each time. And within two or three days, they were sitting on a hill overlooking the city of Seoul.

It was there they made their mistake. They marched right down the street, and finally somebody figured that they were not "friendly" forces. A firefight broke out several blocks from the Blue House, and Park Chung Hee was saved from assassination.

It was extraordinary, because they all dispersed after that, those who were not killed, and tried to make their way north in intensely cold weather. And, individually, in this fairly open terrain, they were tracked down. It took a week or two before they were all apprehended, one by one. I can't remember whether anyone made it back or not. The whole affair was extraordinary. And it really rattled the cage.

I never quite understood North Korea's strategy during the two years I was in Korea. There were always domestic US pressures for us to reduce our military assistance to Korea. And every time there was some serious effort to do so, the North Koreans would try to pull something off, which would only buttress the case of the South Koreans that we were needed one hundred percent there.

Q: I was there ten years later, and the raid on the Blue House was still something that they were prepared against. We were talking about pulling out, and the North Koreans killed several American officers up at Panmunjom in a tree incident, and that, again, kept the Division there probably.

CUTLER: Shortly after the Blue House Raid, there was the capture of the Pueblo. As Political-Military Officer, I spent a good part of my tour, 11 months of it, in an ongoing effort to devise ways of resolving that crisis.

Q: You were there dealing with the American military, and later you were in Saigon, and I'm sure you ran across the same thing. I think one of the interesting things is looking at the Foreign Service dealing with the military, or the military dealing with the Foreign Service. These are two diametrically opposed groups in outlook, yet they have to work together, because this is how our American responsibility is. How did you find it, dealing with American military officers? Was this a problem for you?

CUTLER: Well, it wasn't easy always. I certainly came away rather impressed by the quality in the higher ranks. The overall commander was General Bonesteel. (I was always amused, because General Bonesteel used to communicate regularly with General Birdsong in the Pentagon.)

General Bonesteel was a very strong-willed, intelligent officer. He had been a Rhodes Scholar. He was the cream of the crop. But, as you can imagine, service with a fairly strong-willed Ambassador like Bill Porter was not always easy. There you had a good deal of difference of view. For example, Porter was concerned about the size of our military presence in South Korea and was looking for ways of reducing it. And General Bonesteel didn't agree with that.

But for me, personally, I found it rather difficult only because I was a middle-grade Foreign Service officer trying to deal with literally dozens of high-ranking American officers. I dealt a lot, for example, with General Woodward, who at the time was our man at Panmunjom. And we had a good personal relationship. But, of necessity, the higher-level officers in the embassy had most of the substantive dialogue going with the higher-level American military officers.

But I can tell you this: my experience as a Political-Military Officer has left me with a very profound sense of respect for our Political-Military Officers in the Foreign Service. Respect for the difficult task that they face. They have to overcome what I think is a widespread perception among our military people that diplomats don't understand military problems, they don't think very clearly, they are always looking for ways of avoiding problems rather than tackling them. In other words, there's quite a different mindset in the military and in the Foreign Service.

But I think it's terribly important for us in the Foreign Service to overcome this barrier and to deal with our own military effectively. The best way, and perhaps the only way, that this can be done is to really learn their trade.

Q: Of course many of us in our generation have served in the military ourselves. I was an Airman First Class when I got out of the military. Were you an enlisted man?

CUTLER: I volunteered for the draft.

Q: At least we had that, which is now no longer prevalent.

CUTLER: I do think that there sometimes is a reluctance on the part of our Foreign Service officers to do the homework (and it's not always very exciting homework) that's required to deal effectively with the military. They deal in facts and figures and all kinds of areas that are somewhat esoteric for a Foreign Service officer.

But if you're going to be effective dealing with our own military people, you've got to get across to them that you know what you're talking about, and that you can present your case based upon a good knowledge of their profession.

It's a whole new world for many Foreign Service officers. But I think the ones who have been most successful are those who have taken the time to go through all the hoops and to know what they're talking about, and not come across as some sort of fuzzy-minded diplomat, which is the perception that I think is all too prevalent.

Q: I agree with you heartily. So your next assignment, according to my records, was in Saigon from 1969 to 1971. How did you get that assignment?

CUTLER: Well, in all truth, I got that assignment because Korea, while interesting, did not provide the kind and level of job that I thought was appropriate. And it's the only time in my whole foreign service that I had that experience. Actually, the Political- Military job, within the Political Section, was set up for somebody more junior than I was. And I decided it was time to move on, sooner rather than later.

So I went to Ambassador Porter and told him frankly that, while the year, year and a half there had been interesting, I really thought that I wanted something of greater substance and responsibility. And he said, "Yes, you're absolutely right." He said he would see what he could do.

Well, a couple of weeks later, a copy of a telegram that he sent to Washington came on my desk. In typical Bill Porter fashion, he figured that he wouldn't bother consulting with me, that he pretty well knew what I wanted. And this was proposing me to open our new post in Ulaanbaatar.

I went to him with astonishment, and I said, "Well, this is interesting. Why on earth did you ever think that I would be qualified to open Ulaanbaatar?"

And he said he believed that it would be a mistake to pick a Soviet specialist or a Chinese specialist. He said, "I know that's what they're going to do. What they need is somebody who is capable, but who has had nothing to do with the area. No experience, and therefore no built-in prejudices. I just thought that since you had described to me that you liked refreshing experiences in foreign service, you'd be great for Ulaanbaatar."

I thanked him very much, but...

Q: This, by the way for the record, is the capital of... Is it inner or outer Mongolia.

CUTLER: We just call it Mongolia these days, I guess. But, as you recall, it's a post that we tried to open for years. We had discussions and they never worked out.

As a matter of fact, one of my incoming basic officer classmates was Bill Brown. Bill was packed off for a year's study of the Mongolian language in England, I think, when we thought at one point we were going to open that post. And, of course, we never did. We produced a Mongolian-speaking Foreign Service officer, but with no place to go.

It was only in the last two or three years we managed to open the post, but we still don't have anybody resident there.

Q: Just goes for a few months and comes back or something.

CUTLER: Frankly, it would have appealed to me. But what I really didn't think about was that, when I sort of offered myself up for reassignment and the Ambassador was fully supportive, there was one logical place for me to go at that time and that was Vietnam.

And, indeed, it wasn't too long thereafter that I received a message of congratulations that I had been selected for a "high priority" position in the American Embassy in Saigon, and did I have in any problems in going there, of course without family and all the rest.

Oddly, I really hadn't thought too much about going to Vietnam. But when I was asked to go there, I figured: Well, this is going to be a personal hardship (I had children at very tender ages in terms of development, 8 and 10, something like that), and yet I figured that there was a need and I had a duty to go. And I figured, perhaps naively, that all Foreign Service officers were going to end up in Vietnam at one point or another during the course of their careers, so I might as well go now.

So I agreed to go to replace Roger Kirk as the Chief of the External Affairs Unit within the Political Section. That in itself gives you a little idea of the complexity of the operation there. Because we had not only a Chief of Political Section, but we also had a Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs.

We had a very, very large operation. And as Chief of the External Affairs Unit I had two principal responsibilities: One was to coordinate, working closely with the CIA Station Chief and other Embassy elements, information regarding North Vietnam. We were the Hanoi and Viet Cong watchers, if you will. And the other, which perhaps was more substantively important although somewhat latent, was working within our government and with the South Vietnamese government in planning for a peace settlement: what we called "contingency planning".

So I went to Saigon in May of 1969, as I recall. My family was to be safe-havened in England, and I took them as far as Beirut, where we had a brief holiday, back in the days when Beirut...

Q: You could have a holiday in Beirut.

CUTLER: Right, right. Can you imagine that? This was 1969, and the reason I remember is that that was the moon walk. I remember going to the embassy in Beirut, where we all watched on television the first men on the moon. So after that, it was off to Saigon.

Q: Sometimes it's interesting to get one's initial impression. What did you think about the situation in Vietnam? Before, you said you'd been dealing with other matters, so this wasn't high on your list of priorities. How did you feel about the situation there?

CUTLER: Well, that was 1969, when I guess we still felt that there was something to be gained by our involvement in Vietnam, and I had no reason to question that.

I had had a peripheral involvement in the matter. When I was in Seoul, in a Political-Military position there in the embassy, I did get involved with the questions of the South Korean troops in Vietnam. This was a very important part of the "many flags" that we were trying to show to the free world in South Vietnam, and so I was perhaps a little more conscious of what was going on in Vietnam than I would have been had I been still in Iran or elsewhere, like Ulaanbaatar! I didn't question too much the wisdom of our being there.

But very soon after I got there I realized that the situation was not going well and was not likely to go well, even in the long term. And that it was a question of working out an honorable disengagement on our part, including getting our prisoners back, and trying to leave something in the wake of our disengagement that was viable. That is, trying to leave a government in South Vietnam that could cope for itself. I thought there was a chance of doing that. I didn't think it was likely, but I thought it was possible. So we were working for that.

During the period I was there, 1969 to 1971, the war was pretty much on the borders. It was not a period of heavy armed conflict throughout the country. And, as you may recall, the incursion into Cambodia occurred in 1970, while I was there in Vietnam. So one did not have the sense of a country about to go down the tubes. The military situation looked somewhat improved, but it was hard to imagine, over the long term, how we could get out without leaving a dubious situation at best. But it was worth the chance. And we had put so much into it by then, you just couldn't stop.

Q: You talk about a dubious situation. What was dubious?

CUTLER: Dubious was the quality of leadership in South Vietnam and the dedication and support of the people in the countryside of a central government in South Vietnam.

Q: Well how were we reading the support of the people? We were there most of the same time. But what were the modes of trying to figure out how the people felt about the government?

CUTLER: That was very difficult for me to assess. I was in a very particular part of our operations there. I was external, therefore I was quite consumed by the political situation in North Vietnam-that's what we tried to watch-and consumed by seemingly endless preparation and vetting of contingency planning for regroupment and withdrawal of our forces.

Q: This was the time Nixon was coming in, after you arrived there, and this caused much of the planning for the Vietnamization, didn't it?

CUTLER: Yes, but what I did, Roger Kirk had been doing for the two years prior to that. In other words, even back in the 1960s (Roger was there from '67 to '69), we were trying to get the South Vietnamese government to think ahead to what a solution would look like. Some of this was based upon the assumption that, militarily, we would come out on top, and that at some point the Viet Cong and Hanoi would come to the South Vietnamese government and say: "Look, OKAY, uncle." Or at least, "Let's talk about a cease-fire."

More and more as I was there, we began to think in terms of having to seek a cease-fire and to try to persuade the other side that there was something to be gained from less than total victory. But, initially, what we were talking about was an ending of the fighting, based upon either a stalemate or the North Vietnamese suing for a cease-fire because they couldn't take any more pressure. If that should happen, we didn't want suddenly to be there unprepared.

So we wanted, in-house, to be sure that we were looking at these various options, how it would be done and so forth. We had dozens, literally dozens of contingency papers covering various aspects of an end to the fighting.

Then, from time to time, we would consult with the South Vietnamese government. We would take our papers to them, and, together, we would go over these papers and get their input.

Now on that score, quite frankly, it was always difficult to interest the South Vietnamese leadership in this kind of longer-term thinking. Understandably, they were very preoccupied with the war. The thought of what would happen when a cease-fire came and after, was something which seemed rather remote to them. It didn't seem terribly relevant to the issues, the priorities of the day.

Nevertheless, every two or three months or so, Ellsworth Bunker would go over, and I'd go along beside him, along with Martin Herz, the Political Minister. We would go and see Thieu and Ky, the top leadership of the South Vietnamese, and we would discuss these contingency plans. These sessions were necessary; I don't know how useful they were. At times I felt, quite frankly, that the eyes of the South Vietnamese would start to glaze over a bit, because none of this was very exciting. It seemed, frankly, rather remote, even sometimes to me.

Q: What was your personal impression of the leadership, not only the top, but in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the people you dealt with in the South Vietnamese government?

CUTLER: They had some good people, but it was thin. By that I mean you go down below the Foreign Minister and perhaps his deputy and, quite frankly, at the middle to lower levels of the government I thought the quality was very uneven at best and lacking in really dedicated, competent officials.

One thing that always amazed me: Here we are in the middle of a war, the American Embassy working around the clock (as we tend to do around the world, but particularly in Saigon during that time), you'd try to raise somebody in the Foreign Ministry after five at night, and often it was difficult. They would take their regular holidays and so forth, and it's marvelous, but in a war situation, I thought it was rather extraordinary.

Q: I can remember on a Vietnamese holiday we would run the consular section, but we would run it purely with Americans, working twice as hard, because our Vietnamese staff, who were, of course, essential to our work, were on holiday. We were doing all the visa, passport, protection and welfare work while our Vietnamese staff had the day off. We hated Vietnamese holidays needless to say.

CUTLER: In retrospect, perhaps the Vietnamese knew what they were doing. They had lived with foreign invasions over the centuries, and this was the era of the American presence. Maybe their more laid-back approach to life reflected a sense of perspective in history, whereas we were rather frenetic in what we were doing.

Q: We tend to charge in.

CUTLER: That's right.

Q: Well now, looking at the embassy, how did you feel, can you talk about how the more junior officers felt about the war situation? It was a time of war protests and all this, and we were going through our own sort of '60s movement of young officers, who were sort of bringing some of the campus rebellion with them and all, and here you were in the middle of this with junior officers. How did they react to the war?

CUTLER: Well, I don't know, maybe you saw more of that than I did. I had a couple of younger officers working for me in my unit of the Political Section, and I didn't sense at the time any great disaffection or disillusionment with what we were doing.

Quite frankly, I don't think anybody had time to even think about what we were doing. There was so much work, the pressures were so heavy, and we were all just trying to get it done. I don't recall any major problems with respect to the attitudes, the dedication of those working in the embassy.

Remind you, it was a big place, and I never had time to sit around and chew the fat much with younger people, or with anybody for that matter. As you recall, it was sort of a six-and-a-half-day operation.

But on Sunday afternoons we used to go over to Martin Herz's swimming pool and engage in a literally bloody game of water polo. All of the frustrations and all that other lack of [physical] activity throughout the week would come out in this incredibly aggressive game of water polo. But we used to love it-blood and all.

Q: Within the embassy did you have the feeling that Ambassador Bunker or Deputy Ambassador Berger had any qualifications about what was going on? How did they feel about the situation at the time, from your point of view?

CUTLER: I didn't have very much of a feel for that, as far as their inner thoughts were concerned. Again, it was a big operation.

[SOMETHING MISSING. VIETNAM TO ZAIRE WITHOUT TRANSITION.]

CUTLER: ...so I think that there has been a great appreciation for the fact that Mobutu has been able to run the place and to keep it from splitting apart, because I think that all along we've thought that secession, a breaking up of that artificially created country, would not be in our interest, so even today I see people are protesting the leadership of Mobutu. Last summer, I went to a reception here in Washington, and I had to thread my way through the demonstrators out front, who were shrieking for Mobutu's downfall.

There are still members of Congress who think that we should cut off aid, because it's so misused, and the people are abused, the human rights record is poor. I don't deny any of this. All the time I was out there, this debate raged. And my position was: Look, it's not perfect; it's far from perfect, but it's what we've got, and we'd better be thankful that we've got even that out here in the way of leadership.

Q: You can't defeat somebody with nothing, or change something with nothing.

CUTLER: Well, it's not just that. Yes, you can't replace something with nothing. And the concern was that if we were in some way to oppose, or even actively seek to remove, the leadership of that country, by doing so we would assume ourselves a huge responsibility for what would follow. And there was no prospect of anything or anybody following. And if the country had returned to the bloody state of anarchy that it had been in, and that we had worked so hard to resolve, then we would have been responsible, in large part, for doing that.

Q: The whole time you were there in dealing with it from Washington, this was very much on your mind then.

CUTLER: Oh, sure, sure. For example, Steve Solarz was the Chairman of the Africa Subcommittee in the House of Representatives, and he was very, very upset about what he perceived as Mobutu's failure to lead the country in an effective way, and he thought we should cut off aid. He used to come out there, and we used to have long discussions about this.

And my position was, as I just told you, I said I could not recommend this, because there's nothing viable that we can recognize to take the place of the current leadership. Better to work with what we have and what we know than to simply launch off in a totally unknown and uncertain direction.

Even members of my own staff at the embassy were upset by the deterioration of social and economic conditions in the country and felt that we should put greater pressure on Mobutu. And some thought that, regardless of how much pressure, it wasn't going to change anything and, therefore, we should withdraw our support.

Q: Were you able to make any inroads, or were we basically giving aid and being almost an observer? Did we have any control over events?

CUTLER: Oh, yes. All the time I was there we sought to utilize what limited, quite frankly limited leverage we had. By that I mean a very limited aid program.

And don't forget, when I went out there we had just made the decision to stop our involvement in Angola. And by doing so, we had left Mobutu in a rather delicate and vulnerable situation. But even our aid was not of such significance that it could be used as an effective lever.

What was important, I think, to the leadership there was the public perception of American political support. Critics of Mobutu argued that if we cut off our aid and made it known that we were doing so because of our unhappiness with the way the country was being governed, very quickly the word would spread among the populace that the Americans were abandoning their close friend Mobutu, and that this would, in turn, stimulate opposition to him.

Or, put another way around, Mobutu might fear this perception of diminishing US support spreading within his country, and, therefore, he would do things that we wanted him to do to improve the economy for fear that we might cut off aid.

Basically, what we did was to try to work closely with the IMF in putting into place a reform program. This was our goal. We tied our aid, to a certain extent, to implementation of that program. And the program was not easy, because, like all IMF stabilization programs, it required the government to make certain decisions and take certain steps that are politically difficult. Like cutting back on the subsidization of bread, things like this, things that a good politician doesn't want to do. But we tried to recognize the political importance of this and, therefore, we tried to work closely with both the Fund and Mobutu.

Q: How did you get along with Mobutu personally? How did you find him as a person?

CUTLER: I got along quite well, I thought. Let me just say this: I think that nobody lacks respect for Mobutu as an astute political leader. Anybody who knows Zaire and its history I think appreciates the fact that, one way or another, this person has managed to hold the country together.

Anybody who has met Mobutu comes away rather impressed by the person's charisma-he has it, no doubt about it. He's charming. He's articulate. He has a very, very strong sense of humor, sense of irony. He's a real African leader, and you sense it in his presence.

I saw a great deal of him. We communicated a great deal; we had a lot to talk about. Not all of it was pleasant, and so it required a fair exercise in diplomacy.

In almost all cases, I saw him alone. It was his call. Normally his Foreign Minister was not there. Nobody was there; therefore, I didn't take anybody. Consequently, I spent many hours alone with Mobutu.

And I went back and spent many more hours composing my own messages back to Washington, because there was no note-taker or anybody else who could help out.

All our conversations were conducted in French, often at his house, sometimes in his office, sometimes on his boat, and that's up the river. I met with him Switzerland. I met with him in the Ivory Coast, where I had to deliver messages, presidential messages or whatever. And all of this over a period of four and a half years. So I got to know him quite well. And, while we had a lot of problems, I never lacked respect for his political prowess.

Q: How about when the Carter Administration came in. I was in South Korea at the time, and the human rights business (which I now think probably stands as a real monument to Carter), I must say, at the time we just thought: My God, this is really muddying up the waters. We have other problems here in South Korea. So this must have hit you particularly hard in Zaire. How did you handle this, I won't say sudden, switch, but obviously tremendous emphasis and focus on human rights in a country in which we were interested in keeping the man in power, and yet human rights were pretty low on his priority list?

CUTLER: Well, "sudden switch" is just about what it was.

Q: How did you handle it?

CUTLER: It was no surprise to Mobutu. He follows the political scene in the United States very closely.

Q: He's well informed, then?

CUTLER: He's very, very well informed. He starts his day with Voice of America. As a matter of fact, I learned that very quickly. I learned that I had to start my day early with Voice of America, because if there was something on the air that was of interest to the President or of concern to him, my phone was going to ring at 7:15 in the morning. So it was very difficult keeping ahead of Mobutu, with respect to developments in our own country. He has a very, very strong interest in media. He was a reporter once himself, before becoming President.

And it was very evident in the case of our presidential elections of 1976 that he had followed them closely enough so he knew very well that if Carter were elected, human rights was going to become much more of a center-stage issue than it had been before.So it was not much of a surprise that I showed up on his doorstep after the election talking about human rights. It was good that he was already aware of this, because it made my job a little easier. Because we began to factor human rights into our policy in a way that it had not figured before.

Mobutu, of course, didn't think it was necessary, and he didn't think it was well advised. He would sometimes humor me about this new-found obsession with human rights. He would say, "Look at all the problems I have out here, what do you expect of me? Why don't you lean on some other countries, particularly ones that are not so friendly as I am? Why don't you concentrate on them?"

I remember at that time we were not having a very good time with Algeria. He picked something out of the press about human rights violations in Algeria and wondered why we hadn't addressed that problem in a more vociferous way, as we had with him. So he would sort of make light of it sometimes, but there was no question that our points were getting across, because he kept referring to human rights, even though sometimes in a fairly joking way.

But it was on his mind, it was very much on his mind. And that was good, because he knew that we cared, and that he couldn't go on doing certain things without our taking notice and perhaps factoring it in to our own approach to his needs.

Q: Do you think it had any effect?

CUTLER: Oh, yes, I think so. And I would like to think so.

Q: Sort of my looking in some reflection, I think that probably more than almost any President, Carter, in his short time, by focusing on this one point, really did have an effect.

CUTLER: These things are difficult to measure. I think that in the case of Zaire you probably would have to measure them in terms of what abuses there might have been, but did not really occur, because of the leadership's knowledge that we cared. And you can't measure things that don't happen, really, very easily.

Certainly, I would like to think that we had an effect when Mobutu arrested, tried, and convicted, and gave the death penalty to his Foreign Minister. This was a highly respected individual, and he was accused of treason. They had a trial, which was partly public. (I was in there pressing for a public trial, incidentally, and they put it on the radio, at least portions of it on the radio, which surprised everybody.)

But then the court gave the Minister the death penalty. I, along with a couple of my other colleagues, appealed for human rights considerations, and, in fact, he was not executed. As a matter of fact, he was made Prime Minister a year later! I don't take credit for that.

Q: There was a flare-up, wasn't there, in the old Katanga, which is now called Shaba, at the time? How did we view that, and what was our involvement with that?

CUTLER: That came out of the blue. That was, oddly, the first major foreign policy crisis of the Carter Administration. It was in the early spring of 1977, when, suddenly, reports came in that a fairly large, heavily armed military force had crossed the border from Angola and was marching on the capital of Zaire's copper belt, in what you said is the old Katanga Province.

And, don't forget, this was at the time when a new Marxist regime was being established in Angola, right next door, with the help of a fairly sizeable force of Cubans. So there was a lot of concern about what had happened, finally, in Angola.

And now, all of a sudden, it looked as if that new Marxist regime might, in fact, be attacking its neighbor and going for Africa's jugular right off the bat. Going for the copper belt to close down the copper mines, which, given Zaire's rather precarious economic situation, might actually bring down the government rather quickly. That was the perception; at least that was what, in the worst-case scenario, might be happening. As a matter of fact, there were reports that Cuban troops were among the attacking force.

It was in a very remote area of Zaire. Communications were difficult. Washington was screaming for information on this. It was very difficult for us to know what was going on, even for Mobutu's government, really, to have a good handle on what was going on way down there on the border. All we knew was that there was a force moving into the copper belt.

The whole question, for us, was how serious a threat was this, and was this, in fact, Soviet-inspired, supported. Were there Cubans, surrogates and so forth? It was a challenge to our intelligence community, and one which was only partially met, simply because of limited resources. We just didn't know what was going on.

Anyway, what happened was that this drive was finally blunted. Mobutu, in his own very adept political way, appealed not only for our help, but also for help from other African states. The Moroccans responded with troops. It was viewed somewhat in a Cold War context, yes.

It turned out that most of the invading force were what were known as the Katangan Gendarmes, and these were those who, back in the "60s, had tried to set up an independent state of Katanga, had seceded from the newly-created Congo state, and had fled to Angola. They had been living in Angola for a number of years, having taken sanctuary there. They saw their chance to come back. Angola had become independent. Zaire had become economically weaker. And so in the hope, I think, that this would cause an uprising in Kinshasa, as well as elsewhere around the country, they attacked, with the idea of cutting off the copper belt and, therefore, bringing down the government. It didn't work.

Q: What were you doing during this? Were you conferring with Mobutu and getting instructions from Washington? Was Mobutu asking us for things?

CUTLER: Oh, yes. He wanted military assistance. And for the new Carter government this was very difficult. Very difficult to respond, because, as you recall, the platform that Carter came in on was one of reduction of conventional arms, and peacefully resolving regional disputes, and all the rest. It was just a terrible headache for this new Administration.

Everybody in Washington woke up one morning to reports of an invasion of Shaba. Nobody knew even where Shaba was. Who were these people, anyway? And there were some rather wild reports about Russian tanks and Cuban infantry and so on.

I think, to our government's credit, we resisted a total knee- jerk reaction. Nobody wanted to see Zaire suddenly come apart; but, at the same time, people weren't satisfied that we had a good picture of what was going on. And so we waited.

And, yes, we worked very closely with both the Zairian government and our own in trying to create that picture. Mobutu obviously wanted help, major help. Our government decided that we would respond with limited assistance, particularly logistical and non-lethal.

That was quite an issue then: What is lethal and non-lethal? Is it fair to make it just non-lethal? In other words, we wouldn't ship in guns. We would help out with airlifting and so forth. As a matter of fact, I think we mounted the largest airlift that we had ever undertaken in Africa, in support of Moroccans and others who were actually sending in troops.

Yes, the embassy was fully involved. And we had a consulate in Lubumbashi, which was even closer. But you couldn't really get down into that area safely.

And so, through various means, intelligence and otherwise, I think we probably gained the best possible picture of what was going on, in a matter of days, which enabled us to determine, for example, that the reports of Russian and Cuban direct involvement were suspect at best and maybe not at all accurate. So Washington, eventually, was able to give a positive response, but one that was not an over-response.

Q: So you found yourself in a position of trying to keep things cool while we found out what was happening. Were you inundated by the international media at that point?

CUTLER: Yes. But I must admit to you, Stu, that I now tend to get the two Shabas mixed up a bit. You see, there was Shaba invasion Number One, and then there was Shaba invasion Number Two. Number Two came a year later.

Q: This would be '77.

CUTLER: Shaba Number One was a force moving across the border toward the capital of the copper belt, Kolwezi. But it moved slowly and it never quite made it. It eventually receded and the crisis passed.

Shaba Number Two was probably even more of a surprise, when, suddenly, overnight, Kolwezi was occupied by a force coming again, the people thought, from Angola. A force that had apparently learned a lesson from the previous year.

Rather than making a conventional military attack, going up one of the main roads with trucks and all that, they had infiltrated through a more circuitous route and, all of a sudden, using guerrilla tactics, had invested the capital and controlled it, and had literally taken this copper-mining town hostage and cut off all communications.

They had a large number of Belgians, French, and some Americans held in that town. So people woke up and, suddenly, Kolwezi was in the enemy's clutches.

This was even more of a crisis, in a way, particularly since, as you pointed out before in this interview, there was great concern for human lives.

Well, there were a lot of civilians there who were being held captive. And, in fact, there was one particularly gory scene, where a number of civilians, I've forgotten how many, dozens, were slaughtered in a school house. For one week, the world was riveted on how to rescue these hundreds and hundreds of Europeans and some Americans being held captive in Kolwezi. And, of course, copper production was shut down along with everything else in the region.

This was crisis management in its ultimate form, as far as I was concerned. Here, again, we learned something from Shaba One, but this was a different kind of scenario. I worked around-the- clock with my Belgian and French colleagues. We met in the middle of the night, I don't know how many times. It was a rescue. It was how to rescue and liberate this town, and particularly after the reports came out of a major slaughter.

I remember an American missionary had managed to escape. He came to the embassy and we debriefed him. We wanted to know who were these people who came into his house. They were armed, they were in uniform. Were they speaking Spanish? Were they Cuban? From what we could divine, these were, again, the Katangans, the Gendarmes.

Again, the whole question of Russian-Cuban involvement was very key to our own government in determining how to respond. But we had a humanitarian concern that we didn't have before, and that was rescuing these people.

Well, it was a major political issue for the Belgians, and their parliament debated it rather intensively and endlessly. Meanwhile, the French took action, with our help. We and the French mounted an attack, a paratroop drop on the city. Within a day or so, the whole place was liberated. We, and particularly the French, took a lot of credit for this.

We had dozens of American press in Kinshasa, who were not permitted to go into the "war zone." I went to Mobutu, I remember, and told him that keeping the whole press quarantined in the hotel and not allowing them to go near the war zone, or even to be briefed by the government, was a mistake. They were beginning to file very negative stories.

I would like to think that I helped persuade him to do what he did the next day. He routed them all out of the hotel at five in the morning and loaded them on a couple of C-130s, and he, personally, went with the press and landed at Kolwezi Airport to show that the airport, at least, had been liberated. The town was still occupied, and that was a mile or less down the road. And then he flew them back at the end of the day. It was a rather courageous and imaginative way of doing it. But, I'll tell you, it did the trick.

See, Mobutu's concern was that he didn't want everybody, including his own people, to think that the government was about ready to fold and that this was a fatal blow to Zairian security. And by landing the plane (he was at the controls himself, along with the pilot) right at the airport in the middle of this siege (it's typical of the kind of imaginative politics which Mobutu undertakes, very effective), it reassured everybody that the government had things halfway under control: Don't worry, it will be taken care of. And, in fact, it was.

Q: We had this Dragon Rouge business, back in the old Stanleyville time, when the Belgian paratroopers came in, in which we gave them airlift support, too. This was, what, '65 or something like that. The response usually seems to be: The Americans will supply airplanes, and the French or the Belgians will drop down in there. Did you sort of keep a paratroop plan tucked away? This seems to be a major response. Before this happened, were you in consultation with, say, the French or the Belgians about: If there is another problem?

CUTLER: Yes, I was, in a general way. But, quite frankly, the failure of the first Shaba invasion led us to believe that it was unlikely it would occur again, although it was recognized that that force had retreated back across the border intact. There was never really much fighting. So it was there.

I think we tended to relax a bit when we determined that it was really not a Soviet ploy. The Cubans were not involved, to any extent that we could determine. It was a local thing. As I recall, there were communications at high levels. The Soviets said: Look, we're not behind this, and we don't have any interest in undermining Zaire in this way and so forth.

So we tended to doubt that it would happen again. And we doubted the viability of the force, with respect to attacking, because the area had been fortified to a great extent during the intervening year. But I think you would probably have to call it an intelligence failure of sorts, because they changed their tactics, managed to infiltrate, came right into Kolwezi and took it in one night. So there wasn't an awful lot of contingency planning during the time between the two invasions.

Q: Were you involved in the contingency plan once it started, as far as arranging for the airlift and all that?

CUTLER: Yes.

Q: Things must have moved very rapidly, didn't they?

CUTLER: Oh, yes, round-the-clock, round-the-clock. And it was a race against the clock. Because, after those first reports about this slaughter, we had no assurance the Katangans (who were making demands, they wanted the government to surrender and all this sort of thing) wouldn't undertake a major slaughter of the whole population. And, as I say, there were Americans there, not many, but it was a major concern of how to handle this. It was really a hostage kind of situation.

Q: Absolutely. Did you consult with your French colleague on this?

CUTLER: All the time.

Q: Was this more or less determined, really, in Washington and Paris?

CUTLER: Well, no, it was going on in both places. We had a lot to do with it there. I was in constant touch with the Zairian government leadership. It was all worked out.

Q: So they were pushing for this as we were, too.

CUTLER: Not necessarily. There was a tendency, I think, for the Zairian government to try to convey the idea that: Look, we can handle it. Because, when you think about it, any sovereign government is a little sensitive about having an operation carried on by outside forces, which it, in effect, cannot do. So some of our internal talks there were rather extended and delicate.

Q: This is the next interview with Walter Cutler on the 29th of March, 1990. Walt, we had just finished, basically, the two invasions of Shaba and your working with that. So I wonder if we could talk a bit about some of the other things there. In the first place, how well did you feel you were served by the CIA, as far as in this fast-moving situation there? This is an unclassified interview, of course.

CUTLER: As to how well I was served from the standpoint of their utility of input in providing information that was necessary for policy decisions, I think their performance was satisfactory. I guess I'd say that. I don't really recall any particular problems along that line.

Q: What was your impression of the aid program there? In many ways, we're looking at aid in underdeveloped countries, and there is some sort of revisionist feeling about it. Did it do more harm than good? Or was it really working, as far as you saw it, in Zaire?

CUTLER: Well, I think it did some good. I don't remember the exact figures, but considering the size of the country, the size of the population, and the needs of the people, it, obviously, was not very large. I suppose if you made a list of dollar amounts that we were providing to African countries, the aid program in Zaire would be among the larger ones. And yet, when you look at the population and the expanse of the country, it wasn't really that significant.

It was important in our bilateral relationship for political, as well as economic, reasons. And I think that's true of many African countries. They look at our aid program probably with disappointment that it's not much larger, considering how rich we are. But, at the same time, they attach a fairly high political significance to the continuation of the program, because it shows that we care. So I think that it was of political significance, particularly since there were harsh critics of the Mobutu regime, particularly in our Congress. I know that there were members, including the Chairman of the Africa Subcommittee of the House...

Q: Who was that?

CUTLER: Steve Solarz, who at the time was the Chairman of the Africa Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He was very concerned about the nature of the government in Zaire, primarily from the standpoint of human rights. He felt that much more could have been done and should have been done by the government for the people there. That this was a country which is far from destitute; a country with tremendous resources. That the country, basically, was being mismanaged by the government, and that there was corruption at the top. This was his view of it, that there was corruption and mismanagement of resources, a lack of concern for the individual.

And I know that he was one of a number in the Congress who were skeptical (to put it mildly) of the utility and the advisability of our continuing to support the Mobutu government with an aid program. So, in other words, there was a very definite and discernible political dimension to our aid program to Zaire.

The Administration looked at it in a different way. While recognizing deficiencies in the way the country, and particularly the economy, was being managed, the Administration tended to look at the hard options involved.

One option would be to cut off aid, as recommended by certain members of the Congress and other critics of the Mobutu regime. This option was rejected, with respect to how US interests would or would not be served by cutting off aid.

Is this the way to induce political, as well as economic and fiscal, reform? Do you threaten to cut off aid? Or do you actually cut off aid in order to get something more out of a government which feels that, while it's not perfect, it's nevertheless doing better than we think it is? This option was not adopted.

I, as Ambassador, recommended against adoption of that option. I could not see how American interests could be served. In the first place, our aid program was not that significant. So if we cut it off, it wasn't going to really hurt the people that much, and it wasn't going to hurt the government that much.

There were other sources of aid. The Belgians and the French and others all had programs, which, I imagine, were larger than ours. But, beyond that, the political signal which a cutoff of aid would have sent, I don't believe would have been heeded in a helpful way.

Mobutu certainly cared about his image in the United States. Certainly, some of the opponents of that regime within Zaire would have seized upon a cutoff of aid, and this might actually have increased the amount of opposition.

But, basically, I could not see anything but negative results of such a move. There were other ways to encourage and try to induce reform, which I thought should be tried first, and that the cutoff of aid should have been left as the ultimate and last step if all else failed. So I argued against that. I did not agree with Congressman Solarz on this point. I saw it in a different way, and so did the Administration.

Q: Isn't this a rather typical thing that happens, that Congress thinks in drastic terms? We're going through the same thing today in regard to the Soviet Union and Lithuania. It plays better and it's emotional and all, but it's up to the Administration to say: Okay, but what will this mean, and what will this accomplish?

CUTLER: Oh, precisely. The Administration really has the responsibility for carrying on relations over the long term with a country and looking after US interests.

I think some members of Congress fully realize that they can advocate this or that step, but they don't really take responsibility for carrying it out. It was an easy thing to say in those days: We disapprove of the way the country is being run. We disapprove of our money being used to contribute to the running of the country in that wrongful way. Therefore, let's put it someplace else where it's more useful.

You can say that and take your seat, and you know it's not going to happen, because that's not the Administration's view. But you've made your point. You've gone on record as having stood up for what's right, as against what's wrong. And life goes on.

I think that had we taken that step, we would have risked exacerbating an already difficult situation in Zaire. And I think anybody who remembered the early days of the old "Congo Problem," back in the early '60s when we, together with the United Nations and other governments in the West, worked so hard to put together anything that looked like a government in this very anarchic and chaotic situation, would be sobered by the thought that it wasn't so long ago. And that if you actually take steps that might be construed as trying to bring down the current government, then it might not be far-fetched to think that this could be a return to anarchy. If we want to flirt with the return to the anarchy of the early '"60s, we'd better think long and seriously about doing so.

[SOMETHING ELSE MISSING]

Q: So you're saying we had this country of the different tribes, the different languages, 80 more languages and all.

CUTLER: And all of that. Like most African countries, the boundaries had been artificially drawn. It had been catapulted into independence probably with less preparation than in most other African countries. There were a handful, if that, of Zairians who had had any higher education at the time of independence.

In other words, what I'm saying is that it was a very difficult birth, and the country is still young. Because of this, I think that we had to temper some of our unhappiness with the way it was being managed by the realization that it was still young, that it's not an easy place to govern.

And that for whatever faults he may have (and certainly he does have them), Mobutu has been a political genius. I think I mentioned that the last time. I think everybody recognizes that he has been an absolute political genius to retain leadership the way he has, given that situation and given the difficulties that country has gone through. On the economic and financial side, yes, sure, I think that much more could and should be done.

Q: When you say the Administration, did you find yourself sort of in accord with the African Bureau and the National Security Council? Everybody was pretty much feeling that this was what you really had to do to go along, but try to improve in increments how the Zairian government dealt rather... Or were there sort of opponents within the Executive body who were saying we should...

CUTLER: I don't recall there were many opponents of any consequence within the Administration. I think that there was a realization that it was a very touchy time in Central Africa. Angola had just come into being as an independent state, but with a Marxist government. We were still concerned in those days about Soviet intentions in Africa.

We realized that Zaire was vulnerable, was economically weak. It wouldn't take much to touch off a fire there, and nobody wanted to start playing around with matches, such as trying to undermine the existing government in Zaire, particularly in those circumstances.

We had some very direct interests in Zaire. It was a source of minerals, particularly cobalt. It was, I think, our chief supplier of cobalt, and it had a lot of other minerals; if these were in some way to fall into what was then viewed as the Soviet orbit, it would be very contrary to our interests.

So I think that, if you will, there was a certain Cold War context in which people looked at Zaire in those days and thought: You know, this country's too important not to support. And, basically, Mobutu's global orientation was very much in accord with ours. As I said, we were concerned about Soviet intentions in adjacent Angola, where there were a fairly large number of Cuban troops. In Africa it doesn't take much in the way of a military force to cause trouble and instability. So I think there was pretty wide recognition within the Administration.

Where you found your opposition to our cooperating with Mobutu's regime was primarily in certain pockets among the liberal Senators and Congressmen on the Hill, particularly on the House side, among certain academics, human rights advocates. And even a few people on my own staff in Kinshasa had grave misgivings, on human rights grounds, about our continuing to cooperate and support a government. Yes, as I recall, also in the State Department's Bureau for Human Rights there was perhaps...

Q: Pat Derian.

CUTLER: Yes, Pat Derian. That was probably where the most outspoken expression of concern came.

Q: During this same period, I was in South Korea and we were having exactly the same thing in a way. You know, human rights were there and we were concerned, but we had other fish to fry concerning the very definite military threat from the North.

CUTLER: But even our human rights people were not going to the extent of saying: Let's cut off aid. It was a fairly genuine and responsible kind of concern. It manifested itself more likely in such things as: How far in the annual human rights report do you go in detailing human rights violations?

And, of course, that's always an interesting exercise. The use of one word or another, or even an adjective, becomes almost a question of policy. I do recall some interesting discussions with the Department with respect to that report.

But nobody within the Administration that I can recall was advocating any of what I would call drastic action, such as cutting off aid. They were more concerned about: How can we be most effective in convincing the leadership to move fairly rapidly toward fairly extensive economic and political reforms in the country? That was the challenge for our policy, and that was the challenge to me personally out in Kinshasa.

Q: How successful do you think the mission was in bringing about some economic administrative reforms?

CUTLER: I think we got a good start, because we encouraged the leadership to cooperate with the IMF in adopting a stabilization program.

Now what this meant was some pretty tough decisions, taking some specific actions, which in the short run would be unpopular and which risked creating some political instability. You've seen this around the world. Some of the pills were pretty bitter. President Mobutu was reluctant to take any steps that he thought were ill- advised or were rash.

So it was a cooperative effort. Our government, along with the French and the Belgians, British and so on, were working to support the IMF's effort to put in a stabilization program that meant something, and, eventually, that happened.

We also discussed certain political reforms. That was a much more sensitive matter, and there, perhaps, we made less progress. One of my jobs was to make sure that the leadership there knew that we cared about how the country was being run, not only economically and financially, but also politically. In other words-human rights.

I think I mentioned last time, Stu, that when I went out there, I was appointed by Gerald Ford, and then a year after I got there, Jimmy Carter came in, and there was a much greater emphasis on the human rights element of our foreign policy, particularly in Zaire. So I found myself addressing this human rights issue much more frequently, directly, and forcefully, on instructions from Washington, than I had when I first came out there.

Q: How well do you find you were served by your staff? What was your impression, both at the consulates and at the embassy?

CUTLER: Quite well, in general. Kinshasa was not a popular post from the standpoint of people volunteering to go and serve there. We always had trouble recruiting people, but once they arrived, they found the substantive issues challenging, and they found personal life much better than they thought it would be.

In other words, I think it's one of those posts (and there are many in our service) that have a reputation which is not altogether positive. It's probably because of all of the stereotypes and images which we acquired earlier. And, here again, I'm talking about the blood and anarchy of the old Congo, the Civil War and so on. It was a hellhole for quite some years. I think that we remember those images, and then when an assignment is suggested to Zaire, we tend to resist.

So one arrives with low expectations. And, because those expectations are so low, I think one tends to be pleasantly surprised. We had a lot of people who asked to extend. The Peace Corps (we had a very large Peace Corps contingent in Zaire) had one of the highest extension rates of any country in Africa. And life was tough on those volunteers, because conditions in the countryside were not very good.

But, coming back to the question of staff, I had a good staff. I was blessed with competent and effective country team members, including the DCMs.

I think that if there was any problem, that related to one particular Political Counselor I had who disagreed, honestly disagreed (I think, "honestly") with our policy. And he was one of those I mentioned earlier, who felt that we should do a lot more to induce reform, and who frankly felt that Mobutu was incapable or unwilling to effect reforms and that, therefore, we should start thinking about alternatives. In other words, a rather extreme position. He, in effect, disagreed with me with regard to policy.

I suggested that if he disagreed, he should use established channels that we have for sending in differing views to the Department, which he did. He used the dissent channel, and I think he was disappointed that he didn't get more of a reaction from the Department. Eventually he left the service. Most of all these problems came out on the front page of The Washington Post. You know, this happens.

Q: Well, isn't this difficult? After all, we call it a "country team," and it is a team, and at a certain point there may be a dispute about how we should go, but after all, your Political Counselor is in charge of your Political Section, and if, after a rational discussion and looking at it, the Political Counselor feels we should go right and we feel we should go left, or whatever you want to call it, it really doesn't work very well to have such a person there, does it? I'm not talking about authority, I'm just talking about management.

CUTLER: No, it's very difficult. It was very difficult. And, frankly, it meant that I had to do a lot more work myself, because I could not accept some of the work that he produced. As you know, every message that goes back to Washington from an embassy goes out over the Ambassador's name. And some of his views and recommendations I disagreed with, and would not send out over my name. So I suggested he use the established channel for sending out over his own name, which he did.

Q: But this does hurt the effectiveness of a mission, doesn't it?

CUTLER: It doesn't help it.

Q: How much use did you find the efforts of USIA there, in that type of situation and country with basically a one-man rule and all, in a sort of terribly fragmented society? Is there much it can do?

CUTLER: I think there is a lot that can be done. Probably one of the most effective operations that USIA carried on was in the area of English language training.

We had an organization called ZALI, the Zairian American Language Institute, I think is what it was called. It was right downtown on the main street, and that place was just humming with activity. A lot of our spouses were there teaching English. There was this tremendous thirst for the English language from Zairians looking for a way of getting ahead and all the rest. I thought it was a very effective way for the United States to be represented, and it brought a lot of Americans and Zairians from all walks of life together. I'm a great proponent, anyway, of teaching English abroad. I know that USIA has moved away from that a bit.

Also, I'm a great advocate of USIA libraries, and many of those have been closed down for security reasons or whatever. I think that's unfortunate. I thought the libraries were always very useful. In general, I thought that since you had such a large population, and, given the centralized nature of the government, that there was a real challenge for USIA, but a real role to play reaching out to the people. You had to do it carefully.

We had two consulates there, incidentally: the consulate general in Lubumbashi, in the copper belt, and then another one in the Kivu area. That one was sort of opened and closed. I think, at the time I was there, it was in the process of being closed for budgetary reasons, but I understand it opened again. But it was the more marginal of the two constituent posts.

But certainly the one in Lubumbashi was very good. We have had an extraordinary string of Consuls General who have gone through that post. By that, I mean they have gone on to higher and very significant jobs in our Foreign Service. Our current Ambassador in Zaire, Bill Harrop, was the Consul out in Lubumbashi way back when.I think it's interesting: If somebody were to just look up the names of all those Consuls who headed up Lubumbashi, you would find that nine out of ten of them have gone on to be Ambassadors.

Q: One I can think of, when I was in INR, was Terry McNamara, who went out there at the height of the troubles.

CUTLER: Dan Simpson, Parker Borg. It's a whole Hall of Fame, really. I don't know why. It's always had the reputation for being a difficult post in an important area, that part of Zaire having been in a secessionist mode during the civil war, and, as I say, that's the heart of the minerals. But, anyway, that post, during the Shaba invasions, was key. A lot of our information came from that post, because it was there on the front line. So, basically, I think that it's been well staffed and I was well served.

Q: Your reassignment came in 1979. Could you talk a bit about a rather interesting story about what your next assignment was to be and how this played out?

CUTLER: Yes, I had been in Zaire since December of 1975. And so when December of 1978 came along, I was back in Washington on consultations. The normal three years were up, and I was told, "Well, there'll be something else, but there's not much on the horizon. If you're happy in Kinshasa, fine, why don't you stay on for awhile."

And that was fine with me. I, frankly, believe that three years is the bare minimum that any Ambassador should be at a post, and that moving our Ambassadors every three years is not good policy. I think that they should be there longer. So I went back to my post, thinking I'd be there at least for another year.

But, meanwhile, during the end of '78 and early '79, I, like everybody else, was watching what was going on in Tehran. You remember, 150-200,000 people in the streets. And it was evident that the Shah's days were numbered. Khomeini came back, and there was this revolution in Iran.

I remember consulting with and consoling my Iranian colleague in Kinshasa. He was typical of many Iranian Ambassadors who had been appointed by the Shah. All of a sudden, things changed totally back home, and he had no idea what was going to happen to him. He was fearful of being recalled; he didn't know whether he was going to go back and be executed or what. And so during those initial months of 1979, because I had served in Iran in the mid-60s, he came particularly to me, and also because we seemed to have the latest news more quickly than anybody else in town.

So my only thought about Iran was that, obviously, momentous change was taking place, that it was a dangerous time. And I was concerned about the fate of my Iranian friend there in Kinshasa. In fact, he was recalled, and he didn't know what to do. He had no family or assets anywhere other than in Iran, and he went back. And to this day I've wondered whatever happened to him.

But, anyway, I received a phone call one day, I guess it was April of '79, from the then-Director General, Harry Barnes. I remember it very distinctly. It was on a Saturday afternoon and I was at the residence. He asked if I had any reactions to going to Iran as the new Ambassador. This took me totally by surprise, as you can imagine. I said I obviously would want to consult my family and I'd call him back.

But as we went on through the conversation, it became evident that the decision had already been pretty well made right through the White House.

I told him that there was no reason that I could see why I shouldn't be sent to Iran, that I was willing to accept the hardships involved, including not being able to take my family (I had done this once before when I had gone to Saigon), and that the only thing that I could see as a possible inhibition was the fact that I had served in Iran under the Shah some years before in the mid-60s, and that this might cause the Iranian government, the new, revolutionary government, some problems.

And Harry said they had already looked at that and thought about it and didn't think it would be a problem. And, in fact, as time went on, it wasn't a problem. It was never raised by the revolutionary government as a reason for my not going there.

So I had very little time to pack my bag and leave. My appointment was announced about a couple of weeks later. And then two weeks after that, I left Zaire. Went back to Washington (here, I'm not sure of the dates, but I would say in mid- to late-May). And I was to spend no more than, let's say, three weeks getting confirmed by the Senate, sworn in, briefed, and off.

Bill Sullivan, our previous Ambassador, had come back. Charlie Naas was out in Tehran serving as Chargï¿½. He had been through all the wars and was exhausted. And that was the same with other members of the country team in Tehran.

There was a feeling that we ought to really put in a new team. So, Cy Vance, the Secretary of State, sent word to me that: Look, we obviously can't assign people to a hardship post like this, where they can't take their families, unless they really want to go. If you line up a new team, we will do whatever is necessary to change assignments, etc. to facilitate this.

So, in fact, I spent the better part of a week on the phone trying to put together a team of the best and the brightest that I could find from around the world.

I had full support of the Department in doing this. It was a high priority. We were very concerned at the time about the future of Iran, our relationship with this new government. We knew it was tough. We were hoping in some way to find a way of communicating, starting a dialogue, with Khomeini, and perhaps salvaging as much as we could.

Q: Of course, in the thinking there was no idea that we wouldn't continue to have a mission there and all, at that time.

CUTLER: No. As a matter of fact, in retrospect, I think the thinking was probably unduly hopeful, positive.

So I made my preparations to go. I hand-picked a number of people to go with me. For example, my Administrative Counselor from Kinshasa said he would go, and he started packing his bags. My secretary said she would go. And there were others from the Political-Economic side. I picked a DCM from Washington, who was particularly strong on the economic side, because I knew that a lot of our problems were going to be financial and economic.

There was a morass of questions to be sorted out. Our whole military assistance program was very complicated and large. And we had all the question of assets that were here, we had destroyers that were half-built but not delivered. The questions on the economic and security side were unending.

So I tried to be sure that really competent people were ready. And I think it's a credit to the Service that I really didn't have any trouble finding people who were willing to go off into that kind of a dicey situation without their families. Because it was a real challenge, an exciting challenge, not just a dangerous one.

Well, anyway, I was making good progress, and I was being briefed by experts on Iran. I had a two-day briefing at the State Department. I shipped my stuff, my household and personal effects, to Tehran. Then I went before the Senate for confirmation, and I don't recall any particular problems there.

However... And this goes back, Stu, to what we were talking about, precisely. I have to be very candid on this point, with respect to Congressional responsibilities (or irresponsibility) relating to our foreign policy.

During these days, the new Khomeini regime was arresting people and, in many cases, executing them. There was a big clean-up going on.

Just before I was ready to go, after my hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the head of the Jewish community in Tehran was executed. There was a fairly substantial Jewish community there, maybe 100,000 people, and this caused great consternation here in the United States.

Q: If I recall, he was executed more on economic grounds.

CUTLER: He was executed, apparently not because he was Jewish- that was never mentioned-no, it was corruption, alleged corruption.

Q: He was very close to the Pahlavi regime.

CUTLER: Yes. And this caused a great deal of concern here, particularly with respect to the fate of the Jewish community out there. Was this or was this not the start of an extensive persecution of Jews in Iran-a very legitimate question. As I recall, I was asked about this in my hearing, about minority groups (the Bahais were others out there), and human rights. The hearing went all right.

But then this individual was executed, and Senator Javits became quite concerned and exercised about this. He was obviously under considerable pressure from his constituency to speak out about this.

We conferred with the Senator (I say we, I and others at the State Department) about what should be done, if anything. We encouraged him not to speak out, at least at that point, because we were not at all convinced that this was the beginning of a pogrom or a persecution, and that Congressional action might exacerbate rather than help a situation which was delicate at best. And we were hoping, with a new Ambassador and a new team out there, to establish a dialogue with Khomeini and to point him in some directions which would be in US interests.

Senator Javits seemed to understand this. And it was, therefore, with tremendous surprise when the State Department learned that he had introduced and passed on the floor of the Senate a fairly strongly worded resolution condemning Khomeini's executions, the one in particular, and generally critical of Khomeini.

I would have to check my dates, but I think that that was perhaps done on a Thursday evening, when there were very few people on the floor of the Senate.

I don't recall that anybody in the State Department even knew about this all day Friday, the next day. I certainly didn't know about it, and I was there having consultations.

On the weekend, I think it was either on Saturday or Sunday, all of a sudden the news came on television that Khomeini had asked that the new American Ambassador be held up.

I think it was made quite clear that this was in reaction to the Senate resolution condemning Khomeini's actions in Tehran. In other words, the Javits resolution had triggered a reprisal. And the reprisal was to put a stop, to put a hold, on the reception of a new American Ambassador.

Now let me just remind you that my agrï¿½ment had been granted by the Iranian government fairly quickly. Actually, I was surprised that it didn't take much longer. I think, in a matter of just three or four days, the agrï¿½ment was sent back. Although there was some question, later on, as to whether this agrï¿½ment had gone all the way up to the top for full consideration and approval. I'm not sure we'll ever know.

But this was the first inkling that we had, and it came on television, it came in a news dispatch. I think that Henry Precht, who was in charge of Iranian Affairs, had got word of it about the same time, and he was trying to reach me. But, anyway, all of a sudden I was put on hold.

And then, in fairly rapid succession, one thing led to another. First, I was put on hold, and then the Iranians decided that they would just reject my coming out altogether.

To justify this about-face, this rather extraordinary action, they trumped up all kinds of things about me, which they proceeded to broadcast and to put into their newspapers and so on, that "Cutler was not the right person to understand the People's Revolution, because he had served with highly centralized governments, such as South Korea, South Vietnam, Zaire..." None of the allegations made much sense, but they tried their best to justify their action.

Interestingly, they never said that one of the problems with me was that I had served under the Shah in Iran for two years. Of course, I was up in Tabriz, so I had nothing to do with the central government. But I thought that would be the most likely argument to be used against me; it never was.

Anyway, there I was. The President and Secretary of State put their heads together and decided that they were not going to simply withdraw me and put up another candidate. The position that our government took was: Look, this is a qualified Ambassador. You have already agreed to his coming. You take Cutler or nobody.

So I was the Ambassador-designate for most of the summer of 1979. I knew, and I think everybody else knew, there was no way that I was going to go out there after this public vilification.

Q: That is a fait accompli, completely

CUTLER: Yes, sure, but this was a posture which we adopted. And that's when Bruce Laingen was selected to go out as Chargï¿½, to hold the fort and to see how things went. And I think you know the rest of the story. I stayed back here doing pick-up jobs, still as the Ambassador-designate, through the summer and into the fall. And then the hostages were taken on the 4th of November. At about that time there was no way we were even going to have an Ambassador- designate. So I went and took a job as the Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations.

And that was the end of the Iranian episode in my life, except for a couple of minor personal things. One was that I had felt a very personal responsibility about some of those hostages, because I was the one who had asked them to go with me.

Now when I was rejected, if you will, by the Iranian government, I got back on the phone to those people who I had asked to go with me and said, "You should know that I'm not going to go. It's up to you whether you want to go or not." And I think it's to their credit that they all decided that they would go ahead. But they were all taken hostage, and I, obviously, felt a certain personal responsibility for their having had that fate. My DCM, of course, never went, the one I had selected.

The only other thing was that I had shipped all my clothes. They were sitting there in Mahabad Airport, and every time the embassy sent somebody out to get them back, to ship them back to me, they were told: "Well, we can't do that, because our regulations specify that the personal effects of arriving foreign diplomats must be held here in bond until the diplomat himself arrives."

The embassy would say to the customs people, "Well, look, your government's not allowing this diplomat to come."And they would say, "Well, we can't help that, those are the rules we have."

And so it took months and months to get my clothes back. They finally arrived and all in good shape.

Q: Was there any talk, as this thing developed, of a tit-for-tat thing, to say: All right, you're doing this to our embassy, we'll do this to your embassy or your mission? Or was it felt there's no point in pouring more gasoline on the fire?

CUTLER: Well, the tit-for-tat came later on, of course, after the hostages were taken. And sometime after that, we closed down their embassy, etc.

What they had here in Washington was a sort of Junior Chargï¿½. They had a skeleton staff over at their embassy here. And I remember this, because I went over to call on my then-counterpart. I can't remember his name, but the Chargï¿½ had been a middle-level or even low-level functionary with the World Bank, I think. All of a sudden, he was placed in charge of their embassy here.

I remember that very well, going in and calling on him in what used to be Ambassador Zahedi's office, this great big office. Of course, the huge portrait of the Shah that used to hang above the desk had been removed. And this rather small, bearded fellow was sitting there, quite young, looking a little bit lost, quite frankly, in this huge office. I had a very formal and, I would say, rather tense meeting with him, because I think he was feeling uncomfortable. It was the first time he had ever done something like this. And I certainly found the surroundings rather strange. The whole atmosphere there was rather, shall we say, unwelcoming. I remember he gave me a little book of Khomeini's writings.

I also remember (this was just before the whole problem in the Senate and so forth) his asking me where I'd served before and so on, almost as if he had some idea that maybe they were wondering whether I was going to be sympathetic to their revolution. I think there was a great deal of paranoia at that time and feeling of insecurity. This was the new government, and we hadn't yet been labeled "The Great Satan" (well, maybe we had, as a matter of fact), but, anyway, we were known to be the primary supporters of the Shah and, therefore, we were close to being enemies.

Q: You then went to what was called H, which was Congressional Relations, in late 79. Who was the Number One person in H at the time?

CUTLER: Brian Atwood.

Q: Who was from where? What was his background?

CUTLER: Brian Atwood had, as I recall, not long before taken over as the Assistant Secretary. I think it was when Doug Bennet was named AID Director. I think Doug had been in the Congressional before. Brian Atwood had been a Foreign Service officer early in his career, had left the Foreign Service, had gone to the Congress and worked as a staffer, primarily to Senator Tom Eagleton.

Q: Of Missouri, wasn't it?

CUTLER: Yes. And Brian, I don't know what else he had done, but he was quite young and had become very much of a Democrat. And, of course, as you know, if any Assistant Secretary job in the State Department is politically oriented, it's apt to be the Congressional one. So Brian had come down from the Hill and had taken this job.

And the State Department was looking for a senior career officer to be the Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary, because, as I recall, all of the other Deputy Assistant Secretaries in H were political appointees, they were people who had been brought in from elsewhere. So I was to be sort of the senior career person in the bureau.

Q: How did this work out? What did you see? This sounds like sort of a dangerous mix of having so many people who are political appointees, particularly in a rather volatile time, because of the Iranian crisis, but other things that were going, Panama Canal and all this. How did you observe this team working?

CUTLER: First, Brian Atwood is a very competent and very considerate person. I enjoyed working with Brian. He knew our Foreign Service, he knew the State Department, he had been one of us, if you will. And he knew the Hill, too, so I think this combination of having worked both sides of the street was very helpful. In his own quiet way, he was very effective and, I think, highly respected. So I enjoyed working with him. It was not as if I were a fish out of water.

The bureau was unlike any I had ever served in before, from the standpoint of what I would call near-chaos. I don't say that the bureau wasn't well managed, I'm not saying that at all. But I think, inevitably, H adopts some of the characteristics of its client, and the client is the Congress.

The Congress is chaotic. I don't think there is any other way you can describe it. Things are fast-moving: legislation pops up here and sinks there, people change their minds. It was very hard to establish a work plan of any kind, even for a day.

It's very much unlike a geographic bureau, where things seem so ordered. Frankly, it took me quite a while to adjust to this sort of anarchy, and I really never enjoyed it very much. It was so hard to get your hands around anything. Everything seemed to be so moveable, appearing and disappearing, that it was quite a frustration for somebody who had spent many years in a different framework.

My bag, my particular bag, was the foreign aid bill. And, I must say, that was an exercise in frustration, the likes of which I don't think I've ever experienced before or since.

Frustration in two respects: one, nobody in the Congress likes foreign aid. You know, it's medicine they have to swallow and everybody dumps on it. It's not popular in the hustings. So you're dealing with an issue that gets yanked around, politically, a great deal. Here I'm talking about all of the earmarks and so forth; people have their pet projects.

But the other frustration was that, in principle, I was supposed to be the Administration's spokesman for the foreign aid bill. In other words, the State Department was supposed to be Number One among the various US government agencies who had representatives on the Hill advocating their particular parts of the foreign aid legislation. And that included the Department of Defense, because security assistance was lumped in along with development assistance and all the rest.

We also had a new boy on the block at the time, and that's the newly created IDCA. Do you remember that?

Q: No, what was it?

CUTLER: I don't even remember the full title, but this was an agency that was supposed to be independent, the head of which was supposed to report to the White House, to the President. But it worked as sort of part and parcel of AID. IDCA, International Development and something Agency-an organization, which in my mind never should have been created. I don't think it had a very long life. I don't think it exists now, although maybe it still does on paper.

But, anyway, the IDCA people were very conscious that they were new. They were conscious that they had this unreal mandate and, therefore, they were very aggressive in seeking their place in the sun. So they were part of this Administration team that went up on the Hill, day after day. I was supposed to head it, but that was terribly difficult.

Another part of the frustration is that you go up and you have this myriad of issues in the foreign aid bill: aid to Cyprus, population control, you name it, it's all in there.

There's no way that the Bureau of Congressional Relations, with, let's say, I as its spokesman (and then we had these Legislative Management Officers, Foreign Service officers who were there in H and were supposed to follow up on this and that issue), could speak with the authority that one could find within, let's say, the Cyprus desk.

When a Congressman or a Senator had a question about a particular line item in the aid bill that related to aid to Cyprus, I had my script, this huge book, and so I had all the answers, the policy and so on, but I certainly couldn't get into the guts of the question the way the fellow from the desk could. So I was a bit of a middle-man. And this created a lot of work and a lot of confusion.

And then, certainly, when it came to security questions the committee members (and I don't blame them) wanted to talk to the guy from the Defense Department. He used to wear his uniform, and, as I recall, he had three stars. And, therefore, he was much better qualified to handle this.

So the idea of having an Administration spokesman, from the Congressional Relations Bureau of the State Department, speaking for all these different agencies, I thought, was rather unrealistic.

I don't know how it should be handled, but it wasn't handled very well. I didn't think that I handled it particularly well, because the situation was so chaotic. But, anyway, it was a colossal exercise in frustration.

In the middle of this, I went off and gave speeches around the country in favor of foreign aid, and it's a wonder I ever came back alive. You know, you're speaking on one of the most unpopular subjects that you can possibly handle.

And then we would have periodic, frequent meetings with the people in the White House who were responsible for coordinating the various Executive agencies in pursuing the President's legislative program. Madeleine Albright was actually my primary interlocutor at the White House, and I enjoyed working with her.

I think some people, particularly those who love politics and like working on the Hill, the give-and-take, the interplay and so on, like this environment and do well in it. I found it strange, difficult, and frustrating, but certainly illuminating. I learned a lot about the reality of foreign policy, and that was useful.

Q: Well this is one of the things that comes up again and again in these interviews, of people who have gotten involved. You know, the Foreign Service really doesn't understand the role of Congress, the importance, and how to play to it. And there are ways to play to it. You know, often rather than saying we have our policy of Country X because of so and so and so and so, we give it in Foreign Service terms, and that's not a good way to appeal to a Congressman whose got a constituency. And he or she is just looking for something that makes it palatable. You were going through a learning process, but did you find that the people who were supposed to be backing you up, Foreign Service officers in the bureaus, were aware of the problems?

CUTLER: Yes, I think that they were willing to play their part, to go up. If I saw that Senator X or Senator Y really needed to have a better explanation of some problem, I found the people in the geographic and functional bureaus very willing to do that.

But, in general, I agree with what you say. And I'm one of them. I think that Foreign Service officers tend to shy away from getting involved with the Congress. And I think some of that stems from our primary contact with members of Congress, and that's those who come out on Congressional delegations when we're serving abroad. By and large, those visits are difficult.

We tend to regard members of Congress as meddling in foreign policy, that their interests and priorities do not necessarily match ours. Theirs tend to be oriented toward their constituencies, their views tend to be short-term. Whereas we are concerned about longer- term relations abroad. I think that, therefore, we build up this kind of negative impression, and I think some of it's quite justified.

The trend, I think, through your lifetime and mine, has been toward greater rather than less Congressional involvement in not only the formulation of foreign policy, but its actual implementation. I think that's a fact of life, it's a political reality, and we should not try to avoid it. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. I think that those FSOs who have gone up on the Hill for a one-year stint (and, thankfully, we have a number of programs that permit that) are probably going to be much better prepared to move into policy positions, because they are going to know the importance of Congress.

Whether Congress should be as deeply involved is another matter. I happen to think that, in many cases, they should not. But they are. And, you know, I saw this, Stu.I think, also, the State Department is at a disadvantage in some ways, and maybe it's not really right to be using FSOs. Two-year assignments: they come in, they become LMOs (Legislative Management Officers), they run back and forth, and then they move on. Just the way I moved on after two years.

The Department of Defense has people who have spent a whole career doing this. They even have offices up on the Hill. They become expert in these issues. They get to know the people up there. And, you know, members of Congress tend to stay on for years. So, as lobbyists, if you will, I think they are much more effective than we are, because we move our people in and out so often.

One other impression that I recall in this job: I was struck by how similar it was to being assigned to a foreign country, where you had to establish contacts with the foreign government and with the foreign opinion leaders, you had to win their confidence, you had to ferret out information, you had to even entertain them as part of this overall effort.

I felt, in some ways, that I was assigned to the Independent Republic of the Congress, and I had to go up there, I had to learn the players, I had to learn who was important and who was less important, where the power centers were, I had to sell my wares and so on. I was struck that it was really not at all like dealing with somebody within your own government. It's like dealing with almost a foreign entity. And it takes that kind of effort, at least initially.

Q: How did Reagan's coming to power affect you, and how did you see this?

CUTLER: Well, here I was in this, what I call highly political bureau, Congressional Relations, and, in fact, one of the first changes that was made after Reagan's election was to change the Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations-fully expected and fully understandable. Brian Atwood was replaced by Richard Fairbanks, a Republican. I stayed on for, oh, a couple of months, as I recall, as a carry-over. New Deputy Assistant Secretaries were brought in, and these were Republicans. So it was really just a shift from Democrats to Republicans, with my staying on for awhile as the Senior Deputy. Then I was replaced by a political appointee, but one of the other Deputies was replaced by a career officer. I think there has traditionally been at least one career person there.

Q: Apparently in the Middle East Bureau it went fairly well, but in the Latin American Bureau, the takeover was a pretty bloody affair. How about in Congressional Relations? Was the passing of the torch from one Administration to another done fairly easily? Was there much of a problem?

CUTLER: I don't recall any particular problems, but it was done fairly promptly. I don't recall there was an awful lot of dialogue between the incoming Assistant Secretary and the outgoing.

Q: Just ships that passed in the night.

CUTLER: Yes, pretty much. But you did have a core of people in that relatively small bureau who stayed on, and there was continuity at the lower levels. But, again, you have a whole new legislative program, and you have new people in the White House and all the rest. So the change was made.

When I left a few weeks later, I entered that funny year of 1981, where the new people, the Reagan Administration, were, I think, very skeptical about the career people. And, as you recall, it took a long time for jobs to be filled in 1981. These were Republicans coming in replacing Democrats, and I think that there was a great concern about so-called "bureaucrats".

Some people couldn't understand how a professional could possibly serve a Republican President with adequate zeal, when for the previous four years or more he had been serving a Democratic President. They just can't understand that professionals can actually be non-political.

I had been there in Congressional Relations, which is this rather political entity, and I got caught up in this long procedure of sorting out people and putting them in jobs. I think there was a tendency to move slowly and carefully, particularly with some of the higher-level professionals. And, as you remember, a lot of our embassies were without Ambassadors for almost a full year.

Q: Actually, you got a new assignment relatively quickly, didn't you? When did you get the nod towards Tunisia?

CUTLER: I can't even remember. I really don't know when it came. I do know that I went over and served for two or three months in the Board of Examiners, and I served on Phil Habib's committee on personnel policy.

Q: You were on the Selection Board.

CUTLER: Yes, I did that, too.

Q: We were together on that Selection Board in the summer of '81.

CUTLER: I think it was from February to well into the fall, that I did this and that, waiting around. I do remember that we got out to Tunisia in early 1982.

Q: What was our interest in Tunisia at that time in '82?

CUTLER: The interests at that time were not critical. It was a small, but friendly and well-oriented country. It was a country about which we had some anxiety with respect to designs that Qadhafi might have had on it.

Q: He was in charge of Libya.

CUTLER: He was in charge of Libya next door and had designs on his neighbors. Then we had an aging Bourguiba, the only President that that country had known since its independence, and nothing had really been set up for a transition to new leadership. So everybody expected that Bourguiba might disappear and that, with a predatory Qadhafi next door, this might be a problem.

Q: As far as a preponderant Western power there, was that still France, would you say, and were we playing somewhat of a secondary role?

CUTLER: No, not really. France's influence had diminished quite a bit. In the private sector they certainly had a substantial representation, but, politically, with the leadership, I think our influence was probably even greater.

Q: Were there any major problems while you were there?

CUTLER: Well, I guess the major problem was something that was extraneous to our bilateral relationship, and that was that the whole problem of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon occurred. And, as you know, Tunisia, with our encouragement, took in Arafat.

Q: Did you have a role in this encouragement?

CUTLER: No, not really on that. I'm not sure that it really took much encouragement, but that was not done through me. But I was there when he arrived. And, therefore, there was a new focus put on Tunisia, with respect to the Middle East question. The other thing that made Tunis of more than passing interest was that that's where the Arab League was located. The headquarters had been moved out of Cairo. And I was the interlocutor, if you will, with the Arab League, which was not easy, because in those days the general feeling back home in the State Department and the White House was that the Arab League had done us no favors. In effect, they needed us more than we needed them, that was the perception. So we sort of kept them at a distance.

The longer I stayed there, the less I agreed with that posture. I felt that there were things that one could do with the Arab League. And I think, over the course of time, Washington came around to take a somewhat more mellow view of the institution.

Q: Did you have problems, say, trying to duck Arafat at receptions and things like this, because we were under strict injunctions not to do anything with the PLO?

CUTLER: Well, no. He didn't really circulate that much, probably for security reasons. And the Tunisians kept the Palestinians who arrived with Arafat under very tight control. They had them mostly in an old military camp way down in the center of the country. My understanding is that they were not very happy down there. As a matter of fact, eventually, most of them moved out.

Q: After the flesh pots of Lebanon, it must have been pretty tough.

CUTLER: Yes, pretty tough to take. Arafat himself kept a low profile, I think, again, for security reasons. We knew where his headquarters was and so on, but it was down on the other side of the city. And he really didn't circulate much in any kind of group activities.

I do recall one function at the palace. Bourguiba gave a luncheon, and I can't remember who the guest of honor was, but Arafat came in. It was a large luncheon, so I was nowhere near him. But, ironically, they had seated my wife and me next to the Libyan, which made for kind of an interesting situation.

Q: We didn't have relations with the Libyans.

CUTLER: We weren't talking to the Libyans at that point. But, basically, it wasn't a problem.

Q: How about the Libyans? How did you see the Libyan actions, as far as we were concerned, from the vantage of Tunis?

CUTLER: At the time I arrived, there was some reason to be concerned about what Qadhafi's intentions were toward Tunisia. (Interestingly, I presented my credentials on the 50th anniversary of Bourguiba's establishment of the Neo-Destourian Party, which shows you how long he had been around.)

But Qadhafi had just made his first visit to Tunis in many, many years. Relations had been cool, to the point of being frigid, between the two countries, and there were some good reasons to try to improve them. So Qadhafi came to Tunis (I think it was right after I got there), and this was a big deal, because it was so unprecedented.

When I called on Bourguiba, oh, let's say a couple of weeks later, to present my credentials, we went in for a private conversation, and in the middle of the conversation, Bourguiba stopped and motioned to somebody to go get something.

A person appeared with a long cardboard cylinder, the kind that you keep maps in, and he reached in and pulled out a little piece of paper. It was a little piece of notebook paper, and there was a message written on it. And Bourguiba said, "Eh, voilï¿½, c'est mien main tenant." And what this was, was the infamous Djerba Agreement (of 1974, I think). And, mind you, this was now 1982.

What had happened was, at the last meeting between Bourguiba and Qadhafi, on the island of Djerba, when Bourguiba's Prime Minister was not present, Bourguiba had, much to everybody's astonishment, signed an agreement with Qadhafi that would form a union between the two countries.

Q: One of those unions...

CUTLER: One of those unions; one of the originals. And Bourguiba recognized the error of his way only a day or two later and renounced the agreement. But Qadhafi kept it. And when Qadhafi finally came to Tunis all those years later (he had wanted to do so for a long time), Bourguiba said, "Okay, but you've got to bring that agreement with you and give it back to me."

That piece of paper, symbolically, was terribly important to Bourguiba, because he regarded that as the one major mistake that he had made, the one serious gaffe. Qadhafi arrived without the paper. Bourguiba refused to see him until he had sent somebody back and gotten that scrap of paper and had given it to him. I think I was probably the first one to see it. And so that's what was in this cylinder on the silver tray. And he said he was going to put it in a museum that he wanted to build in his hometown.

Q: What was the situation, as far as your dealing with Bourguiba during the time you were there? You were there from '82...

CUTLER: I was there two years, early '82 to early '84.

Q: How did you find him, because this was sort of in the twilight of his career.

CUTLER: Yes. I would say I had limited dealings with him on substantive issues. His Prime Minister and Foreign Minister were the primary interlocutors on most issues. I saw Bourguiba, however, fairly frequently. And, more often than not, it was to pay my respects to him along with some American visitor. One could do business with him, but usually it was inadvisable to try to take up more than one subject at a time.

Bourguiba had a very, very special feeling about the United States. And, I think this was not only because he and we shared ideals about what the world should look like. He was certainly anti- communist. He understood what we were trying to do in that part of the world and supported it. And he shared our concern for such things as education for the common man.

But he also had a special feeling toward the United States which stemmed from his own personal experience. And this goes way back to when he was in and out of French jails. And it goes back, particularly, to one American Consul, who, at least in Tunisia, is still very well known, and that's Hooker Doolittle.

Before I went to Tunisia, I remember having lunch with one of my predecessors here in Washington, and he said, "Well, of course, you know all about Hooker Doolittle." Well, I didn't at the time, but I soon found out that one has to know the name Hooker Doolittle, particularly if you are to meet with Bourguiba.

Hooker Doolittle was the American Consul in Tunis during the war years, '42-'43. He was among that small group of Foreign Service officers and a few others who had the foresight to look beyond the war and to see that American interests could and should be served by not necessarily toadying to the French for our immediate military needs, but by getting to know some of the Arabs who later on would be pushing for independence.

And he got to know Bourguiba, who, at that point, was a young, idealistic, but very charismatic nationalist leader-not exactly a favorite of the French. At one point, Hooker Doolittle was instrumental in getting Bourguiba sprung from a French jail. And Bourguiba has never forgotten this. He regarded Hooker Doolittle as one of his closest friends.

When Hooker Doolittle was later transferred from Tunisia to Egypt, Bourguiba had to flee from the French again. It's the famous time when he disguised himself and found his way across Libya. There, lo and behold, was Hooker Doolittle, his old friend.

And so when I went to call on Bourguiba, there was a certain scenario for the visits. I would go to the palace and be ushered in, usually by the Foreign Minister, to Bourguiba's rather small office, an office half the size of this. But the walls were bedecked with photographs, and there were many mementos, lots of memorabilia around this great leader's long struggle for independence for his country.

So I might have an item of business to discuss, but it would usually be dealt with fairly quickly, with the Foreign Minister sort of helping Bourguiba, and then I would have our stroll through history. Bourguiba loved to take people around and show them this and that. There was a moon rock, brought back by one of our astronauts. Have you ever gone to Bourguiba's office?

Q: No, I haven't.

CUTLER: There were what I called the mug shots, and these were the photographs, taken by the French police and security officials, of the Tunisian nationalists; and one of them is Bourguiba-you know, it's a line-up.

Q: With a name plate and all that sort of thing?

CUTLER: Yes, all that, all that. And there was this and that, many photographs. And then he would come to a photograph of Hooker Doolittle and Bourguiba shaking hands beneath the wing of some old C- 47, back in 1943. And he'd say, "Eh, voilï¿½, mon ami." And, quite frankly, more often than not he would shed a tear. He became very emotional. And this is where it really all started. There's a street near the embassy named Rue Hooker Doolittle.

It's a little-known story, it's a fascinating one, and I always liked the story, because it shows that there are places and times in history where a diplomat-not even a high-ranking one-can actually influence the course of history. And this is exactly what Hooker Doolittle did. There are some people who remember him, David Newsom, for example. I think David's first boss in the Foreign Service was Hooker Doolittle, in Karachi, I believe. Hooker Doolittle's dead and gone now, but he had a tremendous impact.

Q: He's mentioned in Archibald Roosevelt's book Lust for Knowing, talking about going out with Hooker Doolittle and meeting Bourguiba.

CUTLER: That's right, he's mentioned several times there. As a matter of fact, when I was over at Georgetown, I started to get together material to do a piece on Hooker Doolittle (he still has a daughter who is alive), because I thought it was a fascinating story. Hooker Doolittle was among those, Archie Roosevelt was another one, who had the foresight to look ahead.

Unfortunately, what they were doing, that is, messing around with Arab nationalists, didn't go down well with the French at all. And, at the time, we were courting French favor. We wanted their full cooperation as we tried to end the war. So the French complained (I think this is in Archie Roosevelt's book) about the activities of Hooker Doolittle and others, and they got into trouble for it. And I think Hooker Doolittle eventually was removed. He had a fascinating time when the Germans occupied, he had to leave, and he lost a lot of his household effects and so on.

But, anyway, my dealings with Bourguiba often were of that nature, where the conversation would be friendly, close, focused perhaps more on the past than on the present, and not always very substantive. Bourguiba would know the major issues of the day; he would be concerned about what he had heard on the news. We did talk about such things as the Palestinian problem and all the rest, but conversations were never long and never terribly profound.

Q: What was the view of Israel from Tunisia? Here's an Arab country, but it's always seemed to be somewhat removed, somewhat like Morocco, not as virulent towards Israel. Was that correct?

CUTLER: I think the Tunisians felt very genuinely and sometimes passionately sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. They felt that a great injustice was being done to the Palestinians. They blamed us for supporting Israel and not putting more pressure on Israel to be reasonable, etc. In other words, what I call the normal Arab perception.

They were somewhat removed, but when Bourguiba took in Arafat, that brought the whole issue into much closer focus. There are some who claim, and I think with some reason, that the major reason Bourguiba agreed to take Arafat in-there were real liabilities involved in doing so, and we saw years later what happened: the attack on Arafat's headquarters with some Tunisians killed-was that his wife, Wasila Bourguiba, had long-standing connections with the Palestinians. In fact, she had known Arafat years before, and she felt that Tunisia should get more involved in the problem. I think it was largely due to her influence that, in fact, the President decided he would take this step. That's the common perception, and I think there is some good evidence supporting it. Of course, it was also generally perceived as well that the US government wanted Tunisia to provide a safe haven for Arafat.

Q: Was it difficult, because we were certainly going through a change at that time? Were you there at the time the Israelis went into Lebanon?

CUTLER: Yes.

Q: Because first there was strong indication that Alexander Haig said: Well, you know, go ahead and do this. And Sharon had taken the bit in his teeth. But then you had the complicity of the Israeli Army and the Sabra and Shatila massacres of Palestinians in Lebanon. And it was the beginning of a change in American attitude towards Israel. Were you having problems being in the Arab world? First you have this invasion, then it went really sour, the Israelis didn't do as well and the outcome wasn't as good, the Marines were being killed, and a lot of stuff. How did this play in a friendly Arab world, somewhat removed, but still getting involved, for you?

CUTLER: The Tunisians were terribly upset by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. A little bit like Saudi Arabia, Tunisia was viewed in the area as having a very close, even special, relationship with the United States. Therefore, they felt doubly uncomfortable because of this perception that Tunisia and the United States were very close friends. And, therefore, what we did was particularly embarrassing and upsetting to them, because of their association with us.

This was reflected in our Fourth of July reception, which traditionally was given at the Ambassador's residence in Tunis. This was the reception of 1982, and the Israelis went into Lebanon just a few weeks before that. Normally, anywhere from 400 to 600 people came to the Ambassador's reception. We issued the standard number of invitations. Very, very few Tunisians came. And I mean a handful. It was very noticeable. Everybody commented on it: What on earth has happened to the Tunisians? This was a reaction to what was perceived as our support of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. It was a genuine reaction.

I never discovered any government instruction that went to the lower-downs saying: Do not go to the American national day reception. It was an individual and widespread decision that, as much as they liked the Americans, as much as they may have liked the American Ambassador and his wife and all the rest, they just couldn't bring themselves to go and to hear the national anthem or whatever.

I had very frank talks with the few Tunisians who did come, and they said, "Look, this is the way it is. This is how deeply we feel about this issue." And, boy, I'll tell you, that experience just said a lot.

The Tunisians, somewhat removed from the Arab-Israeli problem, at least geographically, and known for their friendliness and moderation, on this occasion had great, great trouble not expressing themselves in some way-and that's the way they did it. Now, as I recall, a year later, it was all sort of back to normal, but at that time, the impact was deep and genuine.

Q: Before we complete this, I would like to talk just a bit more about the Arab League. There's something in the paper today (we're talking about March 29, 1990) castigating the Arab League for its seeming endorsement of the execution of a British journalist, and supporting Iraq in some of its nastier manifestations. How did you feel about the Arab League there? You say you thought that there was more room to play. What was the Arab League at the time you were there?

CUTLER: The Arab League has never lived up to its potential as a political force, primarily because the major Arab players have never seen fit to work through it. It's a collection of everybody from very radical to very moderate, and, therefore, it's very difficult to do much business with it. It was, of course, without the Egyptians, and that further weakened the organization. I think the feeling in Washington was that, really, this organization doesn't count for much. And, in fact, that was right. It didn't count for much, certainly in those days.

But it was there. And, periodically, yes, it would come out with resolutions, which often weren't compatible with our interests. You know, it's typical: a handful of the more zealous or radical elements would push things through, and nobody would dare stand up to them because that was being un-Arab. So they'd come out with something that would irritate us: support of the PLO doing this or that, or failure, for example, to even mildly rebuke Qadhafi, failure to come to grips with the issue of terrorism. And, because of all this, I think Washington decided it's just not worth bothering with. As a matter of fact, we'll show them that we're not very happy about this organization and we'll keep them at arm's length.

I remember some high-level visitor from Washington. I was setting up a schedule, and I scheduled a meeting with the Arab League Secretary General, who was a Tunisian. And there was resistance to this: My gosh, this is a bilateral visit, there are enough Tunisians we want to see and so on, why do we have to bother with this Arab League?

I thought that we were gaining very little, and perhaps losing some, by stiff-arming the Arab League. It didn't take much to at least keep in touch with them and carry on a civil and, once in a while maybe, a useful dialogue. There were areas where perhaps they could be helpful: terrorism was one, hostages and so on. So, in those days, anyway, it was a matter of trying to convince Washington that we should give them some kind of nod.

Now I remember when Vice President Bush came, he did meet with the Arab League Secretary General. But his staff thought, and I thought, too, that it wasn't right for the Vice President of the United States to be going over to the Arab League headquarters (which, incidentally, was just a temporary headquarters removed from Cairo) and calling on the Secretary General. So the Secretary General came and called on the Vice President at our residence. That's the way we worked it out.

My impression since leaving Tunisia is that, over the course of time, we have found it more useful to deal with the Arab League than back in those days, recognizing all the while that the Arabs themselves really prefer to deal bilaterally both with each other and with us, and not go through this organization. They may give a lot of public support to it and its occasional resolutions, but basically it has not been used as a major vehicle for foreign policy.

Now there's one fairly recent exception, and that is Lebanon. As you perhaps recall, we tried hard to do something in Lebanon, getting the Saudis and a few other states involved-trying to make some sense out of the chaos in Lebanon. Those efforts didn't yield much. And so, our Arab friends turned to the Arab League.

They set up a committee in the Arab League of four states, the Saudis were one, and, actually, this committee of the Arab League made some headway and set the stage for what is now known as the Taif Agreement worked out in Saudi Arabia last year, which actually provided for the election of a president-something that nobody had been able to achieve for some years. And we were very supportive of the Arab League's involvement and efforts there.

So over the course of time I think the Arab League has evolved a bit. And also, of course, some of the more onerous policies of certain Arab states have been moderated. Arafat himself has shifted his positions, and we now talk with the PLO. So the atmosphere and the environment have changed. And now I understand the Arab League will be going back to Cairo, and that may further enhance its clout, if you will. But, basically, like most multilateral organizations, it is used for certain functions, but is often skipped over by its member states when it comes to a crunch.

Q: But you're playing a role here, that a diplomat should, of saying: Let's keep our options open. After all, here is an organization. And so many of these organizations, you might not use them for years, and all of a sudden they happen to fit.

CUTLER: Exactly.

Q: It's so easy to keep the tie open. You don't have to do much, except to remain civil and do the normal courtesy calls, because all of a sudden you might find they're exactly what you need for a certain time. As these interviews go, we're trying to pass on, also, you might say, diplomatic know-how and all that.

CUTLER: Well, that's well put, because that's exactly the way I viewed it. Why alienate the Arab League? We must recognize its limitations, its shortcomings, and its faults, but at the same time, why close off a channel which, at some point, might be quite useful? And I think that's, in effect, what's happened from time to time.

Q: Well, Walt, when we started these interviews, we agreed we wouldn't cover Saudi Arabia. How do you feel about it? Would you like to try it sometime later on, or would you rather hold off for awhile?

CUTLER: Oh, I think after a while. I'm still involved a little bit with the country in certain ways, and I'd just as soon wait on that.

Q: All right, very fine. Well, I want to thank you very much for this, and I'm sure this will be very useful.

CUTLER: Thank you, Stu.

End of interview