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

NADIA TONGOUR

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is the 15th of November, 2007, the Ides of November. This is an interview with Nadia Tongour. This is being done on the behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I am Charles Stuart Kenney.

And you go by Nadia?

TONGOUR: Yes.

Q: Alright. Nadia means hope. No-

TONGOUR: It does. It is the shortened version of the Russian word "Nadezhda."

n the first place, when and where were you born?

TONGOUR: I was born in Istanbul, Turkey, in 1947, and my family and I emigrated to the United States when I was three and a half years old.

Q: Well, let me see. Your family name is Tongour?

TONGOUR: That is right.

Q: Tell me, what do you know about the family, the Turkish and the other roots that you know about the family.

TONGOUR: On the father's side, the Tongours came from the Crimean Peninsula. They were ethnically mixed but may have had some Tartar or Central Asian elements in their background.

Q: Well, that is the Tartar Republic then.

TONGOUR: Yes, but they were not actually Tartar ethnically speaking but the name itself may have originated in Central Asia. And the family, or at least my father's side, somewhat resembled characters out of Chekhov's "Cherry Orchard". They were not terribly affluent but they had a little bit of land and even an orchard and the grandfather had studied to be a lawyer prior to the Russian Revolution. Once the revolution started, he joined the equivalent of the judge adjutant corps for the White Russian army, led by General Wrangel. Subsequently, in 1920, my grandfather was evacuated with Wrangel's forces, the remaining White Russian troops in Southern Russia, to Istanbul - leaving his wife and my father behind in Crimea. My father was born in 1917 right around the time of the outbreak of the revolution. He and his mother stayed behind for a few years because my grandfather firmly believed the revolution would be short-lived and he himself would quickly return. That obviously didn't happen, and in the early 1920s my grandmother and my father managed, albeit with some difficulty, to get out of the country and find their way to Istanbul. where my father grew up.

Q: What did your father do in Istanbul?

TONGOUR: Well, he arrived there as a young boy and remained in Istanbul until he immigrated to the United States. As a youngster in Turkey, he was one of the fortunate people that had the equivalent of a CARE sponsor in America, who would send money and occasional gifts which enabled him to attend a good school. Later, he was drafted into the Turkish army. Before coming to America, ; he briefly worked in an import/export business. During that period he met a gentleman from New York who owned several factories in a textile-related industry, specifically making zippers, in the South and overseas. He often hired capable foreigners to work in his business, and at some point he offered my father a job. This happened apparently around the time I was born, and my father applied for immigration visas for the family. Under the prior immigration system, it took our family approximately three years to obtain the necessary visas and come to America.

Q: Before we leave there, on you mother's side-?

TONGOUR: That is a very interesting story. My parents probably never would have met in the old country as they came from very different backgrounds. My mother's family came from Moscow; they were very assimilated and secular Jews. In fact, I did not even know about that aspect of the family history until much later. My mother's grandfather, had been a doctor, who own a small medical clinic, and in 1905 he apparently saved the life of someone who later became prominent in the Russian Revolution. This story is not unlike a segment in Dr. Zhivago. And the reason I mention this is that the world my mother's family inhabited was that of the Muscovite intelligentsia. Her relatives hung out, if you will, with artists, with writers. They knew the Pasternak family. I don't mean to imply that they were bosom buddies but they were in the same social set. And they were friendly with some fairly well-known poets. It turns out that my grandmother, when she was a very young woman, even acted in some silent films. She was a very colorful person, my maternal grandmother, and in some ways her experiences were larger than life. But she ran off quite young from an unhappy home situation and married the first of a number of husbands, each of whom was of a different nationality. Sometime around 1929 or 1930, she met and married a Turkish businessman, with whom she was able to leave the country. My mother was already born (the child of the first marriage) and she was able to accompany them to Turkey. But mother and daughter did not stay there long, moving to France shortly thereafter, where they lived among Russian ï¿½migrï¿½s in Paris. It was not exactly a jet set existence, but they did move around Europe somewhat. After a number of years in France, they moved to Romania, where my mother attended a French High School. Eventually, they found themselves back in Turkey just after World War II broke out. Although my mother knew some Turkish , she did not know it well enough to go to college there (having done all her schooling in France and Romania). So after high school, she found a job with an allied military office based in Istanbul (then a hot bed of information gathering in that period) doing some translations and interpreting since she knew several languages including a little English.

Q: Well then, how did your mother and father meet?

TONGOUR: In Istanbul. Essentially, my father had grown up in Istanbul, with his family having moved there from Russia in the early 1920s. My mother happened to wind up there during World War II, thanks to her, somewhat peripatetic mother My parents met through friends there.

Q: Do you recall much of Turkey at all?

TONGOUR: I have been back subsequently but from my early years, I only remember some fleeting scenes. I knew that I had a Turkish nanny, which we called Hanum. I knew that at the time we left Turkey we spoke French and Russian at home.. That was very common since and both my parents had gone to French speaking schools. They also spoke Turkish; but both parents know several other languages as well. For example, growing up in Istanbul, my father, had many Greek friends, so he learned Greek. Similarly, having lived in Romania, my mother she spoke Romanian. But at home they spoke French and Russian plus enough Turkish for me to learn a few words, mostly baby talk.

Perhaps, a more interesting aspect of our arrival in America was that my parents were under the impression we would go to a small town in the South for eight or so months while my father learned the ropes of this business and be trained an then supposedly we would move to New York City, where he would work for this company, (a zipper business) at its headquarters. But one thing led to another, and my parents are still there.

Q: Where?

TONGOUR: In Barnwell, South Carolina, which in those days was a very small town. : Until then, neither of my parents had ever spent any time as adults in a small town. When they first arrived by train in Barnwell, it was quite a shock, especially since we came on a Sunday at a time when "blue Laws" were alive and well. In other words, nothing was open, and they really did not know how to make their way. Ultimately, they have done quite well, but it was initially a culture shock. Remember this was the early'50s And they have done quite well but it was quite a culture shock and this was the early '50s, and the McCarthy era was in full flower, and a number of other things were going on. Both the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow laws were alive and well. One of the first episodes I recall (though it has actually become family lore) was the visit of the "preachers" as they are known in those parts. As my parents tell it, the Baptist minister was the first to "call". And my father, not knowing the local mores, offered the minister a drink, an alcoholic drink. And the minister was not amused; he was polite but after he left, I guess he told other people that this foreigner had offered him a drink. Well, shortly thereafter the Episcopalian minister came to call. I think my father had learned a lesson by then and offered the Episcopalian coffee. Anyway, that was our introduction.

Q: Well, what religion had your family come out with and where did they end up?

TONGOUR: When my parents married they had, as I mentioned, a very mixed background which could make a book of its own. However, when I was born, they decided to "clean the slate", so to speak, and baptize me, Greek or Russian Orthodox, which they did in Istanbul. But when they came to South Carolina, to a small town with no Greek or Russian Orthodox Church nearby and with lots of visiting protestant ministers they eventually settled on the Episcopalian Church. That said, both of my parents had attended Catholic schools and allowed me the opportunity to frequent others churches in our town. But in the ninth grade, I went off to a Catholic boarding school for a year before returning to my local high school. But the family stayed with the Episcopal Church.

Q: Okay, let us talk about Barnwell.

TONGOUR: Barnwell is a very lovely southern town that was actually somewhat known in the Civil War, or as it was locally known, the War Between the States because Gen. Sherman marched through Barnwell and burned the town. In fact, in E.L. Doctorow's book The March, it is cited and frequently described by the occupying forces as "Barnwell burns well".

Q: I have to state a prejudice. My grandfather, not my great-grandfather, my grandfather was an officer in Sherman's army.

TONGOUR: Your grandfather. Well then, he must have visited Barnwell. In the early '50s, Barnwell had some lovely, broad, tree-lined streets, with a few antebellum-style houses, with a population of about 5,000 people. When we arrived there, it was a completely segregated town, with roughly 2,500 whites and 2,500 or so blacks. And everything from the doctors' offices to the water fountains were separate. The town has come a long way over the years, with dramatic changes and is now fully integrated. But, I, going to Barnwell Elementary School and then high school was never in an integrated class because although integration had begun during that period, it was handled in a way that was surprisingly effective or rather did not provoke violence or other problems: namely, they started with the first grade and each year another class was added. Thus, the children who started in an integrated school would continue all the way through. But if you were in the seventh grade when integration began, it did not catch up with you by the time you graduated. That was one notable aspect of small town life in the South in the 50s.

The other factor, perhaps more relevant for this account, was that we were one of the only two foreign families in town. Given the specifically hostile attitude toward Russia and the generally limited knowledge of the world in that area then, we did not tell anyone that we were of Russian background; in fact, we spoke of coming from Turkey. In retrospect, I am really grateful that we wound up in this small southern town; had we moved to New York I probably would not be sitting here today - speaking to you as a former Foreign Service Officer. First of all, I might not have gone to college or even if I had, I probably would have had a more limited educational experience, because we undoubtedly would have been ensconced in essentially an ethnic ghetto and lived the typical first generation life. Instead, effectively we crammed the experiences of three generations into one . As a result, you had a situation in which both my brother and I managed to go to graduate school, obtain advanced degrees, and have successful careers. As for my parents, while they retain their accents, I would pit my father's knowledge of English vocabulary against that of any well-educated America. This was a benefit of forced assimilation.

Q: Okay, let us talk about growing up as a little girl. What was it like? I mean, in the first place, let us talk maybe about the family first. Did the outside world penetrate the family circle or did you sit around and talk about things or was news important, papers, TV?

TONGOUR: Right. Very much so, very much so because my family was always interested in the wider world. And certainly for the first several years the family felt very isolated, and we were a little self-contained unit unto ourselves. Given the atmosphere of the times, my parents were concerned that I would become too much a small town girl, and to the extent they could, they exposed me to whatever cultural opportunities might be available. There were certain limitations, both financial and simply the difficulty of getting out and about. Still we did whatever we could and took family trips wherever possible. Then again this was initially quite an adventure because my father did not know how to drive when he came to America and had to learn quickly - with the usual number of mishaps. In sum, there was a great deal of interest in the outside world as well as a real awareness of being different. By the same token there was a real push to become assimilate and become American. We spoke earlier about immigrant families focusing on education, and there was certainly a great deal of emphasis at home on education, on doing well in school. My father had a slogan which he used for years, which was, "whatever you start, finish in beauty." Overall thought, I would have to say that at least until the ninth grade or so, I definitely felt like an outsider, so to that extent one could say it was somewhat of a difficult transition for me, being the foreigner and feeling odd. Luckily , I had no problems with speaking English or doing well in school.

Q: Well, were you much of a reader?

TONGOUR: Voracious. I read constantly. I mean, I have a younger brother who is nine years younger so for the first part of my childhood I was an only child, and books were companions. Another interesting aspect of my childhood was that when I was seven or so, my two grandmothers, who until then had lived in Istanbul, both moved to American to be with us (my parents were able to sponsor their immigration). And although we had a comfortable house, it was not especially large; yet these two grandmothers for a while both lived with us. Eventually first one and then the other moved to New York, but my father's mother returned to South Carolina in her later years.

Q: The grandmother who was the jet setter-? How did she survive?

TONGOUR: She did not stay in South Carolina too long. Actually, she had a very interesting life afterward.. I do not want to portray her as a jetsetter because that is a bit misleading, even though she lived in several countries and moved with a somewhat artsy set. When she moved to New York City, she wound up doing some newspaper work, interviewing people for a Russian newspaper and radio show in New York. A few years later the second grandmother moved to New York as well and wound up living with the first. So although these two women did not always, see eye to eye on everything they wound up sharing a home, first with us in South Carolina and then in New York. While she was in New York, my father's mother sewed costumes for theater companies, which made it possible for me to see lots of shows whenever I went to visit. However, after some years she returned to Barnwell to be closer to her family. She never really learned English very well, and it was difficult for her. For example, I remember going downtown with her to the drug store, and she would have a hard time grasping why the clerks could not understand her - while she was speaking in Russian . Essentially, she never fully made the transition to American life, which her family had nearly completed.

Q: Well, there is always that generational thing. Actually, you are fortunate that your parents made the transition because so many parents do not. It is the young kinds, you know, this is sort of the American tragedy, almost, of parents sacrifice everything to take their kids to the country but the do not quite make it but the kids do.

TONGOUR: That is right. Well, in our case, my father basically had to assimilate because he had a factory to run.. What had happened was that while had been sent to South Carolina primarily for training, within a matter of a year one plant manager after another left for various reasons. The "whys" weren't significant for our story but within a short period my father was asked to be plant manager and wound up supervising a large number of people. Although my parents were not highly educated in a formal sense, they were highly motivated. For example, my mother, who had always wanted to go to college, finally in her late 30s was able to do so, starting with a few classes at a nearby branch of the University of South Carolina and subsequently commuting to Columbia, where she received her degree and her Phi Beta Kappa key. She then went on and to obtain a teaching credential in addition to her degree. And my father was completely self-educated, but incredibly knowledgeable on a wide range of subjects. .

Q: Well, go back to you. As a young kid you say you liked to read. Do you recall and books as a sort of elementary school, ones that particularly encouraged you or interested you in that?

TONGOUR: Yes. There was a writer, who think she did a wonderful job; her name was, if I recall correctly, Lois Lenski. She wrote all kinds of books for elementary school children, but there was a memorable one in which the father leaves his job for a year and the family travels around America and learns all about the country through meeting people and doing odd jobs. But geography and history were always of great interest to me, plus I read literature of all kinds. There was never any question growing up that I would go to college. I was a good student and there were parental expectations that I would do my best - about that there was never a question.

Q: Well, were you getting much, particularly either Turkish or Russian history from your parents or was this not a major subject?

TONGOUR: We talked about everything, especially the news. Whatever was on the news was a major subject of conversation. Both of my parents were readers; when the grandmothers came to live with us, there was also a great deal of conversation about the old country. But there was also a lot in the news of that period about the Soviet Union. I should point out that my father's family felt (not unlike the sentiments expressed by the Cuban contingent in Miami) that they had lost whatever they had had as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution, so there were many negative comments about what the communists were doing in the Soviet Union. And this was very much in keeping with the mood of the times because there was clearly a great deal of media coverage about the evils of communism. And I have to say that while growing up I was somewhat contrary or rebellious and would argue and debate these and other issues. In fact, our home in those days - and this I very much enjoyed - in many respects resembled a Woody Allen movie; we were never quiet or reserved.

Q: It sounds like you brought the Russian kitchen table with you.

TONGOUR: Absolutely. And in fact, the kitchen table persists to this day. My parents have a large house now, and much of it is not actively used because everyone comes and sits around the kitchen table with lots of food and endless conversation.

Q: Talk a little about school, elementary school. The southern school system, I think in that time was not, I mean, both the segregation but also it was not particularly renowned as far as being particularly good. I mean, but how did you find it?

TONGOUR: Well, let me go a step further. I do not know how I found it because I did not have a point of comparison. Elementary school went by as a blur. I did well and skipped a grade. Apparently the teachers thought I could do more advanced work so I skipped fifth grade and went directly to sixth. And then in junior high, the age when kids often go through a difficult transition, my parents thought that perhaps sending me to a more academically rigorous boarding school would be good for my development and self-discipline. I think there was also the typical mother-daughter problem at that age but that is another issue. And attending a Catholic boarding school, St. Angela's Academy was overall a good experience for me. I learned something about religion (theology) and academically it was, in fact, quite rigorous, essentially a Jesuit-type school but co-ed. But I think what was most beneficial about the school was the fact that even though it was less than 40 miles from home, many of the kids there came from far more difficult environments or dysfunctional homes than I did.

Q: You had a family unit.

TONGOUR: I had a very strong family unit. We fought, we argued, but we were very close, and it was a good family. At St. Angela's , many of the boarders came from miserable situations and were clearly unhappy. After a year, I was ready to come home. When I came back to Barnwell High School I basically sailed through it. And, this isn't bragging - I lots of honors and awards and high grades.

Q: Well, how about, you say desegregation followed behind you. But was there much talk it the school about this? I am talking about the students.

TONGOUR: Let me turn it around a bit because the students basically espoused the prejudices of their parents to the extent that they did or did not talk about it. Their opinions also in a way reflected the class structure of the small community. There was not exactly a town-gown split since there was really no "gown" but there was somewhat of an economic split, with the upper and middle class townies versus the more rural students. The former, you might say were taught better manners - they did not use words now deemed politically incorrect in the popular culture whereas some of the kids who rode around in pick up trucks with shotguns in the back may have been more openly prejudiced.

In high school there were a number of incidents that were, frankly very distressing for me. We're now already in the era of the civil rights movement when, as you know, there was an active contingent of young, mostly northern students coming south to work on voter registration drives. I very vividly recall one such group came to Barnwell and tried to take some young black children to the public library. But the librarians were afraid of what the local white reaction would be if they let these children in, and so they turned them away. And I remember feeling very ashamed. I also recall a separate incident when I was 14 and had my first summer job as a "soda jerk" in a drugs store. In those days blacks could come to the counter, order food and take it away but not sit down. One day a young man came in and sat down and ordered a sandwich. As I started making it, the store owner came forward and using unrepeatable language told him to get out of there and not return. He was quite explicit as to what he would do if the young man returned. Such incidents would not occur today, and race is not a particularly major issue in the community. My younger brother, in fact, went to a completely integrated school, and there were no problems.

Q: Well how did your family, given that your father ran a factory and had to belong to the business class, talk about these issues?

TONGOUR: I will give you an example of something that happened in the factory. When he first arrived, bathrooms and water fountains were separated by race and gender: four restrooms, two for women (by color) and two for men. One day apparently there was a malfunction in one of these and a staff member asked my father what to do. And my father gave somewhat of a Solomonesque reply, saying he would leave it to the staff but if they did not wish to be miserable, he suggested sharing the one available women's room. In the end, they did. There was no racism and few discussions of race at home; my parents did not come from that background and were probably hesitant to say much because they saw themselves as outsiders. I recall my father telling a story about driving on a country road one day with cars both in front and behind his that had hooded Klansmen in them and him saying it was very frightening. But I really do not want to imply that everyone was a racist or bigot, not by any stretch of the imagination. Rather, I am simply saying there were incidents in those times. One of the more striking I recall took place in high school at a school assembly. Back then, there really did not seem to be restrictions on having "preachers" come to talk to high school students. On one occasion, a local pastor gave an address - not exactly a sermon - in which he stated that if any one of " those people, comes to my church".....

Q: He is talking about blacks.

TONGOUR: Yes. But he did not use the term black or African American.

Q: He used the "n" word.

TONGOUR: The "n" word. And, if any one of them comes through here, he said, "I will get my shotgun". And I remember sitting there thinking, and you call yourself a pastor. So, to reiterate, most negative comments regarding race seemed to come from the adults, not from the kids, who for the most part weren't terribly interested in "those issues".

Q: Well, I would imagine the division of the kids would be more equivalent to the rednecks and the city folk.

TONGOUR: . That is exactly right.

Q: You know, because, I do not know how it is today but I can recall even visiting California but when you had people coming, groups coming from- during the Depression and we were all very cautious about anybody who came from what, I suppose we basically would call Oklahoma or Arkansas because these were, you know, these were people, for guys, you know, they would fight at the drop of a hat and I did not like to fight so we just sort of kept them to one side. How did you find play, playmates and all this?

TONGOUR: Well, when we first arrived we lived in a small house in what today would be called a mixed neighborhood. It was adequate and we learned English, real English (as opposed to the text book variety) from Queenie, the cleaning lady and the cook, who looked like a stereotypical Aunt Jemima. But she taught us well. Down the road there was a little shop run by a black merchant, often filled with black children with whom I played, and still further down the road an old woman, who as a little girl I liked to visit and watch as she made soap in an old vat, stirring the lye for hours at a time. However, one day a prominent member of the community who sort of took my father under his wing, possibly seeing him as a nice young man who didn't fully grasp the local social norms, said to my father something on the order of " your child is still young, and for now it is okay, but you probably do not want to allow her to play too long with those children down the road. And for her sake, you might want to think about moving to a different neighborhood. It's probably worth pointing out that in fact, there was no residential zoning there, at least not in those days, and young kids tended to play with whomever was around. Later on we moved to a neighborhood that was predominantly white and again I was part of a pack of kids who roamed all over the place. We had an enviable degree of freedom compared to children today.

Q: Yes, kids were feral in those days.

TONGOUR: Definitely. Basically, we would come home for dinner.

Q: And why are you inside the house? Get out and come home for dinner. That is the way I grew up.

TONGOUR: And we had all kinds of secret hideouts and places to play. There were also some clay pits down the road on land that had once clearly been a plantation; we once dug around and actually found what may have been Confederate money.

Q: Did you turn Catholic because of the Catholic school or was this an exposure?

TONGOUR: It was a very good exposure, but in the end I didn't become a convert. At that point I was 12 or 13 and very much a seeker. I had gone through confirmation training in the Episcopal Church but at the last moment decided I did not want to be confirmed. do that. Then I went to Catholic school and I was the only non-Catholic enrolled in religion. The nuns were clearly pleased since I was doing well in the class, and I think they saw me as a ready convert. At the end of the year, school gave awards in each discipline. Although I won my share of the awards, the only one I wanted was the religion award. I thought, perversely, that it would be fitting for the only non-Catholic taking religion to win the award. Ultimately, I missed it by a point but that's another story. Unfortunately, one of the nuns pressed me a little too hard to convert. I think if she had let me alone, I might well have converted but at that point there were simply too many unanswered questions. By the time I left St. Angela's, I decided not to do anything on this score, but felt that were I to be a Christian I might well be a Catholic.

Q: I was wondering, you know, I am thinking of the South in those days, that there was an awful lot of something that sort of city folks today do not want to cross, and that is people sort of coming up to you and have you been saved and that sort of thing. It was pretty aggressive Christianity of the Southern Baptist variety; were you exposed to all that?

TONGOUR: Oh yes. But I think the more interesting angle is the fact that since both of my parents had gone to Catholic schools, they considered parochial education to be quite normal, but when we came to American they discovered that there was not only anti-black prejudice but also strong anti-Catholic sentiments. However, there was actually very little, if any, anti-Semitism. in Barnwell. In fact, Barnwell had only three practicing Jewish families. One was headed by the mayor, another by the speaker of the House of Representatives for the state of South Carolina and the third was the owner of the leading department store. And they were well established within the community. Now, the Catholics had a much more difficult time. So when I came back home from Catholic boarding school, still very caught up in the religion, I remember attending a youth fellowship event at another local church which showed a film about sending missionaries to Italy. When I mentioned that I had gone to a Catholic boarding school, the kids were appalled - implying that Catholics ate heathen babies or something of that sort. I no longer remember the specifics but the sentiments were negative.

Q: Well, I take it though that, looking back on it, this was a pretty comfortable place, was it not?

TONGOUR: In looking back, I think yes. Though going back to the question of the local attitudes among the kids, I remember a high school reunion of a few years ago, where there was another former Foreign Service (actually from USAID) in attendance. We were talking with one of our classmates who was interested in international issues although he had remained in the community when another classmate came by and said "are you still talking about foreign affairs? Let's talk about something more important". She clearly meant more local news.

Q: How about strikes and labor things? Did that come up at all?

TONGOUR: Very little because as you undoubtedly know, one reason so many textile- related companies moved South in the '40s and '50s was that the region was not very unionized, for many years unions were not much of an issue in my and certainly not at the plant my father managed. . From what I understand, and what I saw, he was a well respected and a very good manager.

Q: ...South Carolina side, not too long ago I started interviewing a man who later became an ambassador several times, but his father was a white, illiterate tenant farmer in South Carolina and was able to break loose from that but just barely. I mean, by being able to go to community college on a scholarship.

TONGOUR: Your mentioning that reminds me that years later, when I was a graduate student at Stanford, I became aware of how can prejudices go both ways. What was fascinating to me was the number of stereotypes prejudices that people in other parts of the country have about the South. In Palo Alto, I encountered people who would express surprise on learning that I was from the south, as though I were some sort of exceptional case. Occasionally, I found myself making up stories about living in the South, which, unfortunately, people actually believed. One of them was quite similar to what you just told me. Here I am at Stanford telling people - not many to be sure and mostly to see their reaction - that I was the child of a tenant farmer and the only one in the family to have gotten an education (thanks to a scholarship, of course). But my goal after finishing Stanford was to return and buy shoes for my many brothers and sisters. And I mean they believed it.

Q: Yes well, who knows? I notice you do not have an accent.

TONGOUR: Well actually, I have been away for a long time. In fact, I will be home for Thanksgiving; I am sure after I have been there for a day or two a little bit will come back. But as I mentioned, my parents really made an effort to broaden my horizons. For example, they sent me to a camp in New Jersey one summer called Rova Farms that was founded by the Tolstoy Foundation and filled with Russian ï¿½migrï¿½ kids, and we traveled whenever and wherever we could. But after my brother came along some years later, I think thy perhaps grew concerned that they were creating too much of a gypsy in me. With him, they seemed to focus more on becoming more Americanized. Whether consciously or not, greater attention was paid to Little League and scouting and Citadel summer camp. Possibly as a result, he has more of a Southern drawl and probably considers himself more of a Southerner.

Q: As a young girl did you, in the times growing up, did you see limitations about being a girl or not, as far as the future went or not?

TONGOUR: I saw that more later on. I mean, there were certain things that you grew up not questioning or even knowing about. For example, I don't recall discussions about going into the Foreign Service or being a lawyer or other type of professional with girlfriends in high school. In those days schools were still offering home economics and secretarial skills in the expectation that girls would end up as secretaries, homemakers and elementary school teachers. I had a streak of rebelliousness did a lot of daydreaming on the swing in the backyard and think about being a professor, a diplomat or a journalist - even a social workers - when I grew up, and many of these dreams actually were fulfilled. No one ever said I couldn't, but there was no particular encouragement to go out and be a nuclear physicist.

Q: Did the election of 1960, Kennedy versus Nixon, grab your family at all or was this an important thing or not?

TONGOUR: No. The election that was more significant, not so much for my family as for my school community, was the 1964 Johnson-Goldwater race, where a lot of young people were for the first time interested in politics. And you had people who would be embarrassed to admit this now but were " Youth for Goldwater" then. I think the 1963-64 period was one of real political awakening among the brighter kids students in the high school. Except for a few news headlines and the Nixon-Kennedy debate, I don't recall the 1960 election, but the assassination of President Kennedy did have a real impact.

Q: In high school, did you get involved in extracurricular things?

TONGOUR: Sure, yes. I was involved in most everything. And I say this in the sense that this was a small town and one participated in all the activities. You played basketball, you were on the yearbook staff, the student council, and whatever little clubs there were.

Q: Academics, did anything bother you in academics or were you just an average student?

TONGOUR: Not really. I was the class valedictorian.

Q: Did you have the spelling bee?

TONGOUR: Yes. I won, a couple.

Q: I would have hated you.

TONGOUR: Well actually, my real claim to fame was in declamation contests.

Q: The what?

TONGOUR: They do not do this much any more, but one would memorize a speech or comic presentation and compete with other participants on stage. I was also in the school plays. In fact, one play in which I had the lead part was scheduled for the day JFK was assassinated. This had a double significance for me and was revealing about the attitudes of my father, who was politically quite conservative..

TONGOUR: Not socially conservative, however, but in the old "anti-Bolshevik" sense. Given his anti-communist orientation, he had been more inclined toward Nixon than Kennedy. Since the school play had long been scheduled those of us involved had the day off. I always remember being in a "beauty shop" (as they were known then) t getting my hair done when the radio announced the President had been shot. And I recall returning home and my father saying "well certainly they will cancel the play, they should cancel it." But they did not cancel the show and my father was outraged that the school had not shown sufficient respect for the dead President, even if the local officials hadn't supported him. And he was not happy with me either for continuing to play my part in the show.

Q: You know, it is interesting that when you think about Kennedy, you think, one, he was for civil rights-

TONGOUR: They couldn't stand him for that, and many, in fact, didn't really about what had happened to him.

Q: What were dating habits in high school?

TONGOUR: Like any other small town. You went to the drive-in; you went to the bowling alley. Actually - and this wasn't limited to Barnwell but true for many small town - even though it is larger now, there were more things for kids to do then. The bowling alley no longer exists, nor do the movie theaters. We also went to the ball games and dances - as is the case today. .

Q: To the drug store.

TONGOUR: Yes, straight out of the Ozzie and Harriett movies.

Q: And after graduation. Whereto, whither and what?

TONGOUR: Well, we did not have counselors in those days but there were so-called "college fairs", with colleges in the region (perhaps the furthest afield might be schools in Atlanta) sending representatives to area high schools to recruit students. My family and I did visit some colleges as well, but it was a somewhat haphazard process in terms of where I finally applied. However, I had met some wonderful kids in New York who played an interesting role in my high school development and college choices.

My family's closest friends were living in New York, on Long Island, and they had children who were a few years older than I. These kids and their friends had already started college in places such as Swarthmore and Michigan, and several had been involved in civil rights activities by the time of my junior year in high school visit. To them, I was the little Southern girl come to visit whom they would take to the big city. Although I had been to New York many times to visit the grandmothers, that summer's forays into the city were different. They college kids would take me to Greenwich Village and basically sneak me into small clubs, not nightclubs exactly but '60s-style spots where you would hear comics such as Mort Sol or clubs that seemed very avant garde to me at the time, where interracial couples were common, and my friends would all look at me to see if I was shocked, if the Southern girl could handle it. And I handled it okay. But what was more significant to me was that in this groups was one very impressive young African American woman who went to Swarthmore. She made such an impression on me that I in the course of applying for colleges I applied to Swarthmore. I also applied to a few others places, including William and Mary and Emory University, where I was accepted. But Swarthmore sent me a letter which I do not think could have been sent today to he effect that while I had excellent grades the college really could not evaluate my performance since I had attended a non-accredited school; moreover, the letter implied that given my small town southern background I might not feel comfortable in Swarthmore's very liberal environment. Those were not the exact words but that was the clear sense of the message. I found this quite strange since I clearly would not have applied if I didn't think I'd be comfortable there. In any case, it was not to be.

On the other hand, William and Mary was a different story. I wish you could have seen my father's eyes light up at seeing this "real" American college town. I wound up going to William and Mary. No one said I had to but it was definitely the family preference. nice.

Q: Okay. Let us talk about William and Mary. You were there in the mid-to-late 60s, right?

TONGOUR: Exactly.

Q: Well, we are right in the middle of the student revolution all this and never trust anyone under 30 and all that. Talk about, in the first place, how the school impressed you when you first went there and what the student body was like.

TONGOUR: Well, William and Mary has changed a great deal over the years. When I arrived, considerable attention was paid to the so-called "school priorities", things for which William and Mary was known. For example, first to receive its charter and second in actual operation or the other way around (I no longer remember), the first Phi Beta Kappa chapter, and so on. School officials were quick to let "out of state" women know that they were "exceptional" students; nevertheless, my freshman year at least, they sometimes also made us feel a bit like second class in that they housed us in off-campus apartments. The college claimed this wa due to a shortage of space but theoretically they could have mixed up the freshmen class and allowed some out-of-staters to live on campus. So on one hand, we were special but on the other, I used to joke, they seemed afraid we might pollute the fine flower of Virginia womanhood. That set the mood. I did make a lot of good friends. The great dilemma for me freshman year was whether or not to join a sorority. In other words, the cultural revolution had not yet hit Williamsburg, nor would it until several years later. I really wasn't too keen about joining a sorority but felt almost as though I had to because the Greek system was main form of social life on campus. In the end I did join but was never much of a sorority woman and kept it somewhat at arm's length.

Q: Well, I mean, particularly, I would imagine, sororities in an extremely long established Southern college.

TONGOUR: That is right.

Q: You know, are pretty major institutions and a whole lot of things go with it. At least, how did you find it?

TONGOUR: Oh yes, that is exactly right. I wound up joining one of the least "southern belle" type sororities or actually one of the more casual. But still there were expectations to fulfill and it was hard to actually distance oneself. In fact, I did live in the sorority house my senior year. But returning for a moment to the issue of segregation and where I was coming from, one e very vivid memory occurs from that year - a time when I felt as though I was living a slightly schizophrenic existence, with the so-called "rah, rah" sorority life on the one hand and participation in silent peace vigils (a minority position on campus then) and more serious academic activities on the other. At the time, there were very few African American students at William and Mary, and since I was on the student newspaper, I wound up interviewing one of male students, who interestingly enough, later joined the Foreign Service. At the time, however, he was also dating a sorority sister, who, while not living in the house, would use our room as her "alternate home". One day a "committee" of sorority sisters came by to ask whether - since I knew both the girl and the boyfriend - I would tell her the sisters did not consider it appropriate (or didn't look good) for him to escort her to the sorority house at the end of a date? I refused. But I mention this to convey the flavor of the times and of how much has, in fact, changed.

Q: Well, let us talk about now about the academic side. William and Mary has a fine reputation as an academic institution, probably stronger one than the University of Virginia, which has a very good reputation but also of being a very social school. What grabbed you and what did not grab you, academic-wise?

TONGOUR: Academically I thought it was excellent. Having come out of a small-town high school, I actually had to study for a change. I mean, I swam through high school and I do not remember doing too much studying. That changed at William and Mary. I remember some truly outstanding professors in the liberal arts. I majored in history but the courses that I took in English, economics and psychology were great. And in fact, the history courses strongly influenced my subsequent choices in terms of graduate work and gave me a good grounding for my future career. I had no regrets about attending William and Mary and I probably should have led this discussion with that fact. The only problem, in my view, was that William and Mary never quite seemed to figure out how large a role out-of- state students should play in the numerical make-up of the school, but it was and remains an academically fine institution.

Q: Well, you were taking history; were you concentrating on any area or not?

TONGOUR: Not at the time because for an undergraduate major, a certain number and distribution of courses were required. So I took a little of this, a little of that. I had an excellent Russian history professor. Plus, the team of American history professors were all excellent. But my major in history was not what I would call a strong major in that I took the requisite number of hours of history classes but took a great many other courses in political science and so on, whereas some classmates took as much history as possible. I certainly valued what I learned during my four years there, but I must admit that for a time I considered transferring to a more urban environment. At that time, Williamsburg was a much smaller community and students for the most part could not live off campus. Students were not allowed to keep vehicles, and there was a real sense of isolation and what seemed to me a number of somewhat archaic rules.

For example, walking across campus one day the Dean of Women stopped me and said "Young lady, your skirt is not fully covering your kneecaps". Women could not wear slacks unless they were in art class or athletics. You could not walk with a cigarette, etc. In other words, it was slow to catch up with the so-called social or cultural revolution of the 60s.

Q: Well you know, my wife went to Stanford and they taught gracious living. Was there sort of the campus Marxists or at least- I mean, I am not talking about hard-core Marxists but you know, looking at sort of the socialist type, were there any professors who were of that ilk or not or was it a pretty conservative group?

TONGOUR: Overall the professors seemed fairly relatively conservative but not exclusively so. Certainly there were professors from a wide variety of backgrounds and university. I remember an economics professor who was very much a provocateur, not necessarily a leftist provocateur but just a skeptic, forcing us to question. I think there were a number of professors who were very good at trying to get our gray cells working.

Q: Okay, let us talk about '64 to '68, the Vietnam War, the changes. How removed were you from all that or were you?

TONGOUR: I was very conscious of what I saw as a cultural disconnect. I had a part-time job, for example, working in a local colonial-style restaurant that might have a TV on with news of the world but outside the window someone would be riding a bicycle in colonial garb carrying a tray of food. So I would be offering traditional hot cross buns while keeping an eye on the Vietnam War on TV. There was definitely a sense of unreality associated with working or living in colonial Williamsburg then. So Williamsburg may have been a late arrival onto the awareness scene in terms of Vietnam, because it was very easy to live as though you were living in the 18th century there. Still, I was well aware of the war and by my senior year was involved in silent vigils in front of the student union where maybe 20 people would show up.

Q: Oh boy. Yes, so much for the revolution.

TONGOUR: That is right. You asked about "campus Marxists". That label wasn't very relevant at William and Mary. The people working on the student newspaper and the more artsy crowd, many of whom I counted as friends, were the ones most likely to question the system but hardly from a true Marxist perspective. Essentially, one of the burning issues of the day centered on the draft, or specifically one's draft status. So, while questions were raised, it was hardly a hot bed of radicalism. However, by '68 that was changing even at William and Mary, and by the time I got to California to go to grad school at Stanford (also not known as a hot bed of radicalism) the mood was quite different everywhere. Change was in the air. .

Q: How did you find, you know, looking at it sort of from a distance and all, going to a school with men and women, well, it is still sort of a male society; could you raise your voice? I mean, was it- did you find being a woman you had to try a little harder to get attention or not? How did you find that?

TONGOUR: I think that by the time I got to college this really was not much of an issue. One very positive aspect of William and Mary was the general awareness of the "caliber" of the Virginia women who attended. Since it is predominantly a state school, it tended to attract the more academically oriented Virginia women; those more interested in being prepped for "gracious living" tended to go elsewhere. William and Mary women were frequently reminded that they were among the "best and the brightest" of the state. In other words, women were not necessarily held back except insofar as there were rules about skirt lengths or smoking in public. What there was not, however, was much of a push or an overwhelming expectation that women should continue on for advanced degrees.

Q: Did you, and I am looking back on it because at the time you graduated, did you feel that you were the typical dumb- the child of immigrants sort of pushed to get ahead or were you pretty much mainstream or not at that time?

TONGOUR: I often felt as though I truly became an American when I moved to California. California, for me, was the real watershed. I still felt slightly ambivalent about my status while I was in an undergrad. I knew how to, you might say, talk the talk but internally I still had this sense of being an outsider, especially given the atmosphere of William and Mary. Had I gone to a different undergraduate school, such as Georgetown or someplace more international, maybe I would have felt differently. When I got to California I encountered incredible diversity among the student body - among both the foreigners and the Americans - and with all these different types, I felt very much at home. Does that make sense?

Q: Yes. But I was wondering whether you felt, from your family, was your family driving you or were you doing your own driving?

TONGOUR: Oh no, they were not pushing me. They did not have a script for my future and there was nothing particular that I was expected to do. By this point, I was pushing myself.

Q: Well, you were on the right course, you know, I mean, every immigrant family, you know, wants to see their kids-

TONGOUR: That is right.

Q: -move ahead and you were doing the right thing so.

TONGOUR: Yes. You see, the message was "do your best, whatever you do." In my mother's case there was another implicit message associated with fulfilling some of the fantasies of higher education and travel that she had not then attained, but no one pressed me to become a Foreign Service officer or get a PhD.

Q: It sounds like, too, the education you were getting that you were not moving too far away from your parents, you were not really- Did you find yourself growing estranged from them and their way or not?

TONGOUR: We had our share of arguments over the big issues of the day (our own "war and peace") but there was never any question of estrangement. We've a very close family. It is just that my father's views and my own were very different at that point on political issues.

Q: Well, at that time I had a Marxist daughter, you know.

TONGOUR: Speaking of Marxism, I had an excellent Russian history professor at William and Mary and that contributed substantially to my studying Russian History in grad school.

Q: Were you keeping up with your Russian all this time?

TONGOUR: When I was growing up and through high school I did speak Russian at home, but it was "kitchen Russian"; I didn't have the opportunity to study Russian until considerably later. I took French in college; I'm not sure if Russian was offered at William and Mary then. I took it in grad school.

Q: Alright then, now we can cover a little grad school. You decided- why Stanford?

TONGOUR: I was actually very fortunate on that front and confronted basically an abundance of riches. I had applied to Columbia, in their journalism and international relations program; I had also applied to the journalism program at Northwestern; to SAIS (School of Advanced International Studies) in international relations, and then to Stanford in Russian area studies and history. In the end it got down to something very practical.

Q: Money?TONGOUR: In part, but not completely. It got to be somewhat complicated. I had spent a summer abroad in Paris after my sophomore year in college, and it proved to be a very formative period in my life for a number of reasons, not least of which was in raising all sorts of questions about my national identity. I was quite happy in France, which made me wonder all the more whether I was still a foreigner or an American? Where did I belong? It took me much of my junior year basically to sort through these questions. So, when I was accepted to SAIS, the school offered me the opportunity to spend the first year its two-year program in Bologna (instead of the second year which was more typical). SAIS may have thought it was doing me a favor, but this became a source of great anxiety for me and made me worry whether this would stir up the whole "nationality" issue again. Perhaps, if SAIS had offered me the more traditional option I might have made a different choice because in the end it was a toss up between Johns Hopkins (SAIS) and Stanford. Stanford in those days had a very flush fellowship program. My parents had paid my way through college but they were not in a position to cover graduate school. Meanwhile, Stanford had Ford Foundation grants for all those admitted to certain liberal arts programs. I would love to be able to say that I had a real sense of what a Stanford education represented, but I had never seen the place. I knew it was a good school but so, too, were the others. The decision was made without a great deal of forethought. In the end, I was very happy with my choice of Stanford.

Q: By the way, at any of this time had the Foreign Service ever crossed your radar?

TONGOUR: Yes it did. I failed to mention that when I was a senior I had also applied for a Fulbright grant to spend a year in Finland and had taken the Foreign Service exam. I was 20 years old; I was young. I took the written exam and passed it and then took the oral. . This was 1968. I'm stressed this because the tests have changed many times since then, as have attitudes towards hiring different categories of applicants. In that particular year and perhaps for many years thereafter, the attitude toward hiring women for the Foreign Service, was not, I would say, overwhelmingly favorable or enlightened. . Or let me rephrase this. There had long been a few women in the Foreign Service, but they were the exceptions and they were exceptional. W I took the oral exam, it seemed that every third question dealt with my social life. They would never would ask such questions today but in that era they would, for example, inquire: Miss Tongour, what would you do if you married? And do you have a serious boyfriend? And have you thought of the implications for your family life were you to join the Foreign Service? After several such questions, I probably shot myself in the foot by saying, "I guess if I were absolutely desperate I would marry a Foreign Service officer" . I did not like the tenor of the questions and wasn't very diplomatic in my response. I mention this only to give a flavor of how things have changed.

Q: But also to give a flavor too to the attitude at the time. One was, if a woman married she left the Foreign Service.

TONGOUR: That is right.

Q: This was actually not complete written in steel but it was accepted.

TONGOUR: Well, I actually knew of several cases, including the wife of a boss of mine who had had to leave the Service once she got married. Years later she was allowed to return.

Q: Yes. But also so, I mean, if you approved a woman you were basically saying yes, she might be here for awhile and then leave. And there has always been a higher attrition rate but in those days it was very high so you in a way you were almost looking at somebody and saying will she get married, you know.

TONGOUR: That's right.

Q: I served on a panel but we have gone beyond that but this is in the mid '70s but still, I mean, you could not get it out of your mind because you said gosh, she is a very attractive woman but will she get married.

TONGOUR: And so 10 years later - and this is a good segue - after I finished college, attended graduate school and taught for a few years, I took the Foreign Service exam again. This time I passed and without any such questions; if I recall correctly, the panel focused on the Horn of Africa instead. Interestingly enough, after telling me I passed, the examiners did ask why I had waited so long to take the test a second time (in that period the examiners told you the results the same day). I explained what I had been doing during the interval but also allowed as how the attitudes toward admitting women and the questions asked of them were quite different. To their credit, the examiners interviewing me acknowledged that this was the case.

Q: Yes, I would say around '74 is about when things really switched.

TONGOUR: I understand that women were discussed on their husband's evaluation form at least until 1972. In any event, I did consider the Foreign Service but put it aside for a few years.

Q: Okay, I think probably this is a good place to stop. So we are going to pick this up in 1968.

TONGOUR: Alright. Off to California.

Q: Okay. Today is the 26th of November, 2007. Nadia, Stanford 1968. What was the campus- In the first place, how did Stanford impress you and then let us talk about the campus life and what was going on then.

TONGOUR: Having spent four years in the very green environment in Williamsburg - not in terms of environmental issues though we were aware of them but rather in terms of foliage - in a traditional college campus town, I really had no idea what to expect at Stanford. When I first arrived in California in September, the dry season, I was amazed at how brown the campus was, and my initial reaction was not all that positive. Visually I didn't find Stanford all that attractive at first. How things - and one's tastes - change. Today, I find Stanford a beautiful campus and I love the golden California hills which initially struck me as strangely drab.

Q: Yes, that was mine. I went there after being here for some time and I went on a sort of recruiting trip or something and I was sort of struck by gee, this is not, you know, it is just kind of dry.

TONGOUR: Well it was. When I arrived, after having driven across country with a friend, I remember thinking: how does one adjust to it? As a graduate student you found your own housing and more or less fended for yourself. I remember renting a cottage from a very devout Mormon family - my first encounter with Mormonism. The parents themselves had attended Stanford and not left the area. I quickly learned there were many like them, people who had gone to Stanford and stayed in that environment, creating a somewhat "down on the farm" image, which Stanford capitalized on, calling itself the "farm". That was in contrast, at least up until 1968, to Berkeley, which had always been perceived as more urban and a bit bohemian even prior to the counterculture era - avant garde and somewhat odd, from the Stanford perspective. But Stanford went through its own metamorphosis in that period.

Q: Well, were you sort of warned or leery about heading to California during the- you were not too far from Haight-Ashbury and all that; were your parents concerned about their little girl going there?

TONGOUR: For good or for bad, my parents were not then very aware of the whole Haight-Ashbury scene. It became well known in certain quarters but it was still in the "almost happening" mode and too new for them to be fully conscious of it, plus they saw me as somewhat of a gypsy in any case. And they did not really have a strong sense of Palo Alto in relation to San Francisco at that point. What was quite interesting was that within a matter of a few months after my arrival, there was considerable agitation on campus, partly related to the war and partly to the treatment of a fairly radical faculty member named Bruce Franklin, who acquired some national notoriety on account of his leading a protest march on a campus computer facility deemed to be contributing to the war effort. The connection between Stanford's computers and what was going on in the war was not totally clear, but they were perceived as being part of the old "military industrial complex". And the campus was abuzz; there were study groups and public speakers agitating on one level or another against government policy. We were all caught up in it to a certain extent, even those who did not come from a very activist background.

Q: Was there- At Berkeley you had a very vague dividing line between sort of the followers, the campers on who were not really Berkeley students but who were getting into the campus and all to protest or to hang out or something. Was that...This is tape two, side one with Nadia Tongour. Yes.

TONGOUR: Stanford was just far enough away from the downtown that you had to make a little effort to get from campus to town or vice verse. And Palo Alto certainly wasn't a natural breeding ground, if you will, for radicalism. However, there was a general "evolution" of consciousness, even among students were not particularly radical, prompting a greater degree of awareness and engagement in political activities of the day, including participation in teach-ins and sit-ins. I myself got tear gassed once just once for participating in what was supposed to be a peaceful walk towards the administrative building. So, it was a time of ferment.

Q: Well, normally a grad student is somebody kind of aloof from what kind of happened. What about you all, the grad students?

TONGOUR: Perhaps that would normally have been the case (and perhaps was true in the business school, though even among the professional schools there was some involvement), but as a student of history and particularly for one focusing on revolutionary movements since the 19th century, it all seemed quite relevant. Frankly, I was not into any of the more radical activities, and some people really did carry things too far. But at that point in time, there was truly widespread disaffection with U.S. foreign policy. I was not thinking of going into the Foreign Service at that moment, and my friends and I were not happy with the way the war was going.

Q: What about campus life? Were people smoking pot and all that sort of thing?

TONGOUR: Well, let me go a step further and mention that when I had my Foreign Service security clearance interview some years later the question arose. I should point out that we were all aware that the worst thing in terms of the clearance process was to be blackmailable. Secondly, it would have been extremely difficult to have lived in California in 1969 or '71 or '72 and not been at least exposed to pot. When I was I asked in my security interview, I answered quite honestly saying I had tried it on occasion but could take it or leave it. Actually, it was not illegal in California at the time. Possession was not considered an infraction, but at most a misdemeanor and it was all pervasive at social events.

Q: We will move to the studies in a minute but while we are on the life, did you find that the life a lot sort of freer, easier than at William and Mary?

TONGOUR: Definitely, but generally in a good way. n a sort of a hedonistic sense. For example, I lived in several different housing situations including on my own, with friends, and at one point in a co-ed house. The co-ed house had a very strict moral code with no hanky panky in the house among the residents. Yet, it was called a commune - we cooked together, shared a great deal and became close friends. From that experience, I encountered quite a range of people, from the extreme left politically to the extreme right, from the most bizarre to the strait-laced. California had a very accepting climate, and for me, it allowed me to feel very much at home. I often tell people that that's when I truly became an American. .

Q: Was there any reflection of what was happening in Europe, particularly in France during that time or not? I mean, was there sort of a bubbling feeling of the students are going to take over?

TONGOUR: It would have been interesting to consider this question if I had gone to graduate school in the east. I think my answer would have been different, especially since I had already spent some time in Europe earlier on my own. But California is far enough removed from Europe as a mind set that I do not think that we were very aware that European youth were "in revolt", beyond the more general awareness that people everywhere seemed opposed to U.S. foreign policy, and we tended to agree with them on many points.

Q: Well, let us talk about the studies. Were you involved with the Hoover Institute?

TONGOUR: I was, in fact.

Q: The Hoover Institute is quite a- well, it is a unique organization which has both sort of this great collection about revolutions and all, particularly in Russia and all, at the same time being sort of an arch conservative think tank. Tell me about your experiences there.

TONGOUR: Well first let me back up to say that this was not my first encounter with arch conservatives inasmuch as I had spent a summer in college working for a very conservative South Carolina congressman on what was then known as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). But as I mentioned early, my primary field in graduate school was Russian history, which required considerable research at the Hoover Institution, particularly when I reached the point of researching my dissertation topic, which dealt with ï¿½migrï¿½ diplomacy. Specifically, I focused on the efforts of a group of ambassadors appointed by the interim Kerensky government, who in late 1917 found themselves in Western Europe at the outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution and who subsequently sought to influence the policies of European governments vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. I mention this now because the Hoover Institution Library was the repository for several major collections that I used in my dissertation research. In particular, one Russian ambassador named Maklakov, who arrived at his post in Paris literally on the day of the Russian Revolution, and who became sort or the "ring leader" for the ambassadorial group seeking to influence European opinion, donated his extensive archives to the Hoover Institute. Therefore, I eventually spent a lot of time at Hoover doing dissertation research. Then too, at a later point in my graduate career (after I had taken my oral exams and had begun my own research) I obtained a part-time job working for an author you probably have heard of named Bertram Wolfe, who wrote a number of books, including Three Who Made a Revolution, about Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin. During this period, he was a senior fellow at Hoover and I was his "research" assistant. Since he was then writing his own memoirs, I hesitate to use the term "research assistant" because he clearly knew more about his life than I ever could. But I did help out with general research on the period in question (the 1920s and on) part-time for a year while simultaneously doing my own research. .

Q: What was his background?

TONGOUR: He had a fascinating background and was representative of the world of so many neo-conservatives today, namely from the world of the "god that failed". In other words, he and others of his ilk had been extreme leftists in their youth and then shifted 180 degrees. So he had been a "wobbly", a member of the International Workers of the World. He had also been a communist party member in his younger years, and during a "red scare" period in the 20s, he and his wife moved to Mexico where he got to know Trotsky and became friends with the artists Diego Rivera, Frieda Kahlo and others. But he eventually broke with the communists because of what he termed "American exceptionalism". As he explained it, he had no major objections to Stalin's policies in the Soviet Union, but he did not want America to have to follow the Soviet line. So essentially he broke from the party, and when he did so he gradually became more conservative - anti-communist - over the years. When I worked for him, he was writing a multi volume life story but he hadn't gotten much further than his boyhood in Brooklyn and early years at City College of New York while I was there. Still, it was fascinating working for him and meeting his associates, such as Sydney Hook and others..

Q: Kerensky? Was he there? .

TONGOUR: When I first arrived at Stanford, Kerensky was still alive and at Hoover, but I only saw him infrequently and generally at a distance. We never had any real conversations; he was quite elderly and not often around.

Q: How did you take to research and being a research assistant but also to your own work?

TONGOUR: I have to say that this was somewhat of a muddle. While I very much enjoyed working at the Institute, and had certainly enjoyed classes at Stanford, my own research was fragmented, spread out if you will, over a number of years. Partly this was due to the fact that I had taken some months off to travel. Then I wound up working for Bertram Wolfe part-time, and later still I obtained a teaching position at one of the California State University, in a town called Chico. Consequently, I wound up teaching for nine months, then returning to the Bay Area to work on the dissertation and then repeat the cycle a few more times.

Q: What were you teaching?

TONGOUR: Partly in my own field. I was very really fortunate in being hired for what was called a one year "leave replacement position" which meant that the person who normally taught Russian history would be on leave and I would replace him for the year. Well, two-thirds of the way through the Department Chair informed me that while the Russian History professor would be returning, the Department also wanted me to stay. He said that if I returned, I could teach a variety of courses - Western Civ, Modern France, basically fill in the blank. So I did. I came back for a semester because they only had funds for one term and then returned to the Bay Area for more dissertation work. Chico subsequently obtained additional funds, and I went back for several more years - teaching various history courses and working on the dissertation in the summers. This basically went on for four years, but I was finally was able to pull it all together and finish the dissertation. As I said, it was a chopped up process although one I enjoyed.

Q: Chico. What was it like?

TONGOUR: Chico is about two hours and 40 minutes north of San Francisco, above Sacramento. A charming town, particularly now. Today it has all amenities one might night - coffee houses, good bookstores, etc, - but in those days it was more limited, a good school but not a great one, with somewhat of a "party school" reputation.

Q: Was it connected- it was close to an agricultural area, was that-?

TONGOUR: Yes. But what it really had formerly been a teacher's college in its early years. I assume you are familiar with the tier approach of the California university system.

Q: More or less; you might put it in so we will have it.

TONGOUR: California has a wonderful university system with three main tiers, with the many branches of the University of California at the top and the most difficult to get into. Essentially, one has to have an A or an A-plus average across the board because so many students in California would like to attend schools such as Berkeley, Santa Cruz and so on. Then, there is the California State tier, which nowadays probably requires a B average. Finally, there are all the community and junior colleges. Chico was a school which had bright students who for a variety of reasons may not have gone to one of the UC schools as well as students with somewhat lower grades, but who usually had a wonderful college experience. Chico was well known for its "Pioneer Week", an annual event in which everyone dressed as pioneers, built pioneers structures, and had a wonderful time. I think in those days Playboy ranked Chico as one of the top party schools in the nation. So that provides a bit of the flavor. My own experience there was great. I enjoyed my colleagues and some of my students; plus, I was commuting back and forth to the Bay Area quite ab it, both for academic and personal reasons.

Q: How did you find the students?

TONGOUR: I subsequently taught at a more prestigious college that overall had a better quality (in terms of academic performance) of students. However, at Chico, I found quite a range between the best and brightest to the lesser lights. You encountered the entire academic range, and when they were good, they were outstanding. But there were also a large number of students who did not know what they were doing, where they were going but simply thought they should be in college.

Q: Well, all this time you were on the professor track, in your mind.

TONGOUR: That is right. I was on the professor track. I also very much thought of California as home. At the same time I was well aware of the then current downturn in the academic job market. This was a sad fact for a whole generation of graduate students at that time, namely we had entered grad school at the end of the 60s, with a bit of cockiness about our prospects from having been repeatedly told how wonderful we were and by the mid to late 70s, there were fewer opportunities in academe.

Q: Well, you were under 30, were you not?

TONGOUR: Sure.

Q: And, you know, I mean, you were absolved from original sin.

TONGOUR: Exactly. We were the boomer generation, and many of us had wonderful university experiences, which we assumed would continue. I early on realized that I loved the classroom experience. I loved teaching and the interaction with students and colleagues. The research was fine but I was not really driven to produce a seminal work in my field. And I had always been interested in foreign affairs. As I previously mentioned I had, in fact, taken the Foreign Service exam my senior year. What I discovered early on in graduate school is that the academic job market in liberal arts had basically disappeared. I was lucky to have had a one-year leave replacement position that turned into a four year stint. Many of my friends quickly discovered that there were no jobs in their particular fields. Even in my case, each year at Chico there was considerable uncertainty as to whether funding would be available to hire me for another semester or year. So during my third year there, I started considering other options, specifically revisiting the idea of the Foreign Service, and I retook the Foreign Service exam and this time passed both the written and the oral.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions from the oral this time?

TONGOUR: One question had to do with naming several books that had been influential in terms of my understanding of American foreign policy. I recall thinking the panel was probably shocked that I had put Fulbright's "The Arrogance of Power" into the hopper as a significant work, but as long as one could justify it as being influential or important, the panel accepted it, and it did, in fact, influence a generation of students who were against the war. I also remember that unlike the previous exam, they did not ask me any questions about my personal life. It was a much more positive experience.

Q: While you were in the academic thing did you get any feel for the politics of academia and did this, for many people this is sort of the turnoff. But I was wondering whether you-

TONGOUR: It was definitely a turnoff. At the time, I was in a long term relationship with someone who had studied at the Stanford Business School and had a much more pragmatic view of the world, as did many of his friends. Later, after I joined the Foreign Service, I used to joke that there was a real spectrum in terms of how one measured success and productivity. In the business world, they produce something - widgets or whatever - and the bottom line is monetary. In government we produce programs, papers and sometimes policies, but in academia one is judged largely by one's words and often one's your rapier-like wit. Sometimes that can be very devastating. There can be a lot of backbiting in academia and a fair amount of posturing as well. So the good news regarding teaching at a college such as Chico, rather than Harvard, is the relative lack of pretentiousness and academic intrigue or inter/intra -departmental infighting one frequently encounters elsewhere. Towards the end of my time at Chico, I not only took the Foreign Service exam but also, almost as a matter of course, sent out my resume to several other colleges. Much to my surprise, I received an invitation to come to upstate New York for an interview at Hamilton College, a small school in the village of Clinton, New York.

Q: Oh, I know Hamilton.

TONGOUR: And, this, too, was for a one year leave replacement position and in my field. I do not know if I mentioned this earlier but in my family we always had as slogan," finish in beauty", and I thought, well, the State Department takes a long time, especially in those days with drawn-out security clearances, so, perhaps, I should accept Hamilton's offer and finish my professional life in academe "in beauty" at a nice liberal arts college in my field. And since my I personal life had changed, I no longer had as strong a need to remain in California.

Q: Your business major went on to business and you went on to academics.

TONGOUR: That's really a long story but for the sake of this discussion, I could say that I knew I probably needed to move on. So when Hamilton offered me the job, I accepted. As I said, the State Department had not yet gotten back to me with its own offer. So I drove across country once again. One of the nice aspects of being from the east and studying in the west was that I got to know a lot about the highways of America. I drove across country many times and tried to vary my routes. This time I took a very northern route to arrive in the charming village of Clinton and the very nice Hamilton College campus, a school with a couple of thousand students. I wound up living in a house that had earlier been used in the filming of the movie One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.

Q: Oh yes, oh yes, this is Ken Kesey's book about mental illness.

TONGOUR: That is right, .and it was filmed right there. Hamilton was a very positive teaching experience. The students were a bit different as a group from what I had encountered at Chico. I liked the students at both schools, but after having spent so many years in the often "counterculture" environment of California environment, I found it a bit strange to teach students who tended to be more conservative than the faculty. Many students then at Hamilton were very "practical" in their orientation and concerned about their future - making computer science course very popular. Overall, they seemed less idealistic than what I was used to, but then again the economy and the times had changed. .

Now we are in 1979 and a couple of months into the school year the State Department contacted me and invited me to come on board - in three weeks - after not having been in touch for many months. I explained that teaching college wasn't quite like working for a corporation where you could simply give two weeks notice. I also indicated that while I was certainly interested, I couldn't just leave in the middle of the school year, and certainly not within a few weeks. And the gentleman who made the offer - I'll never forget - said well we will keep you on the list but we cannot promise to get back to you at the end of the school year. I answered that I would then have to take my chances since I couldn't simply abandon my job at Hamilton. So, to make a long story short, I had no idea whether the State Department would repeat its offer but two-thirds of the way through the school year, the chairman of my department at Hamilton invited me back for another year, to teach other courses such as modern France, modern Germany - fill in the blank. And all of a sudden I knew that I did not want to do that. It had nothing to do with Hamilton but I had already had a similar experience at Chico and was beginning to tire of one year "leave replacement positions" being extended indefinitely. I also have to admit that I had a problem with the weather in upstate New York. Having grown up in the south and then lived in California, I had never been so cold in my life as I had been that year. I remember once going to a movie in the nearby town of Utica and on leaving the theater, some distance from my car, I ran and even so my fingers were frozen. When I got into the car, after having just seen a movie about sunny California, I sat there for some time wondering what on earth I was doing there. So in the end, m line, I said thank you but no, I will return to California. I wasn't sure whether the State Department would offer me another position or if I would find a job, but I felt as though I was for once casting my fate to the wind..

Q: Well, you mentioned something about the student body being more conservative. On my 50th anniversary graduating- I graduated from a school very similar to Hamilton called Williams.

TONGOUR: Oh yes.

Q: And I remember talking to a professor who was saying you know, I think he taught philosophy, and he said these are very bright students but you feel like you are turning out investment bankers and this is not a very inspiring crew.

TONGOUR: And I think Williams may have been more inspiring than Hamilton. I say this only because Williams was often more highly ranked among small liberal arts colleges. Many of the students at Hamilton that I knew had at some point indicated they had really wanted to go to Williams.

Q: It is usually in U.S. News and World Report; the ranking is usually one or two each year among small colleges.

TONGOUR: That is right. There were many students who, when asked where else did you apply or want to attend would indicate that Williams had been their first choice with Hamilton a close second. Actually, Hamilton has produced many, many fine diplomats, and my experience there served me well in a later incarnation. It was a lovely campus, and I still have friends from there and we do visit. perhaps there were not enough hellions or eccentrics for that matter.

Q: No, it tends to be, you know, too many people who rank very high does not necessarily make for a good mix.

TONGOUR: Exactly. As I said, there were times when you just wanted to shake them up a bit. And in fact, I volunteered to teach a course of "contemporary terrorism". Hamilton had a fascinating program then which I wish more colleges had, though I'm not sure it even still exists at Hamilton, namely a three-week term in January in which students are allowed to travel, study abroad, or take courses that were often a bit off the "major track". It could be photography or Russian literature, and this provided faculty their own opportunity to refresh their brains by offering a course of some interest both to themselves and their students. So I proposed and taught a course on modern terrorism.

Q: Oh boy.

TONGOUR: I really wasn't being prescient, but simply interested in the topic because Russian history was filled with all sorts of anarchists and revolutionaries.

Q: The Palestinians were doing their thing.

TONGOUR: They were. As was the Bader-Meinhof Gang.

Q: And the Red Army in Japan.

TONGOUR: That's true. At that point, however, "modern terrorism" was oriented more toward European groups and to some extent the PLO, rather than the groups we're seized with today. And the course fit very nicely into a three-week timeframe. week course. We did not have quite the legacy we do today; now such a course would take considerably longer. I found it to be a fascinating teaching and research experience for me. Overall, Hamilton was a good experience as well, but when I left, I liked the idea that for once in my life I was not programmed and really did not know what I'd be doing next, beyond visiting my family in the south and then driving West to California.

Q: Get away from the snow, of course, by that time it was spring, I guess.

TONGOUR: It snowed on June 6th , not a great deal but enough to make me ready for a warmed clime. . So I drove back to California and house-sat the home of some friends while I started looking around for jobs. My parents called a few weeks later to let me know that I had received a letter from the State Department, and I asked them to open it. As luck would have it, the lettered invited me to enter a Foreign Service class starting in little more than a month. I was very torn. On one hand, I was clearly interested, but having just driven all the way back to California, I also wanted to see what I might do there. So I called the Department and asked whether it was absolutely necessary to begin in August. Much to my surprise, my contact replied that I could, in fact, enter in late September, instead. As it turned out, this had little to do with me but rather was due to upcoming changes in the overall State Department personnel system at the end of 1980. So that was that. Obviously, there was initial indecision and "agonizing" over what to do, but in the end, I decided to take yet another drive across country and give the Foreign Service a try.

Q: Alright, you started then in September of 1980?

TONGOUR: End of September.

Q: End of September. Okay, how would you characterize, describe your basic officer's course, in other words the A-100 course?

TONGOUR: As is so often the case when one is a freshman at anything one winds up bonding with a core group of classmates. My A-100 class was fairly close. It also produced a number of success stories and a number of ambassadors. It was a very collegial and nice group of people. But I had no idea at the time how many of them already came from within the "family". these people came from the family. In other words, I later found out that many of my classmates' fathers had been Foreign Service Officers, even ambassadors, and that one of my best friends in that class was herself the daughter of an ambassador. So there were a number of people who came from this world. There were also a large number who came from at SAIS or Fletcher. Yet, there were others of us who came from more eclectic backgrounds - from Peace Corps, law school or even teaching, but the majority seemed to had entered shortly after studying international relations in graduate school.

Q: How about mix, male, female, women, minorities?

TONGOUR: I think yes, here is an issue. We have come a long way. But still, within that A-100 class the majority were male, white male, but maybe not as many "to the manor born" as had been the case in earlier generations. There was a smattering of males who were non-white - at least one Hispanic and one from a Chinese background. There were a good number of women compared to years past gone by but what was noteworthy about the women was that overwhelmingly they were assigned to the consular cone. I happened to have been assigned to the political cone and that was considered highly unusual for a woman then. In fact, later on there was a class action suit involving some women from my class who, believed they had had the same background as many of the men and yet - we had no choice then - were consigned to the consular cone. So that was probably one fundamental difference from today.

Q: How did you find the introduction, the training?

TONGOUR: I thought it was very good. What was particularly interesting was the actual "assignment process" to determine where we would be sent. Unlike in future assignments, we were given a modified "bid list" with only a fixed number of postings included. In my case, I really wanted to learn something new. I had been teaching Russian history, focusing on Europe for years. I actually wanted to learn Spanish and go to a Spanish-speaking country. Given the need for visa officers in Mexico and throughout Latin America, it was easy to get what I wanted. As for the training, the five or six weeks of A-100 training, followed by the introductory consular course and language training for Spanish at the Foreign Service Institute, that all gave me a good 7 or 8 months of training before I left for post. I thought it was a good system.

Q: So you were leaning, you were pointing towards the Western Hemisphere.

TONGOUR: Well, I certainly recall putting Mexico City and Buenos Aires high on my list. Our abbreviated list had a handful more postings than we had people in our class. Quite honestly, I no longer remember the exact numbers but to the best of my recollection, Moscow was not on the list.

Q: Usually it would not be for the first-

TONGOUR: No. Even had it been, I would have to admit that after having just spent a winter in upstate New York, I was not looking for a posting in a cold climate just then. Meanwhile, the notion of learning about a new region and a new language was definitely appealing.

Q: Well tell me, I am trying to pick up an attitude. When you were there, could you- were you picking up an attitude both in general and more specifically the Foreign Service about where women were going? I mean, this was 1980, you know, things were really changing. How did you feel about that?

TONGOUR: It did not occur to me. Having done much of what I wanted to do as a woman up to this point I was not as conscious of the women's issue in the Foreign Service as I would become a very short time later. I did not know, for example, of the tradition of including (until 1972) wives in their husbands' performance evaluation> Nor did I know that women officers had been expected to resign if they got married. That had changed by 1980, but "different" attitudes were still apparent. And here are some examples.

One centered on concern over protocol.. I remember in the A-100 class a Protocol Officer spoke to us about how protocol had evolved for women and how previously wives were expected to call on different women in other missions. There was a whole ritual associated with turning down the corners of their calling cards to indicate that they had visited. I vividly recall giggling at this description and finding it slightly off-putting. Later when talking to a friend who had been raised in the system about the presentation, she was appalled that I - along with other colleagues - had not found the protocol discussion terribly edifying and had even laughed about the calling cards. For me, this was a different world..

A second difference dealt with vocabulary, both the specific acronyms and the somewhat different usage of English terms. For example, I remember one of our A-100 instructors repeatedly using the phrase, "flag it to me." I had no idea what "flat it to me" meant. I no longer have to think about it but we actually don't even use that phrase much anymore. But there were a number of terms that remain part of our vernacular that others do not necessarily understand. And even some of the common terms we use today, such as our reference to working on a desk or having a "portfolio" have a different connotation in other professions.

Q: Well I, as I do these oral histories I fairly frequently interrupt somebody, could you explain what DCM (deputy chief of mission) means. What is a demarche?

TONGOUR: Or chargï¿½.

Q: Or chargï¿½. You know, you _____ every profession has this vocabulary and I try to make it a little easier for the researchers.

You know, something I did not ask you before, as I have been doing these oral histories, I started with people actually coming in in the 20s but basically after World War II, and I happen to be straddling and I consider probably the most significant social movement that involves slightly over 50 percent of our population and that is the role of women. During your time at the universities how did women's lib hit you? Let us take it up to the time you got in the Foreign Service.

TONGOUR: Let me say that while I answered honestly before, I undoubtedly omitted some important points that I may have not thought about in years, namely that while on one level we were certainly treated as equals - admitted to graduate programs and professional activities. On another level the faculty I studied under came from a different era and cultural milieu.
Specifically, a number of my professors were from Eastern or Central Europe. They could be quite charming but they essentially saw "the ladies' us as one of two types of women. Either we were to be figuratively patted on the head and expected to serve spaghetti at the student get togethers or, without using pejorative terms, we were effectively "neutered".

Q: Almost asexual.

TONGOUR: Asexual is right, or "honorary" men, much as some women diplomats are treated in parts of the Middle East. For the most part, it was only gently patronizing with women students treated as charming additions to the group. They did not deny our intelligence but, not unlike an earlier Foreign Service attitude, they assumed we probably would not last and would give up our careers for family or other reasons. And so there was not quite the same emphasis on ensuring we got the same breaks. On a certain level we did fall into the "spaghetti making category". By the same token, there was a bit of resentment for the attitudes associated with it. We were becoming increasingly more aware, conscious if you will, of the women's movement, and it made a difference in our lives. My own circle of friends were drawn to an Australian writer named Germaine Greer, who spoke at Stanford while we were there. I remember that she was beautifully dressed and very well put together which prompted one of the more militant women in the audience to question why she wore makeup or fancy clothes. And she replied, "I do it for myself". She didn't deny that she was influenced by her environment but noted she would not feel better about herself had she been slovenly. My friends and I were more or less of that ilk. We were trying to push the envelope and be more independent but by the same token, we carried our baggage from the past as well.

Back to the Foreign Service and my first tour in Mexico City. Shortly after I arrived in Mexico, the country had its first currency devaluation in many years. In fact, within a matter of a few months the peso went from 26 to well over 100 to the dollar, and there was a lag of at least six months before prices began to catch up. What that meant was that a junior officer making a pittance by comparison to today could do almost anything. We could travel at very little cost all over the country, and we did. Flying to Acapulco cost roughly $10 or the equivalent. We could eat out wherever we wanted - and afford it. As a result we had a sort of a roving band of young people who got together to explore different aspects of the country, eating out frequently and traveling a great deal. It was a wonderful time for us in that regard. But it was fascinating in other respects as well. For example, within the Embassy context, we had a "play reading" group, organized by four of us women who were from different agencies We, the organizers, were quite junior in rank but over time we wound up inviting various people to take parts in the readings and we staged the events in the homes (generally larger) of more senior officers. We would rehearse the play over a weekend and then put on the show on a Sunday evening. These events were really quite popular. As a result we got to know a wide range of Embassy personnel and made many new friends in the process. One of our actors became quite famous, or perhaps I should say infamous, namely Rick (Aldrich) Ames, now known for his espionage activities, but then simply a good actor and one of those taking part in the readings.

Personally, this was a positive period, marked by a close circle of friends, a good social life, considerable travel all around the country - not to mention some unusual and interesting assignments during the tour. The ambassador at the time was John Gavin, an actor and close friend of President Reagan; however some Mexican officials were not thrilled at the prospect of having a Spanish-speaking actor as the American ambassador. They had hoped for someone more "serious" or with more gravitas along the lines of Sen. Jacob Javits. Instead, they got Gavin, who came with two Special Assistants.

Q: The temple dogs, I think they were called.

TONGOUR: You have heard of this group.

Q: Talk about it.

TONGOUR: You mean the general impression?

Q: Yes, yes; talk about how this worked.

TONGOUR: The situation was somewhat unusual in that most ambassadors don't have two such assistants, who were also political appointees. One of the two was okay; he subsequently married a close friend of mine, and we remain on friendly terms. The other was more noteworthy in the negative sense because he created what could only be called a nightmarish situation for many of the staff. My involvement stemmed from the fact that he decided that the Front Office needed not only these special assistants but staff assistants, drawn from the junior officer pool, as well. These staff assistants would be comparable to staff assistants - preparing "Night Notes", assembling papers, etc. The Special Assistants would pick from among the young consular officers and "honor" the designee by allowing the person selected to work in the Front Office for three or four months at a time. I was selected among the first crop to do this. However, it was not exactly a happy environment since one of the so-called "temple dogs" was without a doubt one of the meaner human beings I've run into; fortunately, he was not a career Foreign Service officer. Actually, he had started out in the Foreign Service, left, and then returned as a "Schedule C" appointee. He reduced a number of people to tears. In that regard, I was lucky. Still, as my tenure in that position was drawing to a close, he very pointedly told me that if I ever talked about anything I witnessed in the Front Office, he could ruin my Foreign Service career. Although there really wasn't that much to report, and after all these years the threat is meaningless, it, nevertheless, left a bad taste in my month. Fortunately, my last six months at post were spent in a very different and much more satisfying office. I wound up working for the Consul General. Mexico City had an unusual organizational structure. First of all, there was the ambassador with his two special assistants and a staff assistant, and there there were two Consuls General - both of whom were excellent.

Q: I understand that the special assistants sort of bypassed the DCM.

TONGOUR: Absolutely. And the DCM was an okay guy but he was often by-passed and not treated much better, from what I could see, than the lowly junior staff assistant. So it was not a happy situation. Paradoxically, the negative environment in the Front Office contribute to a great deal of bonding and good morale among the rest of the staff, with everyone else in agreement about how horrible the management was.

Q: What was your impression of Gavin and his operation? I realize this was your first time in the Foreign Service but what were you picking up?

TONGOUR: Gavin wanted to be taken seriously. He did not want to be seen as merely a handsome actor. Actually, Gavin had also gone to Stanford and there were several people other Embassy staff who had also attended Stanford, and Gavin took a picture with us as a group. Overall, he probably was not a bad ambassador, especially considering the expectations people had about him. I know he tried to bring high-ranking Administration officials, Senators and heads of Agencies to Mexico. I remember a visit by Charlie Wick, the head of USIA, as well as some "literati" such as James Michener and E.L. Doctorow who came down as part of a cultural exchange program.

There were a number of VIPs who came down for one reason or another, but I think you hit the nail on the head in noting that junior officers learn more about the dynamics of a post and perhaps less about the substance of bilateral policy. In other words, I was not privy to what the Ambassador might have said to the Foreign Ministry on any particular issue, and even in those instances where I might have had some insights, it was too long ago to remember the details. What I do recall is that he was a man very conscious of his surroundings and that which affected him personally. Let's put it this way. He would not have been my candidate for an assignment to a hardship post, because he did not deal well with discomfort. For example, he insisted on having the whole air filtration system of the Embassy modified so as to have only pure air in his office, and so on. Clearly, a certain degree of self-importance in this regard. But he was perfectly amiable to those whom he encountered. In terms of junior staff, that did not happen very often since he wasn't the type to spend much time down on the visa line. A lot of the scut work was left to the DCM.

Q: Was his wife a factor, Gavin's wife, or not?

TONGOUR: A factor? She came to visit periodically but she, Constance Powers, was a television soap opera star as well as an actress in various films. She definitely added a touch of glamour to the place and in that sense could be seen as a factor. I recall other celebrities coming down with her, such as Bianca Jagger, who had a genuine interest in Central America. So to be sure, there was a certain air of glitziness that accompanied their presence at post.

Q: Okay. Let us get down in the trenches. In the first place, do you have any consular stories?

TONGOUR: Lots of consular stories.

Q: Well, let us have a few.

TONGOUR: First of all, let me tell you that the recent Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs Maura Hardy was on the visa line with me then,. Interestingly enough, Maura was also one of the few women in our group who began her career as a political cone officer. However, she really enjoyed consular work and sought to switch cones. And of course, this was not difficult. Consular Affairs was delighted to have her. Meanwhile, among the consular stories I vividly recall was one having to do with the consular training we received at FSI. One day our trainer for visas told us that undoubtedly at some point in our visa experience we would break the law - not necessarily out of fraud or for some other horrible reason, but we would break the rules all the same. His point was that we needed to understand what and why we were doing doing so. That made a strong impression on me. Frankly at first I wondered what he was talking about. I had no intention of breaking the law - and apart from one possible exception, probably never did (at least not knowingly). Early on, however, I got what we called a "visa turnback", meaning I issued a visa to someone who was turned back at the border. It turns out I gave a visa to an old woman, who was turned back because she had a police record in Texas, where apparently she had been a prostitute in her youth. Well, my colleagues found this hysterically funny and teased me endlessly about my giving a visa to someone with a record of "moral turpitude".

Some months later, I was working away on the visa line when a young man applied for a non-immigrant visa. I remember he said he was from the state of Chiapas in the far south of Mexico. He also said he had walked all the way to Mexico City in hopes of obtaining a visa to spend three months picking lettuce in the Salinas Valley (California). I explained that we did not have visas for such work (the rules on that score have changed over the years but then there was no such category). He insisted he wanted to be "legal", that he could have paid a "coyote" to get him across but he had a new wife and wanted to return home and build here a house in Chiapas after working three or four months in California. I must say that rarely did I find myself believing stories of this type. I got to be savvy about spotting them for what they were. Yet for some reason I believed this young man truly wanted to come back to beautiful Chiapas and would try to do so; whether he would succeed or not was another story. I wound up giving him a one entry, three month visa, think to myself that the immigration authorities probably would not let him enter, but inwardly I wished him luck. I hoped he could fulfill his ream, work three months and then return home. So this was the one time in my Foreign Service career I may have not strictly adhered to the rules but I didn't feel too badly about it. .

Q: Well, we have all, I am a professional consular officer and more than once I have said oh, the hell with it.

TONGOUR: I know. And I am sure you have some wonderful stories to tell. One last anecdote to pass on centered on an old woman or at least one who looked ancient but probably was no more than 45, and who said she had 14 or 15 children. When I jokingly asked whether she hoped to have more, she answered "whatever God will give me" and she seemed to mean it.

Q: Who else was on the line with you, do you recall any of the people?

TONGOUR: I actually do because a number of my co-workers have remained good friends, and that often may be one of the nicest aspects of first tours, because considerable bonding usually occurs among junior officers on the visa line. I mentioned my A-100 friend Frances Jones; she was also assigned to Mexico City. Jonathan Farrar, now our Chief of the Interest Section in Havana was recently my supervisor in the Bureau of Human Rights and Democracy (DRL) where he was the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary. A number of other friends have already retired, but we remain close.

Q: Did you find- was it a little hard at the beginning to say no?

TONGOUR: No, it was the other way around. At the beginning you are fresh out of training and filled with a sense of virtue. There is probably no one tougher on visa applicants than a brand new visa officer. We were sticking to the rules. It is only after you have been around for awhile and have heard so many cockamamie stories that on occasion you feel sympathetic. After a thousand people apply to "visit Chicago strictly to get to know the city in January", someone comes along that simply wants to pick lettuce, you sometimes soften and let them go. I think that you are harder in the beginning as well as slower because you do not trust your own judgment.

Q: Who was your consular general at the time?

TONGOUR: Well, after the less than edifying experience in the Front Office I had the good fortune to work for Larry Lane and MaryAnn Meysenburg who had a somewhat unusual division of responsibilities. Larry Lane was the overall supervisory Consul General for all 13 consulates in Mexico City, and MaryAnn Meysenburg had specific responsibility for Con Gen Merida. By the way, as an example of the "old" Foreign Service, Larry Lane's wife also served at Post but she had had to drop out of the Foreign Service years before because she had married her A-100 classmate, Larry. She was out for a number of years before being able to reenter the service.

Q: Did you get involved in any protection and welfare American services type thing?

TONGOUR: A little bit but basically after my stint in the Front Office, I basically acted as Larry Lane's special assistant, a somewhat unusual assignment as well, focusing more on constituent posts and less on Mexico City. Still, we all had to be duty officers and deal, unfortunately, with death cases and robberies. .

Q: How did, as duty officers how did you view sort of the Mexican system, police, etc., etc.? I mean, so many robberies, things of this nature, what was your impression?

TONGOUR: Well, I saw it more readily just living in Mexico not so much as a duty officer. I mean, we were all very familiar with the issue of Mordida, which is the "bite" or the bribe, which many people wound up paying to avoid being ticketed for alleged moving violations and other minor infractions. Clearly, there was a lot of corruption at the time, which I am sure continues to exist.

Actually, I might mention as a sideline another anecdote about life in Mexico City , a very exciting place to live in those days. I happened to live very close to the Embassy but also near the area known as the Zona Rosa, which was filled with shops and restaurants. When I arrived, officers had to find their own apartments (this has subsequently changed). I do not recall how I stumbled onto my apartment, but I found a place that was only four blocks from the Embassy. When people asked where I would be living, I mentioned the name of the street. It so happened that all the streets in that neighborhood were named after rivers - indeed throughout the city there seemed to be "themes" associated with the names of streets in particular areas. Yet whenever I mentioned the name of "my river", Mexicans would often smile in a somewhat strange manner, leading me to realize that there was something a bit odd about the street which no one seemed to want to explain. It took me a few weeks of living there to discover that only a couple of blocks away from my apartment was a famous rendezvous spot for street walkers. There were certainly other more reputable souls living in the area. Still, there was a fair bit of action in the neighborhood.

Q: Okay. Well then you were there until '83?

TONGOUR: Yes.

Q: How did you feel by that time about the Foreign Service and all?

TONGOUR: At that time I loved it. Like any profession, there were ups and downs, and some bosses were better than others. As I mentioned, however, there was a great deal of camaraderie "in the trenches" and the posting seems to have had a positive impact on many of us. One of my supervisors from that period, who is now well into his 80s, still works part-time at State. As for me, I was fortunate to obtain as my second assignment a position that had greater relevance to my academic background, working in Washington on what was then known as the Soviet Desk.

Q: So you were on the Soviet desk from '83 to when?

TONGOUR: To mid '85.

Q: Well do you want to talk about in the first place, how the Soviet desk was constituted and then we will talk about what you were covering, the developments.

TONGOUR: Actually, I served on the so-called Soviet desk twice, and each tour was quite different. In my first assignment, there were at least four distinct offices under the umbrella of the Soviet Desk. One of these dealt with bilateral relations, which was the office I worked in; another focused on multilateral affairs. A third covered scientific issues, and the fourth, I think, focused on educational and exchange programs. And, of course, there was a small Front Office, then headed by an outstanding Director, named Tom Simons.

He had an excellent career in the Soviet/East European area, including a stint as Ambassador to Poland. I've lost track of him but initially after retiring, he spent some time at Stanford. I had a lot of respect for him, but he definitely came from the traditional Foreign Service background. I think his father had been a diplomat as well, and Tom himself had gone to ivy league schools - Princeton and Harvard I think. So he could be described as being of the old guard. Yet, that said, there was no chore beneath him. If someone needed to dump ashtrays, make copies, or bring in additional chairs for a meeting, he was perfectly willing to help out. So, he represented a super intelligent, big picture thinker who at the same time was able to do whatever needed to be done. In short an excellent boss. Fortunately, my section chief was outstanding as well. As for my own responsibilities, they were somewhat mixed. I had to deal both with security issues, particularly as related to the New Office Building (NOB) being built in Moscow and with questions involving dissidents, particularly religious dissidents. It was an odd mesh.

Q: But both very important at the time.

TONGOUR: That they were. My work also often included many things that did not fall neatly into any one category but were fascinating all the same. But in the case of security, the issue of most critical importance then and subsequently had to do with listening devices and bugs planted in our new compound in Moscow; we were both conscious of these and very concerned about what needed to be do. Obviously, this is a sensitive topic about which I really can't say very much.

Q: Well, at that time, I mean, we were building a new embassy.

TONGOUR: That is right.

Q: And the place was just riddled with listening devices. Was this public knowledge at the time?

TONGOUR: This was a key. It was not public knowledge at that time but became so two or three years later and various congressmen were outraged. Unfortunately, they were under the mistaken impression that the State Department had been in the dark about this. We were well aware of the problem. However, there were differing views within the interagency community as to the best course of action. Does one wait until the building is completed and then take them out or do so piece meal, etc ?. There were various schools of thought on the matter and on policy implications vis-a-vis our relationship with the Soviets. .

There were other issues as well, including the treatment of dissident minority groups. And there was a case I personally got involved with concerning a young would-be defector. The young man was the teen-age son of a high ranking diplomat who was due to return to Moscow. The kid did not want to return to the Soviet Union with his parents..

Q: He was quite young, was he not?

TONGOUR: Yes, he was about 14 or 15 - I no longer remember his exact age. In any case, he ran away - to an American friend's home as I recall - but eventually Soviet Embassy officials "nabbed" with the intention of sending him swiftly back to Moscow. For our part, we tried to submit demarches advising the Soviets not to put the boy on a plane before we had had a chance to ascertain his intentions. Otherwise, we knew that there could be horrible repercussions, not only with regard to human rights concerns but also in terms of our bilateral relationship. But, the Embassy officially refused to accept our demarches. We seemed to be in a stalemate. My supervisor at the time, the Deputy Office Director Lynn Pascoe asked me whether my Russian was good enough to talk to the guard at the Soviet Embassy. After I indicated that it was probably adequate, he asked me to go to the Embassy that evening with a document in hand and essentially insist on giving it to the guard. This, obviously, is not the way demarches are normally delivered. However, I was told that since it was critical that we deliver our message, if it required sliding it under the door, I should do so. I'm sure I was on camera at the old Russian Embassy on 16th Street, where a car dropped me off. After ringing the bell, I spoke with the night guard, telling him I had to leave a document. He clearly did not know what to do with it but eventually took the paper which basically outlined our position - our insistence on interviewing the boy. In the end, they did grant us permission to talk to him at Dulles Airport to ensure that he was returning to the Soviet Union voluntarily. Who knows what he really wanted, but when our then Assistant Secretary for European Affairs - the case had reached that level -Richard Burt interviewed him, he said he wanted to go home.

Q: Well, you know, when you are talking about a 14 of 15 year old kid who is having disputes with his family, you know, it is sort of without question, of course you are going to let him, I mean, you know, you just cannot turn this into something but how do-

TONGOUR: How to avoid the adverse publicity and the problem of public perception that the U.S. Government was sending a kid back to "those commies". It was still the Cold War era after all, and official relations remained somewhat chilly. There is a problem of the public at large saying by God, you are sending a kid back to those communists. It was still a Cold War era.

Q: We had this with, Elian Gonzalez.

TONGOUR: The Cuban kid.

Q: The Cuban kid, where his father was in Cuba and wanted him back and the kid was eight or nine years old and the Cuban American community tried to turn him into a saint or something like that. At a certain point you just realize this humanity and all this; unless you can talk about being really an abusive thing and then you turn it over to the authorities of the country. But it was tricky.

TONGOUR: It really was tricky. And, we were of more than two minds about what was the best approach. From the standpoint of the family, it was best that the son return to the Soviet Union with the family; moreover, as the son of a high-ranking diplomat, he would probably not confront serious repercussions. Undoubtedly, this whole episode had a negative impact on the father's subsequent career. I don't think he secured any other high level postings abroad. Plus, based on later reports, it seems the son had a difficult time readjusting to life in his homeland. In the end, we were all of two or three minds as we watched the kid board the plane and fly off to Moscow.

But it was an interesting, albeit tense, . I stress this now because years later, when I had a second stint on the Soviet Desk, the atmosphere was very different, and the relationship had clearly improved between my first and second tours on the Desk. One final aspect of my first such tour warrant mention, namely that I somehow also had the role of "logistics" person in the office, and as such wound up putting together a lot of the preparatory materials for a visit by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to Washington. Because of the heretofore icy relations combined with factors such as the Soviets shooting down a KAL flight, there had not been an "official" visit by the Soviet Foreign Minister to Washington in years. So we had not "SOP" (standard operating procedures) for the Desk/European Bureau should deal with the visit. So it fell to me to prepare a step-by-step manual concerning who did what - who went to the airport, took part in events, etc. Obviously, the Protocol Office had its own materials but this was in-house for us. It turns out that my handiwork, this manual, was used by the Soviet Desk for a number of subsequent high-ranking visits.

Q: Let us talk about the religious dissidents and all. Were the Pentecostals still in the embassy at the time?

TONGOUR: Yes. There were still one or two Pentecostals living in the Embassy. This had been a very hot issue for some time, but was starting to be less of a point of contention by this time. Yet, the question of "what is to be done" remained. The real issue then was how to assist genuine religious dissidents while simultaneously preventing a horde of people from seeking refuge or camping out in the Embassy basement.

Q: Well what- this '85, it was '83 to '85 period?

TONGOUR: Yes.

Q: What was the situation in the Soviet Union? I mean, how would you describe relations at that time?

TONGOUR: Relations were cool (even icy at times) and references such as the "Evil Empire" didn't help. At the same time, it was a period of flux, even opportunity, wherein Foreign Service Officer, such as our Office Director Tom Simons and the staff as a whole, looked for ways to melt the ice, if you will. This set the stage for the "that" that would occur a few years late, with Reagan-Gorbachev.

Q: But Gorbachev- we were still going through the Andropov, Chernenko; I mean, leaders were dying.

TONGOUR: That is right. What I mean by setting the stage is that there were people in the U.G. Government focusing on how and when to get beyond the horrible time when I said set the stage, there were people already thinking, in the U.S. Government, about how and when and how to get beyond the seemingly horrible relations of the day. And of course, arms control issues that were very much uppermost in the minds of our leadership, as I am sure they were Soviet priorities as well. Other hot button issues included the broad range of human rights and dissident concerns, including a variety of non-religious dissident cases, which I personally did not handle.

Q: Well, did you get involved, I mean, was there sort of a dissidence of religious- was there a Jewish cast to it or was this almost separate?

TONGOUR: That was basically separate. There was certainly a Jewish orientation in the work of the office related to emigrants from the former Soviet union, especially in the late 70s when many of the so-called Refuseniks were starting to leave, but I was there only at the tail end of that migration. By the early-to-mid 80s, we were focusing on more esoteric groups, whereas the Jewish groups were already being cared for by a number of different Offices at State as well as nongovernmental organizations. .

Q: Did you get any feel for the White House, the National Security Council dealing with this? I mean, was there- was this still the period where sort of President Reagan and his group, he came out of the pretty far right of the Republican Party and obviously extremely suspicious of the Soviet Union; was that still prevailing or were things beginning to change? Did you get any feel for this?

TONGOUR: I definitely got the feeling that they were still very, very conservative. But at the same time, folks on the Soviet Desk and elsewhere in the bureaucracy were furiously writing all sorts of briefing papers and memos aimed at chipping away at the ice and looking for ways to open up the dialog and the minds of those in charge.

Q: Well, when you are dealing with religion, did Islam, _____ of the Central Asian area and all, did that play any role in what you were thinking at the time or was it pretty much-

TONGOUR: To start with, there were several of us working on various aspects of the dissidents issue. In general, we gave little thought at that point to questions related to Islam. Later when I returned for a second tour on the Soviet Desk, this was a much more significant variable. But that was later, and while during this period there was an officer in our section that focused more on regional minorities, I concentrated more on the Pentecostals and other minority religious sects out in Siberia and the Far East. .

Q: Did you feel a bit like the new kid on the block, being at the Soviet- I mean, obviously you had had this background but at the same time you would have had people who had been dealing with this their entire careers and then all of a sudden you are plunked in there; how did you feel about it?

TONGOUR: No, I never felt that on the Soviet Desk (SOV). SOV behaved very much as a family and you really weren't included unless you more or less arrived with a certain predisposition or educational background. Not that it was overly tight or exclusive, but rather it tended to be self-selecting with most of the people in the office having advanced degrees in either Russian history or politics, and they all knew Russia. My background certainly fit the mold. There were definitely people that had been working these issues for years but they did not make one feel inadequate or inferior. That said, I recall early on attending a Foreign Buildings Office (FBO) meeting where a big hulking guy briefed me about building security in Moscow. I saw a look on his face that seemed to signify "what is this young thing going to understand about building security, and why on earth did they send her to me?" In turn, I became very determined to prove to him that I could climb the scaffolding, if need be, when I visited the NOB and that I could learn the vocabulary of the building trade.

Q: Did you have, I mean, the fact that you came out of the visa line into the Soviet- did you have a mentor or somebody who was, that you felt was kind of, you know, plucked you out and looking after you?

TONGOUR: Yes, actually several people, one of which was someone who eventually became my supervisor on the Soviet desk who has worked in this field and has a fascinating story of how the Foreign Service works by the name of Jim Schumaker.

TONGOUR: Jim is roughly my age. He entered the Foreign Service after college and rose rapidly in the system. And after having served for twenty-something years and reaches the senior rank of OC quite early confronts the situation of being 47 or 48 and not yet promoted from OC to MC in the requisite amount of time. Having spent most of his career working on the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, plus a tour in Afghanistan, he was clearly passionately committed to working in the region. Yet, suddenly he was faced with being "ticked out", meaning too much time spent in a particular "grade", before he was even 50. Ironically, he was essentially willing to work for next to nothing, so committed was he to the Foreign Service. But the Department really couldn't allow that. Well, Jim demonstrated incredible ingenuity by simply re-taking the Foreign Service Exam. He had already held a number of senior positions, including Deputy Chief of Mission. Needless to say, he passed. When time came for his oral, half the panel had to recuse themselves because they knew him. He passed the oral as well. This created serious issues for the Department's personnel officers, raising questions about what to do with him and whether to re-admit him into the Foreign Service and at what rank. Eventually, they found a diplomatic solution, allowing him to fill in as needed in the former Soviet world. For example, he served as Acting Consul General in Vladivostok for some months during a staffing gap. He filled in elsewhere - Moscow and Kiev - as well. Basically, he served as a WAE without exactly being retired. .

Q: WAE is-

TONGOUR: I am sorry. It means "when actually employed".

Q: Which is what we use retirees for to put them on part-time work.

TONGOUR: That is right. I do not know what category they put him in but they used his services for several years. Most recently he went to work for the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) back in Kiev, once again working in the same general area. I go into all that because he is someone who had been totally committed to first, the Foreign Service, and secondly to serving in the area of the former Soviet Union. And he was the Section Chief for the unit I worked in during my first tour in SOV. When a year into my tour there was an announcement that Roz Ridgeway, who was to be the next Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, was looking for a mid-level assistant, Jim, my friend and mentor, recommended me because he thought I had the requisite skills. I interviewed for that position and got it. And that certainly helped me obtain other positions down the road. Tom Simons also was very helpful. In such a close knit group, people were protective of their own and very helpful to them.

Q: Well, how long were you working with Roz Ridgeway?

TONGOUR: Originally, the assignment was supposed to last one year but it turned into an 18-month tour. The standard length for such Special or Executive Assistant positions was one year. But after I had been on the job a few months, Ambassador Ridgway asked me to stay on a little longer because we had hardly gotten into the swing of working together; so I did stay on, and it was a fascinating experience.

Q: Let's talk about Roz Ridgway, whom I have interviewed? How did you find her and her way of operating?

TONGOUR: I liked her very much. She would be the first to admit that even having been an ambassador twice and then an Assistant Secretary , she had never had a female Special Assistant until then. And she once admitted to me the difficulty of knowing exactly how to interact because at times, especially when we traveled together, it was easy for her to simply regard me as a friend. At the same time, however, she recognized that I was her staffer, and she was used to having men as staffers, except in purely secretarial roles. So, she had to grapple with the gender issue as well.

TONGOUR: I imagine there was a certain ambivalence on her part towards the situation. I remember once during one of our trips to Europe we wound up going to dinner and having a very open and personal conversation. I suspect that she might well have later thought that this wasn't an appropriate interaction with a staffer. She was a bit more distant subsequently. So, there was a bit of "push-pull" that way, but the relationship was certainly amicable and an wonderful learning experience for me.

Q: Okay. What were some of the things you were seeing being done during this period?

TONGOUR: Well, this was the start of the budding Reagan/Gorbachev relationship to be sure, but there were many factors that led to this, including some negative developments, such as the mistreatment of the American journalist Danilov in Moscow and continuing problems related to the whole arms race. But on the personal front, from the outset we had to figure out exactly what my role in the Front Office was to be. The Assistant Secretary herself was brand knew, and initially it was far from clear what I would be doing. Over time, I became essentially a clearinghouse for papers that were passed to the Staff Assistants and intended for her - the doorkeeper of sorts, but there was also a secretary to do that. Some parts of my work were substantive but much of it was in that gray zone, and I lacked a clearly defined portfolio of my own. I attended many meetings and got to hear the views of both the Assistant Secretary and her interlocutors and in turn acquire a better grasp of our own policies. But, I have to admit, I had lots of questions regarding whether I had a real role or was simply moving papers around. In other words, did I have any significant contribution to make? Not really, but then again, that is the way a Special or Executive Assistant is supposed to function.

Q: But you are the fly on the wall.

TONGOUR: The fly on the wall that hears and learns a lot. And in that period our relationship with the Soviet Union shifted from being one might say fairly dark to considerably lighter. But from my perspective one of the most interesting aspects of the job related to travel because when the Assistant Secretary traveled, I traveled as well. When Secretary Shultz traveled to Europe, so did Ridgway, and therefore, so did I. And when it came time for the G-8, which happened to be in Tokyo that year, Shultz traveled to Japan, and she went along , as did I. There were definitely some fantastic trips and the opportunity to witness the dynamics among the key players. As you well know, George Shultz was very well respected by members of the Foreign Service for many reasons, not the least of which was his manner of dealing with subordinates, especially when compared to some of his predecessors and successors. Several examples come to mind. While I was still on the Soviet Desk, Office Director Tom Simons invited him to our Christmas party, an event that was actually renown in the building for having caviar. Apparently, none of the working level offices had up to that point ever invited him to such a party; yet he came. Flying on the Secretary's plane was also interesting. On each flight he would make a point of walking down the aisle and talking to everyone at least briefly. There was someone on his staff who seemed to keep track of the birthdays of members of the traveling party and advise him according so that he could acknowledge the person. It happened to me once during a trip to Athens. We were all at some reception and at some point he came over to me and said "I understand you have a big day today." These little touches were endearing and much appreciated particularly in a bureaucratic environment where such gestures tend to be infrequent.

Q: Of all the secretaries of state, both in the substantive and on the personal level, George Shultz really stands preeminent.

TONGOUR: I think that's right.

Q: Colin Powell on the personal level was great, policy level, well, I mean, we got the Iraq War.

TONGOUR: That too. Back to the earlier period. It was very interesting to work closely with the Secretary's staff (the so-called S Staff) and be at least on the periphery of a wide range of important meetings - some of which were tense or difficult. And there was a period in which Roz Ridgway herself was the center of discussions concerning whether or not a woman might know anything about "throw weight" and should have any real role in arms control negotiations. And that attitude still exists - so the gender issue rears its head in many different ways.

Q: It took her a long time but Roz Ridgeway became the world's preeminent in fish, which was very much a man's world but she became so respected she was a fisherman's boy.

TONGOUR: I know. It was something she said she very much enjoyed. I don't recall the specifics but I think she may have met her Coast Guard husband in the "fish world".

Q: Were you there when- did you go on the, when Ronald Reagan went to Berlin and said tear down the wall, Mr. Gorbachev, and all that?

TONGOUR: I was not, for reasons that I can no longer remember - there were a few trips in which the plane was "too full" and some staffers didn't make it. That may have been one of those times. Frankly, what saddened me is that considering all the trips I did go on, the one that I could not make at the last moment due to space limitations was Reykjavik. And I really wanted to, as did all the staff at that point.

Q: Well, as part of the SOV club, were you finding this a very exciting time? Because things seemed to be melting quite rapidly.

TONGOUR: Yes, it truly was. Your mentioning the SOV Club is an apt description which reminds me that in the EUR Bureau there was another important office called RPM (Regional Political Military Affairs) and there was considerable rivalry or competition between SOV and RPM on policy issues and approaches related to arms control and dealing with the Soviet Union in general. One of the things that struck me most while working for Roz Ridgeway and seeing the papers produced (briefing materials, memos, etc) by these two offices was how in a funny way the two offices resembled two different types of beauties, namely Grace Kelly and Sophia Loren.

Q: We are talking about two mammoth movie stars of an earlier period, Sophia Loren being sort of a very earthy and Grace Kelly being ice princess.

TONGOUR: That is right. Grace Kelly's slip never showed, and RPM was the Grace Kelly of the Bureau. RPM papers were always letter perfect - never a typo and the format was always correct. The Soviet Desk on the other hand - and I have to admit to a bit of partiality here - did not always have its "paper act" all together. Not that Sophia Loren was slovenly, but figuratively speaking her slip sometimes would show, and yet she was quite impressive, and at her best, outstanding. That was what always struck me about the work produced by those two offices; both were excellent but the Soviet desk would come in with a true tour de force production every once in awhile.

Q: Well, did you sort of personally subscribe to Gorbachev as a new look or- there was one of skepticism; how did you feel about that?

TONGOUR: I think there was a very strong desire to want all this - note the caveats - and him to be the genuine article. But at the same time, what did the "genuine article" mean? The genuine article as a Soviet reformer; yes, we thought he really was that. Whether he was going to emerge as our image of an honest-to-God democrat, on that there were widely differing views. After all, he did come up through the Soviet system, and that certainly left its mark, but how much so was unclear. .

Q: Did you pick up on the part of Ridgeway or others or even yourself, you know, a bit of nervousness about Ronald Reagan, that he might get overly enthusiastic about Gorbachev? You know, I mean, you are sort of the handlers and your principle might get too far off the reservation.

TONGOUR: Well, you have to understand that no one wanted to be mistaken for a Pollyanna or jeopardize U.S. interests. But relations had been bad for so long that we were caught up in the hope for real improvements. Things evolve; circumstances and attitudes change but certainly at that moment we hoped for the best. Of course, there was the concern that if we were overly optimistic or enthusiastic, at the first setback, when something went wrong, there might be a tendency for the pendulum to swing to the other extreme. There was that concern; yet, overall, we were cautiously optimistic.

Q: Was RPM a brake on this?

TONGOUR: Probably. You know, it is really hard after all these years to recall exactly who was for what and when but let's say RPM was more focused on the nuts and bolts, the military and nuclear hardware available and what we did or did not need, as were other government agencies. Certainly, they concentrated more on weaponry and broader political-military issues. That said, I don't want to make it sound as though SOV or any other office consisted of misguided optimists, not at all - simply that their orientations were a bit different. different.

Q: One general question. When dealing with the Soviet Union in both manifestations in your job, were you picking up the people around you- I mean, one of the things that struck me as everybody who went to the Soviet Union for years coming back and saying this damn place does not work.

TONGOUR: We knew that.

Q: The elevators do not work. You know, it does not work and yet we were building up the Soviets as being 10 feet tall in a way. How did you feel about this during this particular period?

TONGOUR: I think, and I was hardly alone in this view, there were many who knew what did and did not work in the Soviet Union and why. They were learning about causes - some of which pre-dated the Soviet regime, going back to much earlier periods of Russian history, with its two-class society. Fundamentally, there has always been an elite with lots of intelligence, capacity, and creativity, with scientists who could come un with brilliant ways to patch things together with the proverbial band-aid. And we also had a fairly good sense of how the system did not work, which made it possible to suspend disbelief in a way, regarding the point that you made. In other words, recognizing failures in the system, were we, nonetheless, allowing them to act as a threat. We might be seeing parallels in North Korea with a leader sacrificing his people for specific military-related goals. That, too, was an image many had regarding the Soviet Union, namely that they might starve the masses if necessary to build the perfect rocket. It obviously took some time to grasp that they might not be doing as much as some thought in the sphere of military/nuclear technology development. Similar assumptions came to the fore in assessments about Saddam Hussein and what he was up to, and tended to drive policy.

Q: Was anybody, you know, during this time on the Soviet desk, saying, you know, this place would crack apart as far as the disparate elements , the Stans and all this; was that at all an issue?

TONGOUR: Let me jump ahead a few years. In August 1991, I was returning from a sunshine tour in the Caribbean for my second stint on the Soviet desk and I remember thinking how different was the bilateral relationship I was coming back to and how much better, calmer our relationship with the Soviet Union was the "second time around". And I recall turning on the television in the hotel I where I was temporarily staying, and was shocked to see pictures of tanks in Moscow, with shots of Boris Yeltsin in the thick of it, and everything seemed to be falling apart. That was my first day back. I immediately went to work, and for the next week or so it seemed as though we were working around the clock. What was patently obvious was that other agencies seemingly had not prepared scenarios for this type situation, the "dismemberment" or collapse of the Soviet Union we were witnessing. One would have thought that analysts might in prior years (before 1991) have at least prepared some contingency papers along the lines of what actually transpired, but they provide very little along these lines. We had to come up with our own scenarios for what might happen next. We wound up doing our own analysis, there on the Soviet Desk, with minimal input from other agencies.

Q: Yes, we are talking about the CIA.

TONGOUR: Basically but it is a general observation.

Q: It is far enough back and also, you know, we are not talking about methods or anything else; I mean, we can talk about the analysis of the CIA.

TONGOUR: The analysis was absent, which was quite surprising, even shocking given the large analytical staff devoted to that part of the world. Yet, in that period at least, they really did not come up with much that was coherent or of value to policy makers. So, during the next few weeks we churned out a myriad position papers dealing with the "what ifs": the what if this happened or that occurred - scenarios one, two, three, etc.

Q: Okay. Well, I think this is probably a good place to stop and we will pick this up in again at the end of your assignment with Roz Ridgway, in '85, was it?

TONGOUR: Well, no, actually I worked for Roz Ridgway from the summer of 1985 to January 1887.

Q: Okay. And so where, in '87, did you go?

TONGOUR: Oh, I had what was called a bridge assignment lasting three or four months because my next assignment began in May. From February to May, I worked for the Board of Examiners.

Q: Okay, we will pick this up in '87 when you were working for the Board of Examiners and then on.

Today is the 8th of February, 2008. Nadia, you wanted to talk a bit about the atmosphere and all when you were in- where were you?

TONGOUR: Last time we spoke about my work on the Soviet Desk and then as a Special Assistant for Roz Ridgway. I subsequently thought a bit about our prior conversation and realized that there are a various aspects of our past relationship with the soviet Union that are now virtually forgotten, one of which was that during that period we monitored very closely the movements and travel of Soviet diplomats in the United States, and they, likewise, monitored the movements of our personnel in the Soviet Union. What is now often forgotten was the so-called "25 mile rule" which meant that if a Soviet diplomat assigned to New York or Washington wanted to visit Williamsburg or travel to Trenton, New Jersey or anywhere further than 25 miles from their mission, they would have to seek permission officially from us. Often, depending on their treatment of our folks in Moscow, permission might be denied. There was a great deal of back and forth negotiations between the two sides concerning who could travel where, but that was merely the tip of the iceberg. We had conflicts over the most minute of issues or simply put over minutia. For example, the Soviet Mission in New York owned a "dacha", a country house, in Long Island, just as we had one outside of Moscow. Theirs was in the town of Glen Cove, New York. In a fit of patriotic fervor, the community of Glen Cove wanted to keep the Russians from using the local beach, which created a bit of, you could say, a scandal, with the Russians feeling very hard pressed at not being allowed to use the facilities near their dacha and the citizens of Glen Cove adamant about keeping the "commies" from the beach. I go into all this just to show that there were many such points of friction, not all of which dealt with nuclear arms or substantive policy issues. One that wound up taking up considerable time and energy was whether or not we could build a new Consulate in Kiev (then still part of the Soviet Union) and they in turn could build one in New York City. Such disputes were part of the overall bilateral environment. .

One last point to mention about that era deals with the visit of Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. We talked briefly about this earlier and I may have misspoke in talking about this having been a first visit to Washington in years. In fact, he hadn't been here for some time, but for an interesting reason. He had apparently planned to come in 1983 but that visit was aborted after the Soviets shot down a Korean Airline flight (KAL) which had strayed over Soviet territory.

Q: Over the Kamchatka Peninsula on the way to Korea.

TONGOUR: That is right. Thereafter, there was such an uproar and so much negative sentiment and publicity about the Soviet action that Gromyko cancelled his then anticipated trip to New York for the fall session of the UN General Assembly. A year later there was a desire to ameliorate the situation and improve relations, at least slightly, and the idea emerged for him to combine a visit to Washington with his expected trip to New York. At that point, there was some concern over whether even a stop in New York would prove feasible for reasons that were quite bureaucratic. The Metropolitan Airport Authority of New York did not want to facilitate the landing of the Foreign Minister's plane. Likewise, The metropolitan area police did not want to provide the requisite additional security and on. For several weeks leading up to the visit, my job was to interact with various city and state authorities to persuade them to allow the plane to land and authorize the purchase of fuel without advance payment. Every obstacle imaginable was created to prevent this a visit. In the end, we succeeded, and my personal accomplishment was, as I mentioned, to put together a manual, a standard operating procedures report, on how to handle visits of leaders from "less than friendly" states, essentially how to get them through customs, so to speak, without a crisis. I felt it to be a worthy enterprise.

Q: Did you talk to the police, the airport authorities?

TONGOUR: Absolutely.

Q: What were they, I mean, what was their feeling?

TONGOUR: Hostility, even some rage, probably a less intense version of post 9/11 reactions. Soviet officials were regarded as the people who shot down an innocent passenger flight, and local authorities were not about to facilitate a visit by the leaders of the "evil empire". They were "righteously indignant" and saw no reason to help.

Q: Well, did you find yourself portrayed as one of these State Department wimps who were-?

TONGOUR: Probably. I hesitate to say this because we no longer used terms such as charming in describing women in EERs but some of my bosses referred to me as very personable and this may have been a factor in my dealings with them. In any case, some effort was required to win them over and make them realize we were not just wimps.

Q: Okay. Well, we come to 1987 and you had a rather short term but interesting one with the Board of Examiners. What were you doing and how did it operate and what were your impressions?

TONGOUR: I have been thinking about this quite a bit lately because I may be doing a stint on the Board of Examiners again in the near future as a WAE (a part-time position for retirees). Consequently, I have been thinking about how the whole testing system has changed in recent years. In the mid-late '80s, it was already quite different from when I entered the Foreign Service. For example, in 1987, we did not inform applicants taking the oral exam whether or not they had passed on that day. Years before and subsequently, applicants would be informed of their results at the end of the day.

Q: I was with the Board of Examiners in the mid '70s and we used to tell people.

TONGOUR: As it worked in 1987, a person would take the written exam, fill out what seemed a forest of forms, and then wait to be invited for an oral assessment either in Washington or in a major regional center. Examiners would travel to the various cities to administer the exam. I personally went for two to three weeks each to San Francisco, to Dallas and to Boston, and it was delightful being able to spend time in these different areas. We worked as a team of four and we examined applicants for a full day. I'm sure this has changed somewhat but then we spent the mornings questioning the applicants (the actual oral exam), followed by an "in-box" and writing exercise. The afternoon was devoted to the negotiating exercise, which was fascinating both for its content and the varied responses of the applicants to the assignment. Normally, if one of us interviewed an applicant in the morning, she would simply observe, rather than evaluate, that applicant in the afternoon. Essentially four separate examiners would rate each individual - two in the morning and two in the afternoon. s.

Afterwards, the team would get together and evaluate each applicant, rating them on 16 different attributes - qualities such as judgment, oral and written expression, initiative, cultural sensitivity, interpersonal skills and so on. What we often found - I suspect this is still true - was that a person who might have been outstanding in answering questions about American culture to a foreign contact might not necessarily do as well in the negotiating exercise. Certain individuals stand out even after so many years. I remember a young woman who was a truly outstanding applicant in her morning interview but barely spoke in the afternoon session; instead, she constantly "deferred" to the young man seated next to her. On the other hand, there was always someone who probably assumed he had done a brilliant job by "winning all the goodies" for himself in the negotiation exercise only to fail because he really hadn't negotiated but rather foisted his will on his colleagues. A fascinating process.

It's probably worth mentioning how far the State Department has come in certain areas because in addition to the examiners, there were review panels in Washington that read the full files successful applicants for suitability. Thus, for example, if I had examined you, I would not be able to read your file; however those reading your file would learn a great deal, not only about your scores and security clearance information, but also your biographical data and views on entering the Foreign Service, etc. Towards the end of the overall process, four individuals who had read these files would also rate them. The reason I mention the significant changes since then has to do with shifting attitudes towards gays in the Service. There was one case I subsequently wondered about of a young man who in many respects was a perfect applicant. His academic work, test scores, life experience - were all geared toward a career at State. However, in the course of his security clearance interviews it came out that he was gay, and there were associated problems. First, he admitted that everyone significant in his life knew of his orientation except his mother, but he vowed to tell her at the first appropriate moment. Secondly, it emerged that during a brief period in college he had had a bit of a drinking problem, but that was no longer an issue. I don't want to belabor this, except to say I ultimately concluded that this young man was not really blackmailable (assuming he would tell his mother, etc.). Given all his positive attributes, I voted for his admission, but I was the only one. My colleagues did not agree and deemed him "unsuitable". I'm telling all this to show just how different it is today. Now there is apparently an active gay and lesbian organization within the Department and members of my own retirement class, including a former ambassador openly acknowledge they are gay. This did not happen overnight but certainly during the last decade and a half there has been a widening or opening of the Department's doors to more diverse applicants.

Q: Did you get an impression of, you went to a couple of places that I would think that San Francisco but particularly Boston you would find a particularly high rate of passes or more eligible than you would say in Dallas, but did you find this true or not?

TONGOUR: Not as much as you would think because of the reason we previously discussed regarding the negotiating exercise and manifestations of interpersonal skills. Of course in terms of the educational level, this may have ben true, but I think this was probably a transitional period in terms of movement from the traditional Foreign Service with its emphasis on an Ivy League education, where applicants were judged more on their intellectual acumen than their practical skills, to the current, more mixed system, which tends to frown a bit on the more elitist prior system. When I was on the Board of Examiners, it was more of a combination of how well one thinks on his feet, degree of common sense and ability to handle problematical situations plus, of course, your general knowledge. Students from the Ivy League schools did not necessarily have an advantage in describing how they would handle a consular crisis in the middle of Africa. Probably, the sharpest kid I encountered - and subsequently wondered about - was interviewed in Dallas. He walked in with cowboy boots and jeans, and I frankly wondered how he would manage. He was young, just out of college, and brilliant but it was unclear to me whether he would fit into the culture of the State Department. To conclude, though, there may have been a bit of an expectation that the cream of the crop might come out of Boston or D.C. but it was not pronounced.

Q: Well, I know when I did it I spent three weeks in San Francisco and I thought oh boy, you know, we are going to get the Stanfords, the Berkeleys and all; we did great. You know, they did much worse in Washington and we were really pushing. I came back with a feeling, and I have lived in California for many years, I came back with a feeling that people who went there, you know, lost a few IQ points for just- by lolling around in the sun or something like that. I do not know; I did not go in with that but I came back with that.

TONGOUR: Well, I had that attitude too when I first went to graduate school in California and saw a lot of people sprawled on the grass in front of one of Stanford's libraries. I wondered how anyone got any work done, but they - and I eventually - did.

Q: Well anyway, what was your impression of how women were treated at this particular point in time?

TONGOUR: I think much better than they had been 10 years earlier when I took the exam, and the Department had come some distance already by then. There were certainly fewer, if any, questions that could be regarded as gender based. But as I mentioned there were still too many cases of "reticent" females in the group negotiation exercise. Many still tended to appear more comfortable when asked to talk about cultural or political development than when in the fray.

Q: I have interviewed people who said that at one point, this goes way back, but they were interviewed, when they were told no, they did not pass but they hoped that maybe she could marry a nice Foreign Service officer because she would make a wonderful Foreign Service wife.

TONGOUR: I think I mentioned that when I took the exam first right out of college I certainly experienced this attitude but by the time I entered, the situation had changed. Still, some of the security guys who did the background check on me seemed more resistant to the changing times. One security officer interviewed a longstanding boyfriends of mine and according to him was asked why he didn't marry me and save me from "this life". It seems the security officer still believed it would be better for me to stay home. And he was not alone in this regard.

Q: Sure. I know, and this is the thing that we are talking about. Well, I mean, this reflects American life, too; things have changed tremendously in the, well, in just the last few decades as far as the gay or homosexual side, the gender side, the race side and all that. I mean, things-

When you were in San Francisco did you- were there any Asian applicants? Because this is not a pool that we have been getting many people from.

TONGOUR: It was so long ago that I don't really remember. More to the point, I don't recall thinking what a lot of Asia applicants, particularly since we were carrying out the interviews in downtown San Francisco where there were many Asian-Americans. So while there were undoubtedly a few, not too many.

Q: Okay. Eighty-seven, you are still- where did you go after this time?

TONGOUR: After that I started a regular assignment in one of my favorite jobs of my career. I was the Desk Officer for Hungary and the Baltic States. This was an odd combination, but it happened because no one was sure where to assign the Baltic Republics in our bureaucratic structure. This was after all still the Soviet era, and as a matter of principle or policy, we would not officially recognize the Soviet occupation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Q: That has been going on since '45.

TONGOUR: That is right. We had a rather unusual situation. On the one hand, we accepted the fact that people had to obtain visas from the Soviet Embassy to travel to this region. On the other, we nominally at least recognized the three chargï¿½s based in their missions here. Actually, only two of them were in Washington; the Estonian representative operated out of New York. At this point, these gentlemen were elderly, with the Estonia Chargï¿½ well into his 80s. He had left Estonia in the inter-war period (between World War I and II) and had never been back. In essence, we did not know where to place them in our office structure. Who would be the responsible desk officer? Heretofore, Hungary had been a fairly quiet "account" for many years. As much out of tradition as anything else, the officer handling Hungarian affairs wound up being the desk officer for the three Baltic Republics as well.

Q: Well, you were doing this from '87 to when?

TONGOUR: It should have been a full two year tour but in those days the Department was very strict about the so-called "five year rule". The Personnel Office was particularly vigilant in thwarting the European Bureau's frequent efforts to get around the rules.

Q: Can you explain what the five year rule?

TONGOUR: The five year rule concerned the length of time one could remain in Washington before having to serve overseas. Unless one had an assignment deemed truly vital to the national interest, one was obliged to go abroad after five years. In many instances, individuals obtained waivers to the rule, but the European Bureau (EUR) had had a lengthy track record of trying to get around this rule; consequently, when I obtained this assignment, the personnel system mandated that it would be only a one year tour rather than the normal two. We hope we could change this in the course of the year, but our efforts failed. Still, it was a wonderful assignment for several reasons. One was the excitement of working on an account that was quite active.

Starting roughly in that period, there was a great deal of interest in the Baltic Republics. There was a lively young Baltic American community as well as an emerging activism among the young in the Baltics who were pressuring the State Department to act, to do more than simply issue statements once a year on Captive Nations Day, something I would draft as part of the job. The Hungary portfolio was also fascinating because it was a time when things were starting to loosen or open up in the Soviet Union but even more noticeably in Eastern Europe. The Hungarians were discreet but they were moving; there was great accessibility for our people in Budapest as well as in terms of our contacts with their diplomats here in Washington. I had, for example, an excellent relationship with the DCM at the Hungarian Embassy. The reason this was one of my best jobs is that the Department sometimes provides great opportunities for mid-level officers if they happen to work on a country that is interesting but not on the first tier of interest because in such positions they can actually contribute a great deal to policy formulation. People maybe focusing on other issues while your memos get signed and move up the chain of command. And you may well be creating policy. I say this slightly tongue in cheek but it was a vibrant time and rewarding experience. We also had a very active ambassador there, Mark Palmer.

Q: Yes, I have interviewed Mark.

TONGOUR: Mark was excellent in many, many respects, and in particular, he was very good at bringing people together. I'm sure he still is, from what I understand.. In Hungary; he entertained a great deal and would invite different types of people to his residence, effectively mixing them with varied groups of Embassy personnel. There was a lot of outreach and a big push on expanding student visitor and exchange program, developing a graduate management program - essentially a business school in Budapest - and other people-to-people activities. Moreover, a prominent Washington socialite named Esther Coopersmith was a friend of Ambassador Palmer's, and she would on occasion bring together all kinds of folks who were interested in Hungary. This was also the period in which we returned the Crown of St. Stephen, an important symbol in Hungarian history, which the Americans had kept since the end of World War II. This prompted considerable good feeling in Budapest, as did our hosting the Hungarian Premier towards the end of my tour.

Q: Well, what was the government, from our perspective, what was the situation in Hungary in the government there at that time?

TONGOUR: What was most notable was the fact that the Hungarians had been moving actively to liberalize their economy, not unlike what we've seen happen in China. Officially they were not changing much on the political side, officially, but they were, in fact, liberalizing after a fashion and providing opportunities for private enterprise. Hungarian officials wanted to join OPIC (Overseas Private Investment Corporation) and made it clear they wanted more trade with the West as well as greater economic interaction in general. At the same time they were permitting greater independence in the area of local elections. The Premier's visit to Washington was really a "big deal" for the Hungarians, since this was the first such official visit. I wound up working on that visit just before I left the position in the summer of 1988.

Moreover, I should point out that our Hungarian contacts were openly voicing expressions of Hungarian nationalism. Not that they had not been nationalistic before, but now it was something more openly discussed. For example, the Hungarian DCM, who later became Hungarian Ambassador in several countries, actively reached out to the Department and openly discussed Hungarian national aspirations - as distinct from its membership in the Warsaw Pact. I recall an instance in which he somewhat wistfully compared Finland and Hungary, with their similar linguistic roots and more or less equal economic level before World War II, and noting how far Finland had progressed since then He even joked about one day re-creating recreating a Danubian Federation in which Hungary and Austria could be reunited. He clearly did not suffer as a result of his reaching out to the Department or for making these types of comments.

Q: Of course, we are talking about when you are on the cusp of...

TONGOUR: ...Yes there was definitely an awareness of the possibility of change.

Q: Was this a pressure group particularly?

TONGOUR: Not compared to the Baltic Americas on the Baltic front. There was enthusiasm for the old homeland, but not real pressure, other than in the sense of how can we do more to further economic ties and business relations.

Q: What about leader grants and students? Were they coming through?

TONGOUR: I don't recall the numbers exactly but we seem to have had something on the order of 300 or so, which was a dramatic increase from zero. These USIS -sponsored grants definitely were important. During trips to the region, when I visited Budapest, I also traveled to Romania because I was the back-up officer for that country, and the contrast between the two was amazing - making the positive developments in Hungary seem all the more impressive. Change was clearly visible in Hungary during that period. This was less true for Romania.

Q: Well, this was at the height of Ceausescu.

TONGOUR: It was appalling on several levels, especially the fear factor. I took the train from Budapest to Bucharest and many colleagues told me I was crazy to do this because the secret people would be watching me all the time. Nevertheless, I took the train and there was a gentleman in my compartment who seemed terrified because he was transporting a three-volume, recently published Hungarian history of Transylvania, which was essentially contraband. He was an ethnic Hungarian who lived in Transylvania and had been in Hungary to perform in a concert. When we got to the border and the customs or border police really ransacked various compartments. They inspected our compartment and were obviously not happy that I had a diplomatic passport and they could not, therefore, examine my bags. They did go through the other passengers belongings but did not succeed in finding the books, which I found interesting. My "companion" was clearly relieved after that and became quite expansive, drinking heavily and telling stories. But, yes, the atmosphere in Bucharest was grim and the Romanian secret police presence was all pervasive.

Q: By this time what were sort of the policing, secret policing situation in Hungary?

TONGOUR: Unclear, but certainly not as obvious. I am sure the secret police still existed - they didn't just disappear over night - but they were less visible. The Hungarians pride themselves or rather consider themselves the smartest people in Europe. They joke that if you can learn their language, that in itself is a mark of a high IQ. They were certainly more discreet and did not make their surveillance of visitors obvious.

Q: Well, let us turn to the Baltics. In the first place, you have this peculiar situation. I mean, did these little embassies or legations, I guess they were, did they play any role at all other than just an oddity in the history books or not?

TONGOUR: In one sense they did, at least during this period. There were several factors involved, and one of these was financial, specifically the question of how to allocate or dispose of money that had belonged to these legations before the World War II. I no longer remember the details but somehow the Latvians managed to get gold out of the country and into a Swiss account. As a result, Latvian mission legation had a greater degree of wealth than the other two; however, there was some sort of stipulation that the Latvian legation would provide funds for the hard-pressed Estonians, not as a gift but as a sort of loan. At the juncture, Estonian legation was broke and needed this financial support. Yet, there were all sorts of complications stemming from the fact that the funds were in Switzerland, requiring a formal transfer from the Latvian account to Estonian hands, which someone had to sign for, raising again the question of who had the requisite . It was a highly complex situation, and my role was basically to ensure that this transfer was handled properly. And, of course, there was the unfortunate and inevitable issue of national pride and obvious discomfort for the Estonian Chargï¿½ who basically had to be support by one of his neighbors. Now, that was on one hand.

On the other, there was in this period a deportation case in which a Lithuanian (or possibly Latvian, I no longer recall) , who had been in the U.S. for many years, was to be deported for his role as a concentration camp guard during the war. The case again focused attention on what could be described as the history of anti-Semitism in the Baltic region.

Q: The Baltic Republics, along with the Poles did not have a clean record on anti-Semitism.

TONGOUR: That was truce for much of Eastern and Central Europe. This episode highlighted the fact that while we were supporting these small "captive nations" on the one hand, they were not "totally pure" on the other. So this was yet another angle affecting our policy. .

There also happened to be several people working at the National Security Council (NSC) who were Baltic-Americans, not to mention a growing number of Baltic-American activists in general - some of whom wound up in responsible government positions in the Baltic countries after the fall of the Soviet Union. There also were people, interestingly enough, who were not of Baltic extraction but who for one reason or another were sympathetic to their cause and , empathetic and became involved in helping them out. For example, I had a friend in New York, a lawyer, who helped the Estonian government draft its new constitution after independence, and promoted all sorts of exchange programs for Estonian students, initially using his own personal resources. This was just one case but there were others helping as well..

And then, too, you had various noteworthy developments within the expat community. The Estonians retained their Chargï¿½, who was then 88 or 89 years old, until he died. But in the case of the Lithuanians and the Latvians and especially the latter, there was a changing of the guard. The process of selection was quite interesting. Essentially, the Latvians in exile picked a younger person - in his 50s or 60s - not 80s - someone from within their own ranks to be in charge.

Q: Did you have much dealings with these exile legations?

TONGOUR: Yes. They would visit. Each legation was quite small, with only one or two persons at each. Still, they hosted representational events at their residences, which doubled as their Chancery. They would also, as I mentioned, call on the State Department to seek assistance on a variety of matters and if the Soviets committed some egregious deed, they shared the information with us. Above all, they simply wanted to be reassured of our interest and good will. So they came fairly often. .

Q: In both your responsibilities, Baltic and Hungarian, were they exhibiting any signs of the new world is about to dawn?

TONGOUR: The Hungarians were definitely exhibiting signs that a new world was dawning. They were ready, psychologically. Then, too, during my various visits to Budapest, I met a number of impressive young staff in their Foreign Ministry and other government offices, who are now the generation in charge. Hungary already had an emerging crop of young leaders who were well educated and who generally spoke English beautifully. They were primed for change, and they were not eastward looking.

Q: Was George Soros at all a factor? He was Hungarian, was he not?

TONGOUR: Yes, indeed.

Q: You might explain who he is and he has been, particularly since the break up of the Soviet Union a major player but how about during this time?

TONGOUR: A multi-millionaire, financier, Soros established his own foundation to provide assistance to Eastern Europe (starting with Hungary) and later the former Soviet Union in the spheres of educational, and economic and democracy promotion, to name but a few. But this was just the beginning. An interesting example comes to mind. Indiana University had scheduled a conference on Hungary in October 1987, the date that would come to be known as "Black Thursday" due to the stock market crash of that day. The actual theme of the conference dealt with the economic and political development of Hungary.

Q: And the University of Indiana, of course, has probably the preeminent Eastern European capacity programs and all.

TONGOUR: Yes. They sponsored the event and had invited George Soros to be the keynote speaker. A memorable incident occurred when the conference organizer, who was sorely lacking in tact, began his introduction of Soros by saying that he was both happy and surprised to see him in view of the fact that Soros' stock portfolio had just lost millions in value. He kept talking about how Soros' stocks had plummeted, suffering a $30 to $40 million loss. After the host had once again reiterated how awful it must have been to lose so much money, Soros replied that in the first instance Hungary was so important to him that he would have come even if he had lost it. Secondly, he said, while it was never fun to lose that kind of money, having it to lose was not bad. Then, turning to topic of Hungary, he emphasized the need to help and to focus on the future of Hungary. As you know, eventually, Soros would turn his attention to all of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, but at that time he was already focusing on various types of assistance and programs for Hungary. In fact, he was very interested in the idea of promoting a business school then in the planning stage, known informally as the Hungarian Management School in Budapest. So yes, he was quite engaged. .

Q: How did you fit into the Eastern European? Were you part of the Soviet bureau? Not Soviet bureau or the Soviet whatever it was.

TONGOUR: Team. Yes. You have to understand, at that time the Soviet Desk (SOV) and the East European desks worked very closely together, and they both reported to the same Deputy Assistant Secretary, who at the time happened to be Tom Simons, my former Office Director in SOV, who had a strong interest in the entire region, having served in Moscow, Bucharest, where he had been DCM, and later Ambassador to Poland. So he saw it all as part of a larger domain and one was not "disenfranchised" for working on one set of issues or region versus another other.

Q: Were you getting- We had this thing where the ambassador could not go to the Baltic States, under our rules, but we had officers, I think, I guess out of Leningrad went there. What were you getting from them?

TONGOUR: Quite honestly, I have to say that my assignment on the Desk was too short to get a whole lot. I suspect they were too busy covering the Consular District as a whole to get to the Baltic Republics very often. Probably, Washington was more focused on the situation in the Baltic region than the officers were at post. Then again that made sense inasmuch as we had all these activist Baltic-Americans as well as the NSC stirring up the pot.

Q: We use the term Baltic America or Baltic States, did you get any feel for, at that time, was there animosity between the various groups or were they pretty much singing off the same hymn book?

TONGOUR: Whatever they may have felt privately, they were singing off the same hymnal for our purposes - except, perhaps for the issue of money. There may have been some slight tension over who was funding whom or a bit of sibling rivalry over which mission might be getting more attention from us. Basically, they all saw themselves as captive nations, both desirous of our continuing support and grateful for whatever help we could provide.

Q: I assume nobody was sitting around in Eastern Europe thinking about well, as soon as these nations become un-captive what are we going to do.

TONGOUR: Not to be overly cynical, we were all quite aware of the reality that anyone wishing to travel to Riga had to obtain a Soviet visa. So we weren't focusing on this possibility notwithstanding our own rhetoric, and notwithstanding our hopes for the future; in fact, when that day actually came we were "underwhelmingly" unprepared. I mean, we did not really have a game plan for what to do the day after, when these nations were no longer "captive".

Q: Well this is- when one looks at this thing, one cannot help but asking, okay, we have the CIA and we put the State Department and all, I mean, focus like a laser beam on this area and yet the most cataclysmic event, which was the break up of the Soviet Union, happened and nobody was- not only that, calling it but, you know, raising it as a possibility. I mean it is not very impressive, I think.

Well, okay. Nineteen eighty-eight, I guess.

TONGOUR: That is right.

Q: And the five year rule is looming?

TONGOUR: It was looming, and we failed abysmally in our attempts to secure a waiver of the rule. And in the course of bidding on assignments, I chose a fork in the road that would have a major impact on the rest of my career in the Foreign Service. Basically, I remember thinking that after years of hard work and the frustration of not being able to have a full tour on the Hungary/Baltic Desk, I opted to bid on what I then termed a "lifestyle tour", namely an assignment in the Caribbean, which I thought would be a nice change. I recall talking to Roz Ridgway about whether this would hurt my career, and seemed to think it wouldn't as long as I didn't overdo it and that gaining exposure to a new region could be positive. In any case, I did apply for a few jobs in what I considered "serious places" while at the same time bidding on the assignment of senior political officer in a regional post, one covering many different islands from Barbados. In the end, I went to Bridgetown. Embassy Bridgetown was unusual not only because the Political Section covered seven different countries, but also because different agencies represented at Post covered a range of different countries. For example, the Defense Attachï¿½ assigned to Barbados was responsible for a region from Jamaica to Trinidad, whereas USIS had a somewhat different area of responsibility. In any event, I arrived in Barbados in the summer of 1988 and made some interesting discoveries. .

Q: You were there from '88 to when?

TONGOUR: I had a full three-year tour there from 1988 to 1991 and gained some valuable insights about "living in Paradise". For starters, it seemed as though nearly the entire post tried to curtail their tours. Apparently, this pattern remains true even to this day, stilling having one of the highest requests for curtailment in the service. Several years before I arrived, it turns out, the Department had sent a team of psychologists to the region to ascertain the reasons for the high rate of attempted curtailments, in other words the nature of the problems in Paradise. The report that emerged was fascinating. What I learned from it was that unlike the case in hardship posts such as Bangladesh, where many not only wish to stay but often extend their tours, this esprit de corps seemed to be lacking in a tropical island with beaches and so on. So the staff was not very happy. The situation in Barbados may cast some light on how we Foreign Service Officers behave in general. In a nutshell, I think, we in the Foreign Service thrive on a bit of "outside difficulty" which forces us to work together as a team and which builds our "esprit". What happens when you are in an English speaking island where one is very much on one's own. Strange as it may seem, many felt isolated. Barbados was not a big island but transportation is a problem - the roads are narrow for one thing - and it takes a long time to get from one part of the island to another and people were scattered. In addition to the lack of a sense of community stemming from this and the fact that individuals from different agencies were traveling constantly to different islands, there were problems associated with the fact that spouses could not work, the natives were not particularly friendly, etc. I was fortunate lucky to make some local friends but many Americans believed you could live in Barbados for three or four years and never see the inside of a local home. So, people started getting island fever. Initially everyone assumed they would be spending a lot of time at the beach, but the reality was that the officers had to work, and with the sun setting around six o'clock year round, that was a quickly thwarted expectation. Overall, it was an interesting learning experience. As I said, I was more fortunate than many in that I enjoyed my work and many aspects of my time there, but after a year, I, too, tried to curtail. And that experience taught me a great deal about how our personnel system really worked. What I encountered was a truly odd situation in which both my Post (Bridgetown) was willing to let me leave and there was an "at grade-in cone" position for me at Embassy Moscow, which apparently wanted me as well. Plus, the European Bureau weighed in to have me assigned to the slot in Moscow. And yet, personnel made a decision that had nothing to do with me or for that matter with find another better suited applicant for that job. Instead, it had to do with the fact that there was an officer working in Washington that had not served abroad in more than six years and Personnel was determined to place that person in Moscow. That is a summary of a much longer story which concluded with their sending someone to Moscow who, although she had the requisite background and language skills, did not want to go and for a time was most unhappy with the assignment - and so was I. Ultimately, though I'm glad I stayed in Barbados. I learned a great deal and it was all in all a positive experience.

Q: I would think one of the problems there would be, this is, you know, the place where you would put a political ambassador and the political ambassadors in a place like that would not necessarily be out of the top drawer of the selective political process.

TONGOUR: That may be. The first year I was there there was no ambassador at all because the White House wanted to send a wealthy businesswoman from Long Island with very close ties to the administration. Apparently, there were some problems, or some financial issues or irregularities, which prompted some negative reactions to her appointment. Her name was quietly withdrawn. There seemed to be several such problem cases, and we were without an ambassador for some time, and that in and of itself can become a problem.

I should point out that there were also other more substantive reasons for dissatisfaction at Post. If an officer had any ambition or interest in substantive issues and found himself in a part of the world which, no matter how lovely, did not seem to evoke strong interest in Washington , or if you wrote cables describing the political environment in these islands and had the sense that no one was paying attention, it could be quite frustrating. And more attention should have been paid. After all, each of these mini-states has a vote in the UN, just the same as China; yet they were, in fact, often overlooked. However, there were times when we were not neglected, namely during CODEL (Congressional Delegation) season. We did have a number of congressional and other high-ranking delegations, some of which I was able to oversee. In fact, I was the action officer for a vice-presidential visit when Dan Quayle came to visit. While such delegations were, of course, welcomed by the islanders, their leaders were well aware that some of these delegations did not come for the most substantive of reasons. Some definitely came to play golf and socialize, and the "boondoggle" aspects of these visits were demoralizing for the staff.

That said, as one of my bosses there noted, the fun part of this type of job is that you really are the big fish in a very small pond. And so I had two islands that were - I have to put these in quotes - "my islands" and I would visit frequently and attend their political conventions as well as have my own high-level meetings.

Q: For your two islands.

TONGOUR: Well, it was more than two, actually: St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which consists of a whole chain of islands, and St. Lucia. And in addition I followed some political developments in Barbados, as well. It was interesting attending various political rallies and party conventions. Moreover, during that period there was an active movement to unify the region by creating a federation among the so-called "Windward Islands". Such a movement had arisen in earlier periods. In this iteration, the idea was to bring together the four Windward Island nations into a federations. A constituent assembly was created for this new entity, and numerous meetings were held. These four states included: St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada and Dominica. The last of these was somewhat important then because the Prime Minister was Eugenia Charles, who had been instrumental in securing regional support for our 1983 intervention in Grenada. Grenada, too, was significant because we still had a large U.S. presence there. There were many interesting aspects to this unification process, which did, in fact, result in some common actions and institutions but not full blown unification, even to this day.

Q: Were the Cubans messing around there or had Grenada sort of turned them off that area?

TONGOUR: Minimally. But one unusual development relating to Cuba centered on the current Prime Minister of St. Vincent Ralph Gonsalves. Gonsalves had been a 1960s student leader, an activist-leftist, considered to be a socialist, if not communist. When I visited St. Vincent, I often met with him, as well as other more established politicians, and got to know him fairly well. Since I went to many of the political rallies, I made a point to attend his as well. Gonsalves ran as a candidate for Parliament several times in hopes of one day becoming Prime Minister one day. At that time, however, people insisted "Ralph" does not stand a chance - not because he wasn't intelligent, capable or event honest, but because of his former leftist background. On one occasion I went out with him on the "hustings" to see how he campaigned. One such outing took us out into the countryside, and I saw that he was , in fact, quite popular. Nevertheless, there was still strong sentiment against electing a former "commie". I mention this in some detail because he was ultimately elected - despite his former whatever affiliations - and serves as the Prime Minister today (2008). But then, as an aspiring politician he had traveled so Libya and Cuba, then considered pariah states. He was quite open to me about his travels and explaining why he went and how the Libyans had provided him and his then young bride the wherewithal to have a honeymoon in Rome while in transit to Libya. He was certainly not shy about talking about this, which made him even more interesting.

Q: Well, what about drugs?

TONGOUR: Then or now?

Q: Then.

TONGOUR: I ask because I have served in the region more recently. In the period of the late '80s and early '90s, drugs while certainly available in the region, were not as big an issue for some of the specific islands we were covering. They represented drug transit countries, rather than large scale users or producers. The local governments allowed our vessels to patrol the area and check things out, if you will. Obviously Colombia was the main priority, but the routes used to transport drugs from there to here and to Europe were clearly areas of concern as well. This continued to be a priority throughout the ensuing years. In the case of St. Vincent, I know that it produces a fair amount of marijuana for external sale, not so much for local use. Vincentians may use it as much as anyone, but local consumption is not a significant issue. And Ralph Gonsalves, while not necessarily favoring it, has not done much to stop it. Some of the drug dealers reputedly were backers of his election campaigns.

Q: Again, I am looking to this period, '88 to '91, was Jamaica or the Dominican Republic or Venezuela, I mean, did these countries have real influence or not?

TONGOUR: On whom?

Q: On the islands that you were dealing with.

TONGOUR: Not really, not really at all. I think that we were perceived as the elephant in the room. The smaller states kept wanting us to do more, particularly to provide more assistance, and frankly were not doing very much. Yet, in some ways we really did help. One case in point was that Barbados was then the regional hub for USAID for the Eastern Caribbean. Embassy Kingston had its own AID operation for Jamaica, as did Trinidad. Some years later, we essentially closed down the AID mission in Barbados and conducted regional programs out of Jamaica. Barbados had effectively "graduated" from the world of assistance programs. Over time, however, there was a realization that it didn't really work well to have all programs, especially for the southernmost islands, operated out of Jamaica, and a small satellite office was reestablished in Bridgetown. In short, we recognized their significance in terms of sheer numbers of islands and countries but there wasn't a sustained substantive interest in the region. Back in 1988, however, the 1983 intervention in Grenada was still relatively fresh in people's memories as were preoccupations about what the Cubans might do in the area. Actually, the Cubans are still doing many of the same things as before, building hospitals, providing doctors and medical training and other forms of assistance which are popular as well as relatively low cost, but having a high impact. They did it then, and they do it now, but there remains a certain amount of apprehension about accepting Cuban aid, which may not be as warranted now as before. As for Venezuela, certainly not a major factor then. Hugo Chavez was not a "player" and the entire political scene in Venezuela then was quite different from today. Personally, while I was following political developments on the different islands, I found there were very few distinguishing issues or platforms among the parties. Basically, it was a case of Tweedledee versus Tweedledum. Barbados is a perfect example, having two main political parties, with miniscule differences currently between them, although historically they were further apart. Today, people speak of the "B's" and the "D's" which are ideologically now almost interchangeable, with families often split between the two, but were once separated by powerful individual leaders.

Q: Although you were a political officer what about the impact of tourism, or were you having these huge ships come in and dump their passengers off for six hours of shopping or not?

TONGOUR: Yes, of course. But more significantly for us as a mission was the visa angle. Embassy Bridgetown was a regional hub, although at the time we did have a few more Embassies in the region than we do today. We subsequently closed our posts in places such as Antigua and Martinique. Yet, even then, Barbados was a visa issuing center. Consequently, we would have all these people coming from a mmyriad islands, lined up around the block - the Consulate was then on the main street - after having flown into Barbados in the morning and anticipating returning the same day. The town of Bridgetown always seemed filled with visa applicants seemingly milling around waiting for the U.S. Embassy to issue them a visa. Between the visa seekers and the sunburned tourists wandering around in their Bermuda shorts, downtown was quite a sight. In the crush of people, someone would invariably get robbed and wind up seeking Embassy assistance in resolving their problems. For us, there was never a shortage of work for us all, and political officers occasionally pitched in during peak season on the visa line. Plus, we did all the things that political officers do elsewhere - business roundtables, CODELs and delegations, cultural exchanges, and a fair amount of reporting.

Q: How about ambassadors? Did you have a couple of ambassadors while you were there?

TONGOUR: While I was there we only had one.

Q: Who was that?

TONGOUR: His name is G. Philip Hughes.

Q: G.-?

TONGOUR: G. Philip Hughes, which is the name he went by. His is an interesting and somewhat unusual story. Although he sometimes was called Phil, did not want anyone to know what the G in his name stood for. Apparently, his father had been a fairly well-known baseball player for a Chicago team during its only winning season (until recent years) and he bore his father's first name. The Ambassador, however, had no interest in baseball and did not want to be associated with his father's profession. In fact, when people would ask him what he played, he would answer: the organ. Although he came from the Midwest and studied at a college in Ohio before attending graduate school at Tufts, he had somehow acquired a slightly affected British accent along the way. He was actually a nice guy but the accent was initially misleading. So he arrived in Grenada my last year at Post. I went with him on his rounds to the islands I covered, as did my colleagues to other parts of the region. For us, it was quite a change from having had a very traditional Foreign Service Officer serving as the Chargï¿½ for two years to having a somewhat different type of individual as our Ambassador. And the new DCM was quite different from the previous one - a woman named Barbro Owens.

I mention her because she, too, had an unusual background. Barbro, who is retired now, is Scandinavian by birth - coming from Finland but of Swedish ancestry. Her first husband was an American diplomat whom she met in that region. She herself was an exceptionally bright woman who even earlier had done graduate work in the U.S. - at Princeton, I think. At some point after marrying this American Foreign Service officer whose last name is Owens, she entered the Foreign Service on her own. I don't remember whether she actually accompanied him to any of his posts, but they eventually divorced, and she went on to a number of tours in the region, including an earlier stint in the Caribbean. During our intervention in Grenada. So she knew the region. We had an interesting, even colorful group of people at Post then. Barbro, herself, eventually married the Admin Officer, who was there at the time.

Q: I was just wondering, you mention this and the beaches and the people all over, was it one of these things that people started playing around with other people's wives and husbands and things like this or was this a fairly staid-?

TONGOUR: I think Barbados was probably no different from any other Post on this score, with its share of activity but no great scandals. The Ambassador was not pleased that his DCM was going out with his Admin Officer but neither of the pair was married. Still, he seemed to think there was a certain lack of decorum for two of his senior staff to be dating each other, and he asked her to leave. In any case, they subsequently married.

On another topic, it's probably worth mentioning that in some ways it was an awkward period for the staff. After not having had an Ambassador for two years, we had gotten used to "being on our own" and it seemed a bit strange at first. There were a lot of expectations associated with his arrival as well as a lot of preparations, not to mention a shift in status for the political officers, who for some time had essentially been acting as our country's official representative. In my case, for example, I would escort him to islands where everyone already knew me and weren't exactly sure what to make of the "new guy" - perhaps not providing him the degree of deference he might have expected. It was an adjustment, simply having an Ambassador around. .

On the plus side, when time permitted, there was the sea, sun and the free flowing rum, but to give the islands their due, people did work. We had our share of issues to follow - often related to combating narco-trafficking in the region and minor bilateral disputes. However, it was certainly not the same as being in Tel Aviv or Moscow in terms of Washington's attention.

Q: Well then, after this time in the sun, whither?

TONGOUR: Well, I also became a single mother as a result during this period in connection with a long term relationship in Barbados. Just before returning to a fairly high-powered position on the Soviet Desk, I found myself pregnant and decided to have the baby. Obviously, that's a much longer story but this is not the place for it. .

Q: Let me just ask the question about this because we are doing the social thing, being a single mother, you know, in a certain period this would just have been a no no.

TONGOUR: Absolutely.

Q: Sort of what were the calculations and how did this- did this cause any problems or not?

TONGOUR: Are you talking about in my life as a whole or-

Q: I am talking the Foreign Service issue.

TONGOUR: Okay. Actually I can make this a broader discussion inasmuch as timing may have made all the difference in the world - my own timing and the times we were in for the Foreign Service. Had I been 22, perhaps the sky would have fallen. Who knows how the parents or my immediate world might have reacted. At this point in my life-

Q: How old were you?

TONGOUR: I was already in my forties, and parental disapproval was no longer an issue. In fact, my parents were quite happy to have a grandchild. Moreover, I was personally and financially self-sufficient. From the Foreign Service standpoint, I was very fortunate to wind up back in the proverbial "womb" of the Soviet Desk. When you earlier asked about being part of a particular community at State, I had already had one tour on the Soviet Desk, worked in Eastern European affairs, and these were, you might say, my people, and I felt as though I were going home again when I worked on the Soviet Desk the second time. I hadn't announced my pregnancy before starting the job, but that was not a problem. I took three months off after my son was born and then returned to work. I was fortunate in being able to afford a nanny, and, therefore, could return to work fulltime and carry my weight. Plus, my office was very welcoming to this new addition; except for an occasional bout of baby sickness, my child did not impinge on my work. You are absolutely right, though; a decade earlier and it might have been a real problem. I'm sure it would have been. Now, single motherhood seems to be quite common among women Foreign Service Officers, with some adopting and others having their own babies. That said, there is no question that in a broader sense, raising a child on one's own does impact on a career, and I know it did in my case.

For me, the main career problem or obstacle associated with single motherhood centered on assignment choices. I know that from that point on, each time I had to bid or make choices about where to go, I made decisions that I might not have made had I been childless. The system did not make it difficult for me; I basically made my own choices. Here is a perfect example: working on the Soviet desk, I sometimes worked long hours, but I was in Washington. Having worked on issues related to Moldova and Georgia, it would have been very logical and a real option to follow my Desk job in SOV with a tour in either Moldova or Georgia as Political Counselor. It was certainly a viable option. But when you have a one or two year old child, do you want to take him to new posts such as Tbilisi or Chisinau? The latter, in particular,, would have been a rough posting at that point, with out staff still living in hotels. Ultimately, I decided against these options and picking more "family-friendly postings, where the workload would be more or less normal, rather than perhaps seeking the "prize", if you will or more demanding, "serious" assignments in Moscow or other areas of the former Soviet Union. And as you know, there is a price to be paid for "lifestyle" tours.

Q: Well actually, of course, married people with children often made-

TONGOUR: That is right.

Q: I mean, you know, it just becomes part of the calculation.

We are talking about '91 to how long were you on the Soviet desk?

TONGOUR: That assignment was a regular Washington two-year tour, which started on a very significant date: August 19, 1991. I had returned to D.C. a few days before and was staying temporarily in a hotel. I recall watching the news before going to the office and seeing "breaking news" from Moscow to the effect Gorbachev was out. Meanwhile, as I'm sure I mentioned before, I had been thinking how different our bilateral relations were then as compared to a few years earlier and how much better the environment in this post-Cold War era. I was very much looking forward to a tranquil period in our relationship. Instead, we were immediately swamped - churning out contingency papers and analyses on how to deal with the "day after".

Q: This raises a question. You know, again and again I talk to other people and ask them, what was sort of the contribution of the CIA and all, and you know, the answer, at least maybe at the highest level, certainly of the NSC or something but basically there does not seem to be much substantive input and I think the problem seems to rest in the Agency one, is too big, so as it moves up through the layers of reports and all it gets honed down and all, it loses all its bite. And two, it is not as responsive to policy problems. In other words, what do we do today? I mean, it is a little too almost academic.

TONGOUR: That was certainly the case then. They clearly had some papers but they did not have "the" paper addressing what might happen immediately thereafter or likely scenarios in the aftermath of the fall of Gorbachev.

Q: So, you know, huge amounts of money are spent for what?

TONGOUR: We did not know, but we were somewhat cocky at that moment. Perhaps that's the wrong word, but after getting over the shock that we weren't going to be provided with instant scenarios from without, we concluded we would just come up with our own. And we did - drafting papers and sending them up our chain of command discussing the issue of "what is to be done".

Q: What was your responsibility?

TONGOUR: When I first came onboard I was expected to work on, among other things, a bilateral review commission intended to eliminate or minimize various, points of friction, such as the "25-mile" rule and other contentious issues. I actually no longer even recall what my initial portfolio was supposed to be since when you are assigned to a multi- person desk, you do enter with an assigned function. Given the fluctuating situation in the Soviet Union, our own individual assignments were also somewhat in flux. Still, we did prepare for a bilateral review commission which was eventually held, and we managed to get rid of the 25-mile rule and other outstanding headaches. But almost immediately we were all effectively drafted into small working groups based on the section to which we had been initially assigned. I was in the so-called bilateral section at first. Yet, within a few months the office configuration changed, with our office leadership deciding to divide SOV along geographical lines> My section dealt with Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Belarus. Another group was responsible for Central Asia, and a third focused on the Baltic states. We spent considerable figuring out what we should be called. There was no more Soviet Union or Soviet Desk. At first, we called ourselves ISCA, standing for Independent States and Commonwealth Affairs. Later the office became known as NIS (Newly Independent States) or CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) - there were several iterations. Our Office Director Larry Napper concluded that since the Soviet Union was breaking apart into independent states, we would transform ourselves accordingly, and essentially divide the existing office into groupings of separate country desks.

Q: Did you sort of bid among yourselves?

TONGOUR: Kind of. But it worked out well. I wound up with Georgia, which was viewed as a potential hot spot. However, it was decided that I could handle a somewhat larger portfolio. At the time Moldova was viewed as a "sleeper" and deemed a good complement to the already busy "Georgia account. Well little Moldova wound up having as many conflicts as Georgia; consequently, I wound up covering two wine producing states that were both embroiled in major internal struggles. My role, like that of my peers was initially to do whatever was needed: preparing option papers, figuring out next steps, etc. whether on the prospective commission or other projects on the docket and gradually shifting focus to serving as the first ever desk officer for the newly emerging countries of Georgia and Moldova. Initially, it was not clear whether Moldova would survive as an independent entity or be swallowed up by one of its neighbors - Romania or Russia - because of the ongoing conflict in region.

Q: Still got an army, a Soviet army sitting there.

TONGOUR: That is right, and a major portion of my work was to ensure that higher ups in the Department understood the situation and recognized that it did matter.

Q: Well, in the first place, looking at the whole, I do not know what you want to call it, the former Soviet desk or bureau, how would you describe sort of the spirit of things? Was this a hell of a lot of fun with the adrenaline pulsing through you and all that?

TONGOUR: Absolutely. It was a heady time, an exciting period in many ways. After all, this is the end of '91 and early '92. Not only was the Soviet Union coming apart, but major change is occurring in America as well - a new president and a different configuration of people at the top. At State, our Under Secretary was Strobe Talbott, who essentially oversaw, or basically was in charge of our policy toward the former Soviet Union. For us, there was real electricity in the air. I would not go so far as to say there was unvarnished optimism because we really had no idea what was going to happen but certainly there was never a dull moment. In our office, we were exhilarated by being a small part of the process associated with such monumental changes.

Q: Well let us take your two places; let us take Georgia first. What was the situation in Georgia?

TONGOUR: Georgia was in a state of real upheaval for several reasons. First, two active, full-blown conflicts were underway. One was the conflict in the region known as Ossetia, split between North and South Ossetia, with the former attached to Russia, and the latter remaining a part of Georgia. In adjacent areas with the same ethnic mixes, the basic question was whether they should remain divided or be united under one umbrella or another. Secondly, there was, and still remains, another active - though perhaps a bit more subdued - conflict in , Abkhazia, essentially a breakaway region in the western part of Georgia, where there was strong Russian influence, particularly along the coast. Then, too, a third region known as Ajaria had a strongman leader, who, while not attempting to secede, was ruling his territory as though he were an autonomous potentate. In addition to these tensions, was the issue of the "new kid in town", the new leader of Georgia being the former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, who was not universally beloved by the Georgians for several reasons. First, in their view, his longstanding, active service on behalf of the Soviets raised doubts questions about his bona fides as a real Georgian and his commitment to Georgia. I think he eventually persuaded them that he was but that cost him vis-ï¿½-vis the relationship with Russia. Secondly, he had come to power on the heels of the ouster of the heretofore quite popular nationalist leader Gamsakhurdia, which also made Shevardnadze a bit suspect. In addition to the previously mentioned struggles, his position was made more precarious by the fact that Russia and Russians had always regarded Georgia in a special way, as a civilized Christian nation amidst many Moslem groupings, one of their "own kind" in other words. For Russian, having their former (Soviet) Foreign Minister as the Georgian head of state was distasteful; adding insult to injury, he was also someone the U.S. very much liked.

Q: Yes, because he and Baker, our secretary of state, were practically the Bobbsey twins during the break up and the last gasp of the Soviet Union.

TONGOUR: Exactly. So that created a very exciting panorama. I recall sitting in on the meetings we held with Shevardnadze on the periphery of the UN General Assembly session, when he came to New York in his new capacity, which was fascinating. For our part, there was a great deal of sympathy for, investment and assistance to Georgia during that period, with considerably less activism, as I indicated in Moldova. But I have to admit that in some ways working on Moldova was actually more satisfying. There were certain parallels to my stint as the desk officer for Hungary and the Baltics. When the chain of command was not paying a great deal of attention to a particular area, the officer in charge could "push the envelope, put forward positions and even influence policy related to a particular country or situation. Basically, it was up to the desk officer to convince superiors that a particular country mattered and was strategically important. In the case of Moldova, my efforts seemed to work. I take personal satisfaction from having gradually gotten my bosses to focus more and more on Moldova. Although Georgia clearly started out as the regional darling, after a while Moldova increasingly was perceived as the "little engine that could". There was growing sympathy for the Moldovans standing up for themselves opting to make Romanian the national language while insisting on their independence, rather than being incorporated into Romania. Moldova wound up with a number of fans, if you will, in our office and the Department as a whole. Moldova was the little engine that could, you know. There was a certain gradual sympathy for the Moldovans standing up and the fact that they chose to have the Romanian language but that they did not want to be swallowed up by Romania gave them a lot of fans, if you will, in the European Bureau and the State Department as a whole

Q: Well, I want to stick to Georgia for a little while. How did we view, I mean, you had this dukedom off to one side, a warlord or something, and then you had the Russians in - was it Sochi, which I am told has beautiful- it is a great place for retired Soviet army officers.

TONGOUR: Right, right.

Q: And then the other one. I mean, what were we doing about this?

TONGOUR: We were trying to keep it together but there was a limit to what we could do. We were certainly providing various forms of assistance to the central government and to Shevardnadze, but there were also issues of national sovereignty and the extent we could or should intervene on his behalf. There were several different ethnic different groups, some of whom opposed him as a usurper as a result of the ouster of the popularly-elected Gamsakhurdia, whom Shevardnadze replaced. There was definitely a three- ring circus feeling to the situation, but certainly we provided substantial assistance, guidance, and advisor on a host of topics - how to write a constitution or hold parliamentary elections and so on. It was a booming enterprise. Our embassy there was a very lively place.

Q: And was there, in the first place was there a Georgian community, I mean, the head of the joint chiefs of staff was Shalikashvili who was from there but was there much of a Georgian American?

TONGOUR: Not really in the sense of a formal grouping, when compared to any of the other countries I have worked on - and, of course, this may have subsequently changed. I do not mean to imply there were no Georgian groups; there were some, but they were relatively small. I remember in the Adams Morgan area there was one restaurant run by a Georgian, who even called it a Georgian restaurant, but that was rare. By now, there are probably more, but then it was all too new. Likewise there was no formal Moldovan community to speak of, or at least not one that pressed to make itself known..

Q: Well, did you ourselves trying to initiate anything that would sort of ease the civil war or not or was it really something we just kept pretty well- we just had to sit there and watch developments?

TONGOUR: No, we did do more and concern was also expressed in the UN and other fora aimed at helping out and encouraging others to do the same. Similarly, there were bilateral overtures toward the Russians, pressing them to back off, to stand down and indicating that we would view Russian military involvement as a matter of grave concern. So, we engaged in diplomatic efforts and provided all sorts of assistance. Not only in Georgia, but in general we were quite supportive of these newly independent states. In the case of Georgia, and especially in the early phase of its independence, we sought to bolster Shevardnadze to the extent we could and to convey to the Russians that we would not look kindly upon attempts to undermine him. On several occasions when we really thought the Russians were about to intervene, we did issue strong demarches to this effect.

Q: Okay, Moldova. You had this, what, Transdniester, almost republic which was- I mean, what I gather, I mean, this is a great market for us to buy up Soviet equipment and _____. Were you involved in that?

TONGOUR: Other offices more specifically focused on military affairs were the ones directly involved in this, but obviously I stayed informed. Looking back on it now, if you consider the geography of the region, this was one conflict zone that made sense from the Russian perspective - much as Ukraine does as well. Given the large contingent of Russian speakers or ethnic Russians living there, both they and the Russian government saw them as but an extension of Russia. And from their standpoint, the "upstart" Romanians were effectively encroaching onto their turf. While willing to cede one side of the river, they were not willing to part with the Transnistrian region to the east, which they not only saw as theirs but where they had stockpiled military equipment and personnel. So, yes, Russian armaments and supplies were in abundance in this Russian-speaking enclave. One of the more interesting features of this region as a whole was that the populace had been educated in Russian for so long that while there were certainly plenty of individuals who spoke Romanian, especially at home, others who, regardless of their ethnicity, were more comfortable speaking in Russian. A similar situation prevails in eastern Ukraine, especially in the Odessa region, where many see themselves as both from Ukraine and ethnically or linguistically Russian; some of these do not speak Ukrainian well. And then, of course, in Transnistria there was General Lebedev, the general in charge of the military encampment in Transnistria, who had also been a major figure in the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan. He proved to be a key player in the Transnistrian conflict; later on, he actually ran for President of Russia as well. : He was quite a major figure at one time.

Q: Well, I would think that having Moldova you have the Romanians, you had the Ukrainians and you had the Russians.

TONGOUR: Moldova was quite ethnically diverse for so small a country. There was also a Turkic ethnic group, known as the Gagauz. This was a small contingent, originally from Turkey who maintain that they have been in Moldova for centuries. They and pockets of other nationalities made for an interesting mix. .

Q: Well, it used to be called Bessarabia, did it not?

TONGOUR: Part of it was Bessarabia, yes.

Q: Which was an oil producing-

TONGOUR: That is right.

Q: Are they still producing- Was there much oil there or not?

TONGOUR: There was some; I do not remember how much.

Q: Alright, we will stop here and we have been talking- you are going to review a little about Georgia but also Moldova and talk about the relationship of the Ukraine and with really- We have not talked really about the internal setup of Moldova and our relationship with them.

TONGOUR: I'll quickly mention that for the first year that I handled this portfolio, many months passed before a truly functioning government, in terms of inspiring confidence in its viability, really got off the ground. And there was considerable doubt as to whether Moldova would make it or rather that it would not be reintegrated into one of its neighboring states.

Okay, well we will pick it up then.

Okay, today is the 21st of February, 2008, with Nadia Tongour.

Q: Anyway, so, what were we talking about? What is the period- we are talking about when you were on the desk or were you going there?

TONGOUR: No. We had gotten up to basically 1991, and I think we had left off where I had returned from overseas in August of 1991 and begun working on the Soviet Desk.

Q: Broken your arm- had a baby and broke your arm.

TONGOUR: That came the next year but before I had that happened I had returned thinking I would be a desk officer on the traditional Soviet desk, working on U.S.-Soviet relations but my first day back coincided with the end of Gorbachev's rule. The period that followed was one of the most exciting and exhilarating of times, when we really tried to address a myriad "what ifs" an "what type of" situations.

Q: Bureaucracies interest me, particularly our State Department. Was there a fighting, did you sense a fighting and muscling, who was going to get the Ukraine and who was going to get Georgia, you know, this sort of thing?

TONGOUR: You mean when we were eventually breaking it up into desks?

Q: Yes.

TONGOUR: I don't know. Frankly, I think if it occurred, it happened at a much higher level. I think there was a sense that the people who were originally focusing on certain types of issues would naturally be assigned to certain portfolios, but initially we were simply divided into small groups. So for example, I was originally supposed to work in the Bilateral Section. As I previously mentioned, the office had previously been divided along functional lines. Now the Bilateral Section was basically reconfigured to be a regional office, with a few of us winding up working on Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and another group worked on the Caucasus, etc. What was noteworthy at that time was the notion that certain countries - not necessarily in terms of importance to us - would be "busier" than others and take up more of an officer's time. And so what we knew from the outset was that one officer would focus on Azerbaijan and Armenia and another - me in this case - would handle Georgia and "something else". That something else turned out to be Moldova. In retrospect, our internal situation on the Desk in late 1991 and early 1992 frankly mirrored the fluidity of the former Soviet Union. We were very much focused on the so-called bigger questions associated with what it meant for the Soviet Union to no longer exist and how to tailor our relationship to Russia, first and foremost, in this new scenario. Overall, there was a sense of quasi-optimism, if you will, on that score. We certainly did not want to overlook Russian misdeeds, whether in Georgia or elsewhere, but we (I'm speaking of our office in particular) wanted to be forward leaning and we sought to find ways to resolve some of the longstanding bilateral issues. And in fact, in thinking back on this period, I recall that we still were working on the Bilateral Review Commission, something that had been set in motion before the demise of the Soviet Union, intended to be an annual event in which we met with the Soviets work on or at least iron out our differences. So for much of the first months of the new regime the central question was how does the dissolution of the Soviet Union impact on our dealings with "new Russia" and then down the proverbial food chain with the other countries of the former Soviet Union.

Q: I can remember the feeling, I think the feeling of optimism was everywhere and you know, you had Baker and Shevardnadze walking hand in hand in Wyoming, you know.

TONGOUR: That is right. And to add one small comment to that, looking back at Moldova in light of the fact that Georgia certainly received more attention then, it would be fair to say that initially the reasons for the limited attention paid to Moldova had little or nothing to do with Russia. Given the ethnic breakdown of the region, our starting assumption regarding Moldova was that it would either choose to unite with Romania or Romania would make that choice for the Moldovans in some fashion or another. It was not that we didn't care at that point but it was not exactly a top priority. It became a bit more of a priority as well as a somewhat of a shock when tow things happened. First, "little Moldova", alone among former Soviet Republics paid off some of its debts, or rather its portion of the former Soviet debt owed to us, which endeared Moldova to us and fostered the image of Moldova as the little engine that could.

Q: You know, this goes back to after World War I when Finland paid off its debts and Finland won a place in our hearts that, you know, even I, as a small kid, were ever- say well, the Finns paid their debts.

TONGOUR: That is right. I do not know that Moldova completed the process, but the country made some good faith efforts on that score. Secondly, there was an election in Moldova and while I no longer remember the detail, the election basically was a referendum on unification with Romania. The general expectation going into the election was that the party favoring such unity would win; yet it did not. The actual winner was the more nationalistic "Moldova for Moldovans" or "Moldovans for Independence" type party. That took us back a bit. I would not say we were totally shocked but the outcome was somewhat unexpected.

Q: Did you figure out what were the factors; was it because Romania had been such a disaster under Ceausescu?

TONGOUR: Maybe, to a certain extent. However, there was a another, perhaps more salient, factor. I think we just assumed that Moldovans generally wanted to be part of a greater Romania and would be happy playing the role of younger brother. Frankly, there was a certain arrogance among the Romanians vis-a-vis Moldovans, regarding them somewhat as the country bumpkin cousins, while others, including us were treating them as a potentially "real" country. While the vast majority of Moldovans would never deny their ties or linguistic and cultural affinity to Romania, I think many wanted to see if they could survive on their own. The real shock was that Moldova was starting down this path at the very time when they experienced a major blow, namely the onset of the Transnistrian conflict, when the Russian-backed forces in that region staged a rebellion and refused to recognize Moldovan government authority. That was the official beginning of the conflict, in the summer of 1992, between Moldova and the "Transnistrian Authority", which in some form or another has persisted - more recently in a "cold war" manner -for lo these many years.

Q: What were you getting- were you in close consultation with the Romanian desk and what was sort of their attitude?

TONGOUR: We were. And initially, again, it was the Romanian desk that assumed the Moldovans would naturally gravitate to the orb of Bucharest. They were as surprised as w when the Moldovans opted for an independent path instead. Probably, my main contribution as the Moldovan Desk Officer was to convince my chain of command that it mattered that the Russian-back Transnistrian forces were undercutting the viability of this very fragile state and since it was a western leaning state, friendly to us and responsive in terms of its debt obligations, etc., we should either on our own or more likely in conjunction with regional groupings (e.g. the precursor of the OSCE) send observers and to some extent become engaged.

Q: What sort of role was Ukraine doing? I mean, Ukraine sort of sits a fork the lines of communication from the Transdniester region. How could sort of the Russian forces survive in that geographic position?

TONGOUR: Several years later I would be focusing more on Ukraine. At the time, I recall there was a somewhat fluid border situation, including the movement of some munitions and supplies. Overall, I'm sure the Ukrainians were more preoccupied with their own situation vis-a-vis Russia and focusing more on questions of immediate interest to them such as the future of Crimea and the Odessa region to involve themselves overly in what was happening in "Bessarabia". They clearly paid attention and may have offered some support but were not then seized with that conflict. .

Q: Well what about, what were we getting, what were you getting about what was going on in this Transdniester area?

TONGOUR: Officially our people were not even supposed to go to Transnistria and when they did, it was a major production, requiring permission from authorities on both sides of the river as well as from Washington. What was really remarkable was that we were the primary source of information, in the best sense of the word, for other, European countries, which were interested in the region but had fewer resources to commit to the area. Consequently, I wound up spending some time briefing European Embassies in Washington about what we were finding out about the Transnistrian situation, based on our albeit limited information. Gradually we got our own act together to inform the Russians that we were not indifferent to the fate of this small country, and encouraged them to stand down from real incursions or adverse actions.

Q: What was happening on the ground? Was the Soviet army, a division or what?

TONGOUR: Yes. I think it was called the 14th battalion or division (I can't remember) under General, Lebedev, who...

Q: Who later ran for president of the country.

TONGOUR: That is right, and he had been in Afghanistan and elsewhere. They had basically seized a major power plant that was in the Transnistrian region and were hindering Moldovan access to power. This was obviously a major problem for Moldova. The situation was dicey. It was not a "hot conflict" with major battles, but a conflict that was literally "close to home", with the establishment of the "Transnistrian Republic" just across a small river. In reality, it was somewhat of a standoff because the Moldovan military lacked the resources to really take on the sizeable Russian-Transnistrian forces, which called themselves the Transnistrian Army..

Q: Did you get a feel that, I mean, was this sort of a criminal conspiracy, I mean, was criminality sort of a major cause of the being for this Transdniester thing, smuggling, human trafficking, that sort of thing?

TONGOUR: You know, anymore it is hard to know which was the chicken or the egg or rather what was cause and what effect. The problem, which one finds throughout the former Soviet Union, certainly existed in Georgia as well. Over the course of hundreds of years Russians fanned out and lived in enclaves in these regions. There was a legitimate minority group, ethnically either Russian or Russian-speaking, living in these former republics and they were certainly not comfortable with the sudden turnaround. For some of them it was a matter of national prestige. Imagine how we would if suddenly Hawaii went off on its own. For those people of the previously dominant group nationalism was definitely a factor. I think for Lebedev and others of his ilk the issue then had little to do with drugs or criminality. Drugs and crime would become more salient factors later on.

Q: Were we trying, at your level, I mean, passing on to your colleagues in other places, overtures to the Russian desks, tell them to try to help or something like that?

TONGOUR: Oh yes. Well, I mean, it was nothing so formal. The Russian desk was 50 feet from my office. It was not as though we had to cross town to communicate. We certainly did talk constantly amongst ourselves and all the way up our food chain again about whatever was happening.

Something else that warrants mentioning is that in some respects our staff in the field were operating almost as though they were in the "wild west". Keep in mind there had not been anything resembling an embassy in Chisinau, so initially our mission was "housed" in a small, rather interesting structure, in which the entire post ate lunch together with the char force doubling as cooks, who made soup and bread each day for the staff. It was a cozy arrangement which seemed perfectly normal at the times. The Ambassador was the only person then at post who actually lived in an apartment, and it was far from palatial; the rest of the staff were all still living in hotels then. And the U.S. Embassy was the lucky one, the first to get up and running - opening up our shop as it were within the year. But there was a very positive feeling about the experience, and a great deal of camaraderie on the part of the staff. When I visited the post, I was very impressed with the high morale..

Q: Yes. I noticed it had gotten better when I went to Bishkek in, I think '94, and it was pretty primitive. You know, one place which would be considered a modest house here in Arlington and that is where the whole embassy was located.

Well, how about the role, and I do not want to get into details, but from the desk perspective were you getting much out of the CIA, from their analysis?

TONGOUR: Eventually we received some help from their analytical branch, and we received some useful support after the break up of the Soviet Union, but not much before then.

On another topic, I don't think we have fully exhausted our discussion of developments on the "Georgia front". Georgia, after all, was one of our top priorities. You asked if we nudged the Russia Desk. We certainly did on Moldovan issues and even more forcefully on George where we put whatever pressure we could on both the Russian and Georgian sides to stand down and not exacerbate problems in Abkhazia and South Ossetia - continuing issues even to this day. In that period, our President actually sent forward letters to both of their leaderships that our office drafted. .

Q: Well, Georgia of course, just because of sort of the people; I mean, you had Stalin coming out of there, you had Shevardnadze, who was a great friend of Baker and I do not know where he was at this time but Shalikashvili was at one point the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. So I mean, you had this Georgian connection with America, you know, it was recognizable and all.

TONGOUR: Well, even before Secretary Baker, his predecessor George Shultz had been very concerned about Georgian developments and close to its leadership. He was interested in Shevardnadze not simply as the leader of Georgia but as the former Soviet Foreign Minister and his primary interlocutor in the region when he had been Secretary. I remember, jumping ahead, the year after I left the Desk, I spent a year in San Francisco at the Asia Foundation and went down to Stanford, to the Hoover Institution at his request to brief him on what was going on in Georgia. By that point, he was already out of the government, but still interested in what was happening in that region.

Q: Well, were you involved in the shopping spree of the military and I guess intelligence agencies, trying to pick up Russian equipment which was up for sale, you know, surreptitiously or not, I mean, we were tried to pick up- and of course the former Soviet troops wanted to get rid of this stuff because they would get money for it.

TONGOUR: I was somewhat aware of these kinds of activities rather than directly involved. Several years later I had a job that involved assistance to the former Soviet Union, where we had a big program to "help" scientists who had previously worked biological warfare projects or nuclear research transition to civilian employment - somewhat similar to programs for scientists following World War II - and meaningful work. We weren't necessarily interested in having them emigrate but rather in ensuring that they were gainfully employed and not exporting their expertise or products to rogue states.

Q: Yes. Of course, this is a very big deal. Let's stick to Moldova for a bit, the government? Was it a relatively responsible government?

TONGOUR: At that time, very definitely. In a way, attaining power sort of hit them by surprise, too. Their leadership ranks included a group of young energetic types who seemed genuinely committed to Moldova. When I went there to visit, I recall meeting all kinds. I do not want to imply that everyone at the helm was a saint but in general there seemed to be a fairly decent group - especially when compared to some of the other former republics - then. But again, that was the early period. I have not followed Moldova closely in the intervening years, so I do not know what the current leadership represents.

Q: But at the time, I mean, these were-

TONGOUR: By the time we began to focus seriously on Moldova, the Moldovans were just having their first election and picking some fairly forward-leaning representatives who sought to assure us they wanted to maintain their independence and neither return to the Russian fold or unite with Romania.

Q: Did they have an embassy here?

TONGOUR: Not at the beginning, but, yes, by the end of my tour. All of the former republics did.

Q: Did we get involved in the training? I know we at one point here at the Foreign Service Institute where we are talking we were training, among others, Albanian diplomats. I, at about this time a retired Foreign Service officer, was sent to Kyrgyzstan to talk about setting up a consular service. I mean, we were trying to get these people into the community as fast as they could absorb the knowledge.

TONGOUR: Let's put it this way: I know they asked for guidance and support and acknowledged in many ways how unprepared they were to work in the diplomatic arena. Actually a few Moldovans had served as diplomats in the Soviet system but being on one's own was a different matter. But they had not reached the point of asking us to provide training for them at our Foreign Service Institute. I think we had gotten around to instituting International Visitor Programs for them, including programs for journalists traveling to the States. But in terms of formal training programs, I think we were further along with Georgia.

Q: Well, you were saying that you found yourself paying more attention to Moldova much to your surprise than you were to Georgia.

TONGOUR: No. I would not say more than Georgia but rather roughly the same; yet this defied expectations because where there were many people focusing on Georgia, relatively few paid attention to Moldova at the outset. Essentially, if there were papers to be written on Moldova - and our business consisted largely in writing briefing memos and sending them up the ranks - or if someone would be pushing the envelope regarding Moldova, it would basically happen at the midlevel officer level - in this period basically me. As for Georgia, on the other hand, there were many other people equally willing to push for Georgia. Certainly, I was the desk officer, but there were others waving the flag. My main point here is that while my bosses expected that I would spend 75 to 80 percent of my time on Georgia, with the remainder on Moldova, in fact, Moldova took up its fair share. Gradually, with the blessings of my supervisors, there was an increasingly widespread recognition that more attention to this small country was warranted.

Another interesting factor worth mentioning is just how difficult the Russians were making it to get to travel to Georgia. If you wanted to go to Tbilisi, it was no mean feat. I remember taking an orientation trip to my two posts. It was relatively easy to get to Moldova via Frankfurt or Moscow or event Kiev, in short from various places. But for Georgia, at that time there was a commercial flight once a week from Vienna or the iffy alternative of flying from Moscow when gas was available. In that period, Aeroflot officially no longer flew to Georgia. An Aeroflot subsidiary supposedly had a contract for flights to Tbilisi, but the arrangement was fluid at best. As I was leaving Washington for this trip, my colleagues bet that I could not make it from Moldova to Georgia via Moscow in one day. The first part - Chisinau to Moscow - was easy, But once in Moscow, there was no sign that Aeroflot or any other carrier would be flying to Tbilisi that day. At least no flights were listed. Eventually I learned that I had to find a certain kiosk, a booth with a window, where one could pay for a ticket and be told that when sufficient money was raised to purchase gasoline for the plane, the flight would depart. I remember being told not to wander too far away because an announcement could be made at any time. This conversation was in Russian, which fortunately I spoke. I can't imagine what would have happened otherwise. As it was, I had to ask countless persons for information and guidance. The loudspeaker announcements were far from clear. In fact, the message concerning the departing Tbilisi flight was scarcely intelligible or audible. In short, I spent five or six hours waiting to see whether or not there would be a plane. After a time, people in that section of the waiting area began talking to each other, and we became sort of comrades in arms, all waiting for the same plane. Finally, the plane was called. Presumably, they succeeded in getting enough money for gas. And we walked across the tarmac looking a bit like refugees clutching our bags. I will never forget this experience. I have flown in a lot of bad planes but this may have been the worst. Standing at the top of the stairway was a guy who looked to be a character in a mafia film smoking a cigarette - smoking very near the plane's gas tank. Once inside, I saw actual chickens in the open, overstuffed overhead compartments. Eventually, we took off and eventually landed, and the pilot, to give him his due, landed on an icy runway as though on a dime. The point of all this is that by the end of the week I was at the Tbilisi airport waiting for the flight from Vienna, and it was equally iffy whether the return flight would be able to take off because the availability of gas in Tbilisi, likewise provided by the Russian gas company, was also uncertain. So the Russians were not making it easy for the Georgians then.

Q: What did you observe when you got to Georgia, to Tbilisi and all? What was your impression?

TONGOUR: What I observed was that the country basically had an edgy feel to it. Everywhere you went, there was a sense that someone was probably armed and that there was probably a good reason for the metal detectors at the entrance of the main hotel for Westerners. It was common knowledge that there had been shootings at the hotel, involving supporters of the previously elected government and its opponents. As I mentioned Shevardnadze was not initially the darling of all Georgians, even if he may have been ours and that of other nations. After all, Gamsakhurdia had been duly elected president and then been ousted by forces deemed more sympathetic, with Shevardnadze emerging from the latter group. The story was more convoluted than this but basically he was invited to return by the elements opposing Gamsakhurdia, who still had a strong following in the western part of the country. And even further west was the region of Abkhazia were tension was and remains rife. Even in the streets of Tbilisi you could see where fighting had occurred, with old bullet holes and shattered windows still visible. If Chisinau seemed somewhat dull, or gray despite some nice buildings (some of a backwater like a setting for a Chekhovian play), Tbilisi seemed a bit dicey by comparison. This was in the beginning, when our support was only beginning to pour in. Our Embassy there, however, was a former palatial residence, if not an actual palace, though not a fully furnished one. There, too, the staff ate lunch together on the premises but in a room resembling a fancy hall. Moreover, our staff were already living in apartments - another contrast to Chisinau - and they were quite nice. Tbilisi had many interesting places to visit, but the slight feeling of danger in the air was definitely present.

Q: How well were we able to work with them, I mean, our embassy and all, to work with them in Georgia?

TONGOUR: Within Tbilisi?

Q: Tbilisi.

TONGOUR: In Tbilisi they were able to work quite well but there were some restrictions on their mobility; staff were not encouraged to roam around. On one level, the situation was quite positive in that the Shevardnadze government was very responsive and receptive to us, but Embassy personnel were told not to go out at night unless accompanied by "escorts". That was the way the people lived then; crime and violence were very real concerns.

Q: Who was our ambassador?

TONGOUR: Ambassador Kent Brown, a very good guy and very enthusiastic about Georgia. I have known several of the others: Bill Courtney who served there after Ambassador Brown and later still John Tefft, our current ambassador. And it seemed that everyone who served there somehow got hooked on Georgia and its people. The Georgians in general are very charming and the country is colorful, with a rich history, and a Christian countries which also adds to its appeal for Americans.

Q: Were you feeling any Georgian ï¿½migrï¿½ influence when you were on the desk and all?

TONGOUR: Very little. We began talking about this last time. There may have been more later on, when I had another tour that dealt with the former Soviet Union. Certainly in the 1999-2001 period there was a much greater degree of coordinated activity. Frankly, the only desk in which I was exposed to substantial ï¿½migrï¿½ activity was during my tour as the Hungary and Baltic Republics Desk Officer. Both had very active ï¿½migrï¿½ elements here who were keen on staying in close contact with the State Department. I do not know how many Moldovans there are in the U.S. Certainly there were groups that called on us, especially when Moldovan officials were here visiting, but it was nothing comparable to the Ukrainian lobbies, which I got to know later. And there were definitely some Georgians too.

Q: Well, I would think that- maybe I got- I know from Armenia supposedly but with Georgia, I am told, that you know, there used to be almost daily flights of people coming from these Caucasian areas of the Soviet Union go to Moscow and they would have big baskets full of stuff which they would sell.

TONGOUR: Absolutely.

Q: And I was wondering, was that trade completely stopped pretty much?

TONGOUR: I do not think so. I think that the black market trade continued and that was where one found much of the so-called Russian mafia. This may have toned down a bit in recent years, but I don't really know. A recent movie called "Eastern Promises" dealt with just this theme with many people becoming very wealthy, and a number of these originating in the Caucasus and then making it big in Moscow. As for your question about the differences between the Georgians and Armenians here, I'd have to say that while the Georgians got to know our leadership and developed close relationships at the top, they had no enclaves comparable to places in California and elsewhere of strong Armenian communities having enormous influence.

Q: Was there any spillover of Armenians into Georgia?

TONGOUR: Yes. There is actually a southern province of Georgia with a large Armenian population, but it was a fairly quiet group and did not put undue pressure on the Georgian government. But, I don't know what the situation is today. Quite possibly as other groups began agitating for more rights within Georgia, the Armenians may have grown more vocal as well. We don't here much about that area. Earlier, we spoke a bit about the conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia but there was also a strongman in another region known as Ajaria. He had not tried to break away but at the time was operating as though he was in control of his own fiefdom . So Georgia was plagued with a smattering of groups seeking to assert their own autonomy as well as other entities engaged in nefarious or criminal activities such as kidnappings and robberies.

Q: I assume that if one traveled by car, if you were a diplomat, that the police would stop you and basically ask, you know, you would have to slip them some money. I certainly found that in Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and I am told this happens all over. That is how the police get their salary.

TONGOUR: That is right. That happens in other parts of the world as well. I know that was the way it worked in Mexico as well.

Q: How about, while you were there did you find yourself dealing with the non-governmental organizations? Because the former Soviet Union was awash with all these groups that were coming out to do good or do well or something.

TONGOUR: Some. I have to tell you that in recent years I have worked with NGOs so much more that by comparison that particular period did not seem to be as rife with them. In the beginning stages of state formation, much of the outcry, to the extent that outcries regarding who did what to whom existed, centered on what the Russians collectively were doing in a particular area. For example, there was considerable pressure from human rights groups regarding individuals arrested by Transnistrian authorities, persons languishing in jails, or complaints about mistreatment of civilians (both Georgians and Abkhaz) in Abkhazia, primarily by Russian-backed elements. At that juncture, the bulk of such criticism was not leveled at the "host" Georgian or Moldovan governments. .

Q: Well, were you involved in supporting our efforts in nation building?

TONGOUR: Yes, but we did not call it that then. That terminology seemed to emerge a few years down the pike. That was in fact what we were doing. We were seeking ways to aid civil society, promote elections, combat corruption - all the things that we think of today when we speak of governance and nation building, and that we continue to do. However, at that point we were still at stage one, namely how to build a government or some sort of political entity that was not simply a throwback to the old Soviet system. Even more basic: how to stage elections in these regions, how to secure the elections and ensure non-interference by the Russians. Another focal point was how to foster a modus vivendi with a former giant in a now newly diminished status and help it move forward in a positive way and forestall its devoting too much of its energy on the "Near Abroad". A few years later, the orientation would shift, and we would focus more on providing "concrete assistance" - giving grants, building schools (including business schools) and other practical support as well as opportunities for their people to come here for training. In some ways we felt as though we were helping to give birth - delivering countries rather than individuals.

Q: Well, you were doing this in what, '91 to?

TONGOUR: To '93. In the summer of '93, I embarked on my next assignment, which was Pearson Fellowship with the Asia Foundation in San Francisco.

Q: Well, could you explain what the Pearson was and then what you did.

TONGOUR: The Pearson Fellowship Program was named for a former Senator who sought to foster better ties and understanding between the Department and the Congress or in a broader sense to build bridges between the Executive and Legislatives branches. So a program was established - I no longer recall when it was set up - that provided a one-year assignment for Foreign Service officers (other government agencies subsequently became involved in the program as well) working on the Hill. Actually, there were from the outset two types of programs, one of which presupposed you would spend a six-month period working on the House side and a similar term in the Senate. The other program included an academic component wherein one would spend a semester at Johns Hopkins (SAIS) in Washington or some other academic institution in the vicinity taking relevant courses and then work for a congressman or a staff committee for the remainder of the tour. The initial Pearson Program was strictly focused on links to Congress, with a dozen to 20 people participating each year. Over time, the program evolved and came to include other governmental or quasi-governmental . In other words, there began to be Pearson Fellowships for assignments to municipal governments, such as a tour in the office of the Mayor of San Francisco. Then it expanded further to encompass a few associations and non-governmental organizations. These groups would have to apply to obtain a Pearson Fellow for their staff and commit to paying the associated administrative costs for the officer selected; however, the Department would continue to pay the basic salary.

By the time I became a Fellow, the program had expanded well beyond the Congress, and there were Pearsons in a number of American cities and at various organizations. When I applied for a Pearson, and specifically for an assignment with the Asia Foundation in San Francisco, I really did not expect to be selected because although I had considerable knowledge about the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, I was certainly no expert on Asia. However, it turned out the Foundation was not at that moment looking for another China hand but rather someone who was familiar with the Central Asian region of the former Soviet Union, and for good reasons because it was then considering whether to expand the Foundation's programming into that area. In the end, I was selected to spend a year in San Francisco as a Pearson Fellow for The Asia Foundation. .

Q: This would be from '93 to '94?

TONGOUR: That is right, from the summer of '93 to the summer of '94. As you can imagine, being unaware of the Foundation's emerging interest in Central Asia, I was somewhat surprised at being chosen. Subsequently, I discovered that aside from their substantive interest in the former Soviet Republics, the leadership of the Foundation regarded me as having some "accidental pluses" I was unaware of. It turned out that the then president of The Asia Foundation was an alumnus of my graduate school and very attached to the school. d so-

Q: Your graduate school being?

TONGOUR: Stanford. So, having attended Stanford, he probably viewed my having studied there as a positive as well. Then, too, it turned out that the person who was to be my supervisor had attended college at Hamilton College, the small liberal arts school in upstate New York, where I had earlier taught. I imagine that this, too, was seen as a plus. In any case, it was a nice match for all concerned, and working at The Asia Foundation was a fascinating experience for me in many respects.

Q: I Okay, what were they doing and what were you doing?

TONGOUR: Okay. The Asia Foundation had a number of different programs such as democracy promotion, good governance, rule of law and a book program involving the shipping of books all over Asia - to mention but a few. Actually Asia Foundation had an interesting history. It was founded right after World War II, during the Cold War, initially as a vehicle to combat the spread of communism in Asia. In its early days, the Foundation wound up accepting some funding from the CIA, which became a problem in the '60s when this became public knowledge. Thereafter, The Asia Foundation (TAF) resolved not to accept any more money from the Agency, and no longer did so. Subsequently, TAF received funding from AID and other USG agencies, but its prior associating somewhat tarnished its reputation for a time, with TAF having to fight the impression in some quarters of being an offshoot of the Agency. I think this is no longer an issue, merely a part of the Foundation's history. Anyway, TAF now has programs in many Asian countries, with resident representatives and staffs throughout the region. It's a very responsible organization.

When I came onboard they were not only working on their usual range of democracy programs, but also on a relatively new conflict resolution project, which I unexpectedly got involved in. But initially, my work centered on carrying out an assessment of whether or not it was feasible or made sense for TAF to become more actively involved in Central Asia. I researched the topic, provided my own analysis, and prepared a recommendation to the effect that if resources were no obstacle, much could be done; however, given limited resources, there were a few things that could be done that would not be very costly and could be played out over a longer term. This way they would not have to plunge into Central Asia where as an institution TAF did not necessarily have a comparative advantage but could instead undertake relatively low cost efforts such as such as expanding their book program into the region or invite Central Asians to conferences that TAF was sponsoring and thereby make itself more widely known. And, fact, TAF did invite several prominent Central Asians to a conflict resolution conference being held during that period as well as invite visiting dignitaries from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to stop by the Asia Foundation when they were in town. These were among the recommendations I contributed as part of my assignment. .

One very interesting and unexpected aspect of this assignment was the fact that I was allowed to work on the preparations for various conferences that TAF sponsored. For example, I worked on a conference held in Korea that dealt with various aspects of the democratization process. For that conference, I served as notetaker and had the opportunity to really see how this type of NGO functioned. On a separate track, TAF hosted a conflict resolution and culture conference, which was quite complicated both in terms of organization and content, that was held in Malaysia and involved three different host organizations. And once again, I was able to participate fully.

Q: What was your impression of the value of these conferences?

TONGOUR: I questioned it on a certain level. However, I was well aware that I was fairly new to the "conference scene". Later in my career, I would see many more conferences and could better assess their value. The TAF conferences I attended were very professional. But in some respects the value was mixed - in other words a qualified positive but perhaps also a qualified negative. On the negative side, such conferences do tend to resemble other academic conferences where people come together with professional counterparts and present papers which eventually are assembled into a book. As a concept, it's not terribly original or new. And yet, if that book appears in certain areas or reaches reading audiences that normally do not have the opportunity to talk about democracy, freedom or how to change their societies, then perhaps there is truly some positive impact. For example, there were people at that conference who had come out of China - remember this was more than a decade ago when the situation there was quite different - and it may have been an eye opener for them.

Q: Which conference?

TONGOUR: The democracy one first.

Q: This is the one in Seoul?

TONGOUR: Actually, it was not in Seoul but in a historical city in the south eastern corner of Korea, whose name is almost indistinguishable from another Korean city in the center of the country. But this was the medieval capital, with incredible burial mounds and preserved art works. In any case, we're talking about late '93 or early '94, and the participants were quite open in discussing the problems in China and elsewhere in the region. The Chinese participants seemed to respond quite positively to the free flowing conversations taking place around them. In other words, there was an easy exchange of ideas and information, including discussions about concepts such as the "value" of corruption in moving certain societies forward (greasing the wheels in effect). It was eye-opening even for us because the notion that corruption can have a positive value up to a point is not an idea we normally would subscribe to. Likewise, there was considerable talk of alternatives. Singapore, for example did not have much corruption, but it was certainly not democratic either. So the exchange of contacts, the exchange of views and the inclusion of people from more repressive societies was definitely worthwhile.

Q: What was your impression of the powers that be within the Asia Foundation? Were these do-gooders, practical people or political types; I mean, what were you getting from them?

TONGOUR: My exposure was quite positive. When you are only on an assignment for a relatively short period, you do not necessarily see the internal problems of an organization. The management was definitely practical, realistic and seeking to do the best work possible and attain achievable goals. The conflict resolution conference, moreover, would demonstrate additional qualities or a different side of the leadership, namely that in addition to be generally effective, TAF leadership was wiling to push the envelope a little, to try different approaches that were beyond the usual or standard operating procedure for an NGO. In this instance, undertaking a somewhat unusual conflict resolution conference cohosted by an Australian university, a Malaysian group, and TAF which sought to meld together both theoreticians and practitioners was a very complicated endeavor and not part of TAF's usual modus operandi.

Q: Well, did you find yourself, I mean, you are coming out of the Foreign Service world where you can call yourself, you know, you might say the real world; I am not trying to put pejorative or non-pejorative terms on it, but the academic world, and this is a mellowing _____ where there are theories and often somebody has dealt with it says that is a fine theory but it will not work, you know, I mean, did you find yourself siding with the practitioners as opposed to the theorists or did you- how did you find this world?

TONGOUR: That is a good question. As you noted, I had come out of the academic world some time before, but by this point I tended to question more the overall value of conferences from the standpoint of how do they help the average Malaysian or people in general. Certain aspects of the democracy conference gave rise to this type of questioning - more so than in the case of the conflict resolution conference, which had a number of practical aspects. And yet, even the democracy conference was a positive endeavor, resulting in good literature and actually a conference book, which I had a role in producing, and definitely seemed to have real merit for the participants from China and other repressive societies. The other conference, while quite idealistic in orientation, included exercises that drew from Maoris and other societies, whereby we could learn how they handled day-to-day conflicts in their villages and larger communities.

Q: This is in New Zealand.

TONGOUR: Yes. We considered how the indigenous tribes in a particular area handled certain problems, and in so doing, we mixed and matched theoreticians with practitioners - indeed the conference included a variety of practitioners from all sorts of unusual groups as well as representatives from parties in conflict such as the Tamils and Sinhalese of Sri Lanka. While it may not have been completely successful, I could see real possibilities emerging form the process.

Q: Well of course a lot of these programs are designed, really two things; one, to open people's minds to different ways and the other one is to make contact with people. You go to these conferences and here are people who have maybe been rather isolated and finding people of like thought in other places and this is probably the great value, do you not thing?

TONGOUR: That's true. The organizers produced widely distributed lists, not only of the participants and their organizations but also relevant associations and groups, as well as how to contact and even deal with them. Plus there was the wonderful camaraderie of like-minded souls all gathered together; from that standpoint alone it was a huge success. Personally, I found it very educational and learned a great deal. As to what this all contributed to the greater good is hard to say or to quantify. In my case, I later wound up in a job that required my working on Asian issues, and I was able to draw from what I learned from these conferences and other TAF activities.

Q: Did you get any feel for how- this would be the Clinton Administration fairly early on. How it was doing Asia-wise?

TONGOUR: Being in San Francisco, the concerns were slightly different. There, the main issue continued to be funding. Our focus was perhaps narrower or more myopic but we tended to focus or worry about whether the USG would fund this or that particular program. That said, as a result of the conflict resolution conference - and this in a way answers your question - TAF applied for grants to continue its work in this field. I personally worked on a grant proposal which was approved.. This somewhat of a circular answer but there was definitely an openness in that period and a willingness to try new programs that might prove beneficial. The environment was certainly more open than today.

Q: Well then, '94, whither?

TONGOUR: Before leaving this topic, there was one sideline to this assignment that probably is worth mentioning, namely the expectations of the Department that I should combine my work at The Asia Foundation with certain tasks directly of benefit to the Department such as informal recruiting, visiting various colleges in the area and giving speeches or talking about Foreign Service life, plus simply making myself available to groups or individuals wanting to know more about the career. For example, a former supervisor of mine was during this period a Pearson at Stanford's Hoover Institution. Knowing that I was in the area and also that George Shultz (then at Hoover) remained interested in hearing the latest word on Georgia, he invited me down to brief the former Secretary. We wound up having an excellent discussion that led Shultz to tell me that he would soon be having a meeting with some young Georgian students and to invite me to talk to them about U.S. - Georgian relations. So, I was still fulfilling a certain amount of my role as a State Department officer. During the course of my year in San Francisco, the TAF leadership graciously asked if I could extend for a second year. I would have welcomed the opportunity, but the Department effectively said one year of living the good life in San Francisco was enough. I should probably mention that the Pearson assignment also allowed me to visit half a dozen countries as a result of various TAF projects. .

Q: Well, did you do any recruiting?

TONGOUR: I did - in the sense of going to Berkeley, San Francisco State, and Stanford, as well as several other schools to talk about life in the Foreign Service.

Q: One of my colleagues here, Les McBee, was diplomat in residence at Berkeley, just came back from that, and said he went to Stanford to do some recruiting and found it- sort of a brick wall because almost everybody there would say well, how much do you make. There was not much interest at all in what you might call public service.

TONGOUR: Well, Stanford may have gone through another cycle but there was a period, somewhat of a brief window when event the so-called "Stanford farm" was, if not radicalized a la Berkeley, then at least quite civic minded or socially conscious.

But, in any event, I soon had to return to the cycle of bidding on normal tours of duty. In fact, that had started even before I went out to California because the bidding cycle in effect begins sometimes more than a year in advance. In my case, I found out after I arrived in San Francisco that I would next go to Rio de Janeiro, by way of a short course in Portuguese. Consequently, after leaving California in the summer of 1994, I came back here to Washington and spent three or four months at our Foreign Service Institute studying Portuguese. And in December of 1994, I headed down to Rio.

Q: Good heavens. This is quite a change.

TONGOUR: Isn't it?

Q: You were in Rio from when to when?

TONGOUR: I was there for two and a half years, from December 1994 to the summer of 1997. The reason for this slightly unusual period is that I curtailed my tour by a few months in order to get onto what was called the summer cycle for the Department, since most jobs become available then. .

Q: Well, how did this come about? I mean, your Caribbean time could not carry over to Rio and the rest of the time you were pretty much, you know, Eastern Bloc.

Q: This is tape five, side one with Nadia Tongour.

TONGOUR: When I went out to San Francisco, it was just a year and a half, and we left a year later. While I was well aware that from a career standpoint it would make sense to go next to Georgia or Moldova or elsewhere in Eastern Europe, I thought it might be very difficult from a family perspective. So I consciously bid on assignments that I thought would be satisfying and that would allow for nanny care and all that goes with it. Having already served in Latin America (my first posting in Mexico) and done a stint in the Caribbean, I was not out of the question as a candidate for an ARA, now WHA (Western Hemisphere Affairs), posting. And the other part of it was that Rio de Janeiro was at that time one of our largest consulates, having something on the order of 70 American direct hires and a much larger contingent of Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs); nevertheless, it was a consulate and many ambitious officers would have had second thoughts about serving in such a post. In a way that might have been a mistake for those who wrote of Rio or Sao Paulo because Rio had long been the political capital of the country and many of the most prominent Brazilians, the movers and shakers, still tended to scorn the inland capital of Brasilia, which then still lacked charm, and spent as much time as possible in their home cities of Rio or Sao Paulo. In other words, Brazilian political leaders of that period had somewhat of a commuter existence, spending Tuesdays through Thursdays in Brasilia and the remainder of the week and all holidays in their home cities. For political officers this was wonderful in that we gained access to many officials who might have been too busy to see political officers in Brasilia since their time there was devoted to attending congressional sessions or other required activities. Back home, however, they tended to be more relaxed and accessible to us. Of course, Rio was a beautiful city to live in, with numerous advantages as well as some drawbacks.

Q: What was your job?

TONGOUR: I was the senior political officer. We had a combined pol-econ section. I actually wound up running the section for about seven or eight months during a staffing gap, and for a month or two I served as Acting Consul General, again because of a gap between the former and prospective Consul General.

Q: Who were the Consul Generals when you were there?

TONGOUR: My first year the CG was David Zweifel, who subsequently retired from the Foreign Service, but may still be around doing WAE work. Subsequently, James (Jim) Derham took over. He spent a number of years in and out of Brazil and the region as a whole and most recently was our Ambassador to Guatemala.

So, as a political officer, what did I do? The Consulate covered five states in Brazil. Many people do not realize that Brazil is larger than the land mass of the lower 48 United States. Consequently, it was comparable to covering the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S. During that period, there were numerous elections - municipal, local and state - and I would do the normal political reporting on these. I had contacts across the spectrum of society in Rio and met with political and societal leaders. . I was very active in recommending people for visitor programs, the so-called International Visitor Program as well as other grants. Of course there was considerable reporting on drugs, crime, and street children which represented a major social issue. I also dealt extensively with various NGOs in the society and worked closely with them, providing whatever assistance we could. CODELs, congressional delegations - we had a lot of them, some more credible than others. One such CODEL which I will never forget - the head of which is still a congressman - managed to time its visit for Easter week where there was absolutely nothing in terms of work going on. The members were was absolutely appalled that most of the jewelry stores would not open just for their visit. I remember accompanying this CODEL to a fancy restaurant and a reporter and cameraman showed up from the local press; the head of the delegation was outraged that the media had been allowed to show up and he actually raged at us because he assumed the Consulate had permitted or even encouraged the press to appear. His main concern was that his constituents would not like to see him out gallivanting around Rio in this way, and the pictures might get out.

Q: Who was this?

TONGOUR: He was one of the Burtons (Dan, I think) from the Midwest, and he still rants quite a bit. I heard him on the news just recently bashing a critic and calling him a liar. I found myself thinking about "pots and kettles". In any case we had our share of people like that, and we definitely organized meetings, trips and other outings for them - as well as the obligatory jewelry stores. Still it was a fascinating experience.

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

TONGOUR: Well, the government was one we were quite keen on. Traditionally, Brazil had a policy of one-term presidents; reelections were not allowed, until the presidency of Cardoso who was at the help at that time. An amendment to allow for re-election of the president was a major development of the period. Cardoso, the immediate predecessor to the incumbent Luis (Lula) Ignacio da Silva, was considered a moderate reform-minded president who, in fact, succeeded in more or less stabilizing the currency, a phenomenal achievement given that Brazil had had skyrocketing inflation on and off for decades with tragic consequences for the country. Just before I arrived there was a shift to a new currency, the "Real", which at least initially was more or less pegged to the dollar, with an exchange rate that fluctuated but for some time stayed fairly close to a one to one rate. The Real was fairly popular and remains the currency still. In any case, the Brazilians amended their constitutions, thereby allowing Cardoso and subsequent presidents to run for re-election. Overall, it was a positive period. There were inevitable disagreements but we were very favorably disposed toward Cardoso's administration.

Q: How would you characterize the attitude or attitudes towards the United States at this particular time?

TONGOUR: Brazilian intellectuals and Brazilian activists basically were very skeptical about the United States. The problem in Brazil is that while traditionally the Brazilian left, including the Workers' Party (PT) , for example, that current President Lula comes from, had its share of corruption and problems, these were nothing compared to the kinds of shenanigans that the more right wing parties were involved with. Moreover, since the right wing parties had traditionally been associated with the dictatorship that had controlled Brazil for many years and were also the parties of the landed aristocracy or the ranchers in the Amazon, timber cutters - in other words forces that were not environmentally-friendly or progressive - they tended to be more sympathetic to the U.S. For our part we were sometimes ambivalent, and to use the old clichï¿½, we sometimes held our noses when dealing with some of the less savory groups, viewing them in some instances as the lesser evil. In other words, the USG as a whole was still uncomfortable with Latin American leftist entities. We have grown much more comfortable with Lula in recent years but then our government was still less than thrilled with the idea of some of these leftists coming to power. Now the history of the Brazilian left is quite rich and colorful and includes members of what was known as the Sim Terra Movement which supports landless workers. This group did not exactly embrace the policies of the USG. I would have to say that personally speaking, one great satisfaction came from being able to travel to some outlying areas and actually meet some Sim Terra members - when they were willing to meet with me. I felt that when they were willing to meet and share their views, it was a real breakthrough and I learned a great deal about what they were working on.

Q: Did you sense that the leftist movement was interested in what was happening in the United States or were they sort of almost genetically forms of suspicious or opposed to it?

TONGOUR: Both. I think they were suspicious and "genetically" predisposed to oppose us. On the other hand they are educated. I mean, for the most part they came from the educated elite. One sad aspect related to the Brazilian left is the continuing dichotomy between the extremely poor and extremely rich. This is not some figment of someone's imagination. Yet, the people who tended to be the leftists, with rare exception - a few did work their way up the ranks - were children of fairly comfortable, if not outright affluent parents, who read and kept up and knew what was happening in the outside world. They did not necessarily dislike the United States as an entity but they certainly were not predisposed toward the U.S. government.

Q: In your area were there any sort of crises or anything, at least from your perspective, that you had to deal with?

TONGOUR: Crises is probably too strong a word because essentially the kinds of things that were of interest to Washington revolved around issues of narco-trafficking, corruption and how to make our assistance more effective. We were concerned about fighting crime and narco-traffickers and wanted to support the police;; at the same time, cops were involved in the killing of street children. The quandary we faced was how to help people who might be doing good on one front when some of those very people were not necessarily predisposed toward us. These were the types of issues we discussed, namely given limited resources should we send to the United States potential leaders who might now be critical of the U.S, Could they be brought around to understand our viewpoint, etc? I don't think you could say that there were major crises in our relationship with Brazil at that time. To be sure there were various pressures, including from environmental groups and NGOs to take a strong stand on developments in the Amazon or on human rights issues. On the latter, we really did try. I personally met with a lot of NGOs who frequently came in and provided invaluable information on human rights abuses in Brazil. But the problem was that most human rights abuses in Brazil were not officially being carried out by the government of Brazil. What does one do when an off-duty cop - a cop by day, a paid security guard by night - kills kids at night or goes after people who then disappear.

Q: Why were they killing people, killing children?

TONGOUR: Children were only one small segment. The case that became most famous, the so-called Candelaria Massacre involved the killing of children. But such killings were rare. The disappearances, the rounding up and abuse of victims was more common. A few years before I arrived, there had been what many described as an invasion of locusts, of children and teens roaming the beaches and robbing tourists and others. Officially, the police would clean that up, because after all, for a city such as Rio de Janeiro, tourism is a major industry. So, the police were there to clean up the beaches, and they did. Crime was definitely a problem and the favelas (slums) were breeding grounds for drugs; the police would invade these areas and clean them u. Some of the people rounded up were quite young, but the overt actions of the police were viewed as legitimate. The other aspect, their off-duty work, such as what occurred outside the Candelaria Cathedral in downtown Rio were more brutal - resulting in the killing of children who were literally sleeping in front of the church. Apparently storekeepers in the vicinity did not like to see these children sleeping on the plaza in front of the church. They considered it bad for business. Who paid whom, who did what to whom, was never clarified but eventually some off-duty policemen were tried for the killing of half a dozen or more kids and the wounding of others. The so-called Candelaria Massacre became a visible problem, creating a sense of outrage among the more enlightened members of Brazilian society and the outside world and spawned considerable social activism. One of the people I got to know well in Rio, who was related to the UN Rep Vieira de Melo, was very involved in working with street children after this massacre. She was a woman who came from a very wealthy family. Yet she wound up working with these kids. And I am talking not this street group or that street group; there were thousands of children who are essentially living on the street, living in squalor in cardboard shacks.

Q: Where do they come from? In other words, are they disconnected from at least their mother or something like that?

TONGOUR: Some of them are not disconnected from a mother or other family members. In fact, some come from families that lived in the cardboard shacks. The woman I mentioned invited me to go with her on one of her visitations to see a group of kids she often brought food. Many of them slept under aqueducts or bridges where they created cardboard shantytowns. These children ranged in ages, and sometimes they lived with a parent; thus, they were not always alone. However, the parent might actually have been working somewhere. Alternately, a 10 or 12 year old might well have run away from an abusive situation or be living with one parent in the cardboard shanty, but that parent might be somewhere working as a maid or in some menial profession. Their backgrounds and where they came from was unclear. Many were clearly from rural areas and came to the big city to find work, given their bleak situation elsewhere. Things have gotten better in recent years, but 10-15 years ago there was considerable poverty and many such squatter settlements. Then, too, there were many favela kids who would come down from the hills to sell "whatever" (Chiclets and odds and ends) on the streets. Sometimes these were runaways from abusive situations, but often they would simply leave their favelas during the day and return at night. The worst off had no where to go and simply slept under any available arcade in downtown Rio. One could spot them any evening when walking around the city; they would be sleeping on the sidewalks, under building arcades if they were lucky. Fortunately, the climate in Rio is generally mild so this is feasible.

Q: Well talking about this, how did you find living in Rio? How was the living there?

TONGOUR: I loved it. I loved it notwithstanding what I've just been saying about the dichotomy between the haves and have-nots. You know, it is a beautiful country and a beautiful city. I used to jokingly say that God was kind to Rio but man made a mess of it. I lived in a wonderful old apartment overlooking the sea and facing the famous Sugarloaf Mountain and I could also see the statue of Christ out of the corner as well as gorgeous scenery all around. The apartment was in a previously very fashionable neighborhood on a still highly desirable street. It's always dangerous to generalize about a nationality but I must admit that I generally found Brazilians to be very nice, regardless of their class or educational level. They tended to be warm, friendly and fun. In short, I got to know many people, a cross-section of society and seemed to be invited everywhere. The Consulate as a whole had excellent access. I personally traveled all over the country. However, it is true that one can develop a somewhat distorted view after a while and stop being "shocked" at the visible social problems. That's one reason why it was good to go out with the woman I was telling you about and meet others like her; otherwise, it would be too easy to stop seeing the whole picture. I remember a dear friend of mine visiting me from the U.S., and I took her to a town about 40 miles away, a beautiful hill town called Petropolis, which was the traditional summer home of Brazilian royalty in the old days. We drove for some miles through poor areas, with low-lying favelas interspersed with trashy tire shops and grungy small businesses and after a while she asked "doesn't this bother you?" And DI asked "what?". She replied: "All this poverty." One does get a bit inured after a while or at least stop really seeing that clearly. I think this becomes a danger for the upper classes who live phenomenally well, who are educated, cultured and basically have everything - and then there are the rest.

Q: Well, I do not know, a phenomenon which may have gone away, but I have talked to people who served in Rio during the '50s and '60s and all and said particularly the men began to pick up the habits of the locals, where all of a sudden they were, you know, this was at the embassy at the time, they sort of had mistresses and all this. I mean, this became quite prevalent and a real shock. Was this still going on?

TONGOUR: Well, I am sure some may have but if so, people were discreet. Like anywhere else, there were divorces and people who remarried locals. But another aspect of life in Brazil that is worth mentioning centers on the social side, notably Carnival. Anyone visiting Brazil during that season would invariably describe it as an enjoyable experience, with Carnival being wonderfully fun, colorful and unique. Undoubtedly, they would also mention the incredible amount of near nudity; some would wonder how this would square with the fact that Brazil is a predominantly Catholic country. I think one particularly noteworthy characteristic of Brazilians is that they seem much more comfortable in their own skin than most of us are. I don't mean to say that every Brazilian is beautiful, but rather as a generality, they seem much more relaxed about their bodies or less insecure in that regard.

Q: Well speaking about skin, the Brazilians talk about being sort of not racially motivated but I am told by those Americans who go there, particularly those of some color or observant found that they are very racially stratified.

TONGOUR: I am glad you brought this up because, in fact, this may be one of the less attractive features of the country, which is ironic because many tend to think of Brazil as a racially mixed paradise. The situation is not quite that simple or straightforward, and, in fact, sometimes even seems paradoxical. I recall an incident that occurred during the visit of a popular American gospel group Sweet Honey in the Rock which performed in Rio and had clearly not done its "homework" on the issue of race in Brazil.

Q: Oh yes, it's a famous group.

TONGOUR: Yes, it is. During her opening remarks, the leader of the group began the program by gushing about the racial harmony in Brazil and how wonderful it was to be in this racial paradise. The audience did not boo her but made sounds indicating their lack of acceptance of her interpretation. And it was a very racially mixed audience. Now most Brazilians would be quick to assert that they are not racists, that Brazil is not a racist society but rather that it is class-based, and admitted highly economically stratified in such a way that if you are successful, you are considered white. There is no caste system, and Brazilians correctly maintain that there is certainly greater fluidity than in the American South, where historically even the smallest percentage of "black blood" would define you as black. In Brazil, if Pelï¿½, the soccer star, wanted to consider himself white he would be white. But what they did have and what they probably still do have is an informal type of segregation in certain quarters - separate facilities such as "service elevators" for those who do not dress a certain way or look as if they don't "belong". An African-American Foreign Service Officer gave me an excellent and irksome example of this. She noted that if I entered an apartment building wearing grubbies, no one would ask me to take the service elevator but if she, who happened to be our Cultural Affairs Officer, was having a "bad hair day" or simply casually dressed, she might be asked to take the service elevator. So the Brazilian view is that there are strong class distinctions based on economic development, not race. That said, there is a lot of emphasis on being white. Another example comes to mind. I had as nanny for my son a beautiful young woman who could be described as "cafï¿½ au lait" in color but she always insisted she was white, while noting that her grandmother was not. She was quick to emphasize this distinction, and she was far from alone in this regard.

Q: As a political officer, how important was the church? Maybe not the Catholic Church but also maybe the Evangelical Church. I mean, what was going on?

TONGOUR: Oh, religion was definitely an important theme while I was there. First of all, on the Catholic side there was essentially - not exactly a schism which would be too drastic a term in the Brazilian context - a division within the ranks. Actually there were at least three types of Catholics: the totally non-practicing; the casual "I was born a Catholic but not really involved types" which I'm not really considering at this point, as well as the activists who themselves were divided. On the one hand there were the more conservative, traditional Catholics, some of whom would be comfortable with the Opus Dei crowd in Mexico, but perhaps a bit more liberal. On the other hand, you had the "worker priest" types, activists who generally espoused some form of "liberation theology"; this group also included many of the Bishops of Brazil. In fact, the ranks of Brazilian Bishops were also split between the more conservative and activist wings. The sense among those who followed religious issues was that the worker priest tradition in Brazil was basically quite admirable. Again, these more leftist priests might not be politically to the our liking but they were sincere in their commitment to social justice and so on, whereas the other group was more traditional and possibly more venal, if you will, in terms of how they lived. The predominance of the more traditional Catholicism in a way served as a catalyst for the growth of Evangelical Movements, partly in reaction to perceived flaws in the more established Catholic Church. The Evangelicals really stressed "moral behavior" and toe-ing the line with regard to not drinking, working hard and making something of oneself. In fact, the of Evangelical emphasis on getting ahead and prospering was phenomenally popular. I became acquainted with several young people who were working on the management side of one of these Evangelical groups. This group had radio stations, classes, churches throughout the country and abroad - including Florida for Brazilians who had moved there. It was a major enterprise as well as a way for many people to put their lives in some sort of order. Very often the ones most drawn to the Evangelical movement were the poor as well as those who had previously had major alcohol or drug problems.

Q: Was this translated beyond the personal lives into political movements?

TONGOUR: Yes, but I would not call it a "movement" at least at that point in time. However, I do recall that one so-called Evangelical candidate was elected either Mayor of Rio de Janeiro or perhaps even Rio State Governor after I had left, and he had been a very effective "preacher man" earlier in his career. In addition, I know there were candidates in other states that were running for various offices essentially as Evangelicals - somewhat along the lines of the recent Huckabee candidacy here.

Q: Did you find that sort of a ruling or the establishment, the white establishment and all was getting kind of nervous about the Evangelical movement and the left wing, I mean, things that Lula came out of or what?

TONGOUR: Well, Lula was not an Evangelical.

Q: He was not an Evangelical but I mean, you know, I am talking about both the Evangelical-

TONGOUR: And the left.

Q: -and the left.

TONGOUR: Certainly, certainly. But again, for different reasons. Most leftist politicians were not Evangelicals; if they had any strong religious background, it would more likely be of the "worker priest", "liberation theology" traditions. That said, the Evangelicals were somewhat of a threat to many of the more established, traditional politicians. The left, at least, was viewed as a known threat. They had already had to deal with the left in the past and knew where leftists were coming from, but they really were uncertain about where this new Evangelical fervor would lead to politically.

Q: Well, did you find, as sort of the top political reporter that the consular general- was there a problem in breaking loose from the sort of embrace of the wealthy, the glittering class and all that or not?

TONGOUR: The first Consul General I served under was very well connected to what you term the "glitterati". The second, Jim Derham, also socialized a great deal but he was an Econ Cone officer and was more interested in seeing the entire economic picture and more curious about different strata of Brazilian society: And I have to say, they both gave me a certain amount of latitude. I recall later rereading my EERs (evaluations) and thinking, did they really let me do this. When visiting dignitaries or CODELs came to town, I would stage different kinds of events for them in addition to traditional CODEL type activities. For example, I set up a visit for our DCM (from Embassy Brasilia) to see a street theater performance, sponsored by an NGO which supported the Transgender and HIV/AID community, including the actors. So, we did on occasion break out of the normal strictures, but sometimes it was hard.

Q: Oh, it is very difficult.

TONGOUR: We often received tickets to performances and sometimes we even sat in the Mayor's box at the Opera House and even the Governor's box on occasion. They were our "hosts" which maid it tricky sometimes when we pressed them on human rights issues or other concerns.

Q: Well, I am just looking at time; this is probably a good place to stop. And we will pick this up-think it over, if there is anything else we should talk about while you were in Rio but you left there in '96, was it?

TONGOUR: Ninety-seven, but before we leave I might mention that I received a somewhat unusual award during this period, which probably says something about the extent of my contacts in the community. A Brazilian women's organization, based in Rio, every year honored 10 or so "women of the year" for various contributions both to women and the broader community. Usually a woman diplomat was included in the ranks of those selected and my last year in Brazil, 1997, I was one of the recipients of this award. I have to admit I was touched by the gesture and appreciated my inclusion.

Q: Ninety-seven. And where did you go?

TONGOUR: Then I came back to Washington and then I had two back to back Washington tours. My first job back in the Department was in the International Organizations Bureau, in an office then known as Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Operations (PHO). I think the name has changed since then. I marveled sometimes how office names or acronyms often bore little relation or even antithetical to the actual work of the office. When one hears the word "peacekeeping" or "humanitarian operations" one normally would assume that our goal was to promote these ends, and to some extent it was. But, since this was the International Organizations Bureau, our immediate task was to work closely with other government agencies and with our UN Mission to ensure that UN peacekeeping operations were on track with our own overall foreign policy objectives. We did - and we still do - support peacekeeping operations; however our position vis-a-vis these operations was not always identical to that of the UN or other member states. At times we found ourselves in the position of trying to reign in relevant UN offices or attempting either to cut costs or reduce budgets or still more often making sure the budgets were relevant and that our Congress was satisfied with existing peacekeeping operations and so forth.

But in any case, I came onboard and initially I was given three or four portfolios which were quite interesting.

Q: What were they?

TONGOUR: Two were in the area that I knew a fair amount about, namely Georgia and Tajikistan, which were both facing serious upheavals, requiring ongoing UN peacekeeping operations or observer missions. The third portfolio I inherited dealt with a part of the world about which I knew very little, namely Africa. The Liberian peacekeeping operation, known as UNOMIL, was winding down and then the question of the day was what would replace it. Until that point, the United States had officially opposed engagement in "nation building/ peace building" operations; our position was to support observer mission and "stop the fighting missions" but as far as out mandate was concerned, we were not in the nation building business. Obviously, the situation today is quite different, and we frequently become involved in such ventures, but then this was still something fairly new. It was somewhat difficult to convince the Pentagon, the NSC and other agencies that support for follow on actions in Liberia geared toward helping the Liberians build their own nation was a good thing - this was something relatively new.

So in my first year, I handled UNOMIL in Liberia, UNMOT as it was called in Tajikistan and UNOMIG for Georgia. The second year I took on a variety of other portfolios that I had previously "backstopped" or filling in when another officer was away. Consequently, I spent a few months working on Sierra Leone, which was a hot topic at the time; later and in a similar vein, I worked on Haiti, Macedonia and even a bit on Kosovo. One of the things that is both wonderful and sometimes frustrating about this profession is that we often become instant experts. You work on Sierra Leone for two months and suddenly you are the "go-to" person for information about that country - a country which I had known next to nothing about previously. But we do jump in, learn on the job, which sometimes makes for some fascinating experiences. In this case, I learned a lot about generals with colorful names such as General Butt Naked as well as other factoids I had previously not even known existed.

Q: Well, let us start, in the first place, when you got there, this is the Clinton Administration which had, as so many administrations wanted, to concentrate on economic conditions within the country and social conditions within the United States and all of a sudden found itself spending an inordinate amount of time on foreign affairs. How would you describe when you arrived in '97 the attitude towards peacekeeping; let us do peacekeeping first and then humanitarian affairs.

TONGOUR: Actually, and unfortunately, we can make short shrift of the humanitarian side of our work. Since I subsequently worked in an office that really did address humanitarian concerns, I can say that our office's mission or the humanitarian component of our work was misnamed and quite limited. I can describe it in a few words and cover the topic quickly because I , for one, did not really have to deal with it; moreover, the office as a whole dealt almost exclusively with Iraq sanctions in our "humanitarian role" Specifically, officers in our section addressed issues of whether or not we would allow humanitarian supplies into the country in that time frame. Little did we know where we would be vis-a-vis Iraq a few years later. Mostly, we were trying to keep things out of the country - that was the humanitarian aspect of the office's work.

Q: Did you get involved in the 400 teddy bears or not?

TONGOUR: I personally did not but word of it was certainly circulating. But the real issue for us was the bad PR the USG was getting on account of the question of sanctions. The big concern at that point centered on whether we were keeping food from needy Iraqis and in turn making the situation worse. In short, were we aggravating this "semi-known" despot, named Saddam Hussein by keeping food out. And, of course, there were corruption cases that emerged later involving officials stockpiling or pilfering food that was intended for the people at large.

Q: Well, even Kofi Annan's son was involved.

TONGOUR: That is right. The details started coming out after I had left the job but obviously this had been taking place earlier. Essentially, as I said, my own involvement in this side of our work was negligible but when one speaks of an office called Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Affairs, one expects a broader humanitarian component.

To get back to your point regarding peacekeeping operations, when I first arrived, our biggest concern seemed to be the inflated UN budget and specifically the inflated UN peacekeeping budget with various Congressional leaders tasking us to keep an eye out and ensure that the UN was not wasting our taxpayers money. Congressional committees were seized with the issue of whether these were worthy ventures and something we really should be engaged in. Obviously, there were certain favored countries. For example, there was Congressional interest in Liberia, and likewise, there were groups keen on Georgia. Tajikistan was a much harder sell; we tried to persuade Congress and other USG agencies that observer missions such as UNMOT (Tajikistan) were performing a truly useful function. My boss, for example, had to go up to the Hill every month for what we called an RTW, otherwise known as "Round the World", basically an overview of what was happening in all the global hot spots. We spent an enormous amount of time briefing him - providing countless papers in the process - so that he could go to the Hill and persuade staffers and the occasional congressman that what was happening was valuable.

Q: Who was your boss?

TONGOUR: My main supervisor, the Office Director for much of this period was Edmund Hull, who subsequently served as our Ambassador to Yemen. I suspect that some variant of these RTWs continues to this day. On my level, I also had to deal with Hill staffers and try to make them understand our actions and policies. One concrete example was somewhat interesting: During my first year, four UN observers in Georgia were briefly kidnapped by one of the various warring factions, a renegade group making it unclear who exactly had taken the observers. You can imagine our sense of outrage since two of the four were Americans. Where were endless questions along the lines of what are our people doing there? Why are we putting our troops in harm's way on a UN peacekeeping operation? Should we even be there? And, of course, there were calls for yanking our people out immediate. We have come a long way on that score, but certain concerns rightly remain. Thus, a great deal of effort was made to try to persuade various other elements in the USG that we could find ways to safeguard the security of these American observers, mainly by keeping them away from particular areas of operation, while simultaneously stressing our support for the new government in Georgia. It seemed critical then to show the Russians we were seriously interested and that we intended to keep peace efforts in play and our people in the region - thereby demonstrating our commitment to the process. I know I later received an award for coming up with some actionable recommendations in this area.

Q: Well, how did you find your dealings with congressional staff and the members of Congress?

TONGOUR: While many of the staffers and the members themselves were perfectly amiable, they were generally not the people that were most interested in a particular country or operation. Those who were most engaged usually came down strongly on one side or another of any given issue. In this instance, there were certainly staffers and congressmen who disapproved of whatever w were doing with regard to Georgia. For example, we were either not doing enough to help the government of Georgia and should not be leaving it to the UN to protect that fledgling nation or we should be out of there altogether - one extreme or the other. .

Q: Well, I would think, I mean, we are not that far, at this time not that far away from the Cold War and not doing anything would basically give a free hand to the Russians to reintegrate, I am not sure that is really an appropriate word, Georgia back into the empire, wouldn't it? I would think that in Cold War terms this would be anathema to Congress.

TONGOUR: Absolutely. And that was the prevailing view but the problem of how to help remained - through the UN or not. In other words, some of the harshest critics were advocates of a more unilateral approach or basically some form of "cowboy diplomacy" wherein we should get in there to help the Georgians and to hell with the UN, to put it crudely. In other words, there were definitely proponents of direct assistance to the Georgian government instead of playing the "neutral observer" role via the UN.

Q: Well, did you find yourself bumping heads with what later or maybe at the time but certainly became a major force during the Bush 2 administration, the neocons, I mean. , Was this part of their movement of disliking the UN and wanting to go and do things ourselves or was this in play at this time?

TONGOUR: Well, they certainly felt that way and there certainly were voices in Congress that were consistently antithetical to the UN but...

Q: In the first place, were you up against Jesse Helms and his staff particularly?

TONGOUR: They were definitely critical and ever present. I had forgotten about this, but yes, Helms staffers seemed ubiquitous and whatever the group we had to address Helms staffer X would be there and pressing certain buttons. On the other hand, there were a few staffers that either had strong feelings about or their bosses did regarding Shevardnadze and endlessly grilled us about what we were doing to help Georgia.

Q: Shevardnadze was a major figure and he became sort of the darling boy of our foreign policy on the collapse of the Soviet Union which carried over into Georgia where he was a hell of a lot more popular in the United States than he was in Georgia, I think.

TONGOUR: That is true. But working on Georgia was relatively easy compared to some of the other peacekeeping missions because people genuinely cared about Georgia; therefore, we had, apart from the kidnapping case I previously mentioned, considerable support for our involvement there. Our problems were in cases or countries that staffers either did not care about or knew less of. For example, we had to work hard to "sell" the peacekeeping operation in Tajikistan where warlord factions were all over the map, including groups coming out of Afghanistan. In some ways, it truly resembled the Wild West. The organization the UN had in place there was called UNMOT, and compared to many peacekeeping efforts, it was a low budget. Yet, the UNMOT forces were in very dangerous territory, similar to the mountainous regions of Afghanistan. There were tribal leaders killing each other with great abandon and at least three or four separate armed forces fighting the so-called central government - yet this small UNMOT force was expected to keep the peace. .

Q: What were we seeing as the danger by these- I mean, okay, they are fighting up in the hills but this is before the Taliban, well, not even Taliban but the Al Qaeda and the sort of terrorist thing; we were seeing this as a potential terrorist thing or is this just they should not be fighting each other?

TONGOUR: We weren't using the term "terrorism" then, at least not in that context. What existed was a weak central government of Tajikistan lead by an old-style, typical former Soviet bureaucrat confronting various competing armed factions plus some emerging democratic elements. Theoretically, they agreed to hold elections, with these different factions also technically agreeing to make peace rather than tear apart the country, thereby making any form of democracy impossible. UNMOT was supposedly there to help facilitate the peace. Yet, there were elements within the USG that questioned why we were bothering. And we had to try to persuade them that this low budget operation could be carried out to the benefit of all involved and prevent the country from becoming yet another hot spot in the former Soviet Union. In other words, we did not have an ax to grind in this struggle, nor any particular vested interest beyond moving some form of national self-determination or democratic process along. Interestingly enough we did come up with a low budget proposal for actual force protection, which was definitely warranted inasmuch as some of these UNMOT troops were getting killed. Essentially, the plan was to have the various warring factions that had nominally agreed to peace to protect their protectors. In other words, if you had UN observers on the ground, this was definitely a place where force protection was needed. After all, UNMOT was an unarmed observer mission whose observers needed protectors. The issue, therefore, was who would protect them? Should we send another team of armed UN troops to carry out this role? Did that make any sense? This was the type of discussion that went on endlessly. We were well aware that by tripling the size of the operation (with armed protectors), we would triple the cost. So, we came up with the idea of making the factions live up to their obligations by committing themselves to protecting the UN observers.

Ultimately, they agreed to do so - nominally at least, with the main factional leaders agreeing to provide protection to the UN observers. On the face of it, this might be seen as an absurd situation but it more or less worked for a time.

Q: Well, in a way, and I am not using this in a pejorative sense because it is often used throughout history, we were paying these people not to fight.

TONGOUR: That is exactly right.

Q: And I mean, that is what it was all about anyway.

TONGOUR: Yes. It also made for an interesting assignment with a great deal of variety given that there were so many different and ongoing operations at the time.

Q: Okay, well let us turn to Sierra Leone. What was going on and what were we doing there?

TONGOUR: I became involved in this mission late in the game where there was suddenly a need for speedy action. This was one of those instances where we were smart, collectively, in realizing that we could not do everything on our own. Since Sierra Leone had previously been a British colony, the Brits retained a strong interest there and we recognized the need to work closely with them, and we did.

Q: It was basically philosophically and practically their Liberia. I mean, both were places where they hoped to send Liberia named Liberia and Freetown was named- I mean, this is where- each country sent their freed slaves if they could to get rid of the problem.

TONGOUR: So we cooperated with the Brits in developing strategies for low cost ways to work in the area and to encourage the African Union and others to send in observers and peacekeepers to put an end to the massacres.

Q: What were the massacres about? Was this a spillover of Charles Taylor's Liberian business or was this indigenous?

TONGOUR: All of the above with some diamonds thrown in for good measure. I make no pretense at being an expert on Liberia or Sierra Leone, even though I had to learn a great deal quickly. There were clearly various local factions, and like Liberia, under colorfully named generals or leaders, many of whom were quite young but who engaged in a fairly brutal conflict including the cutting off of limbs and other bodily parts. It was horrible. They did not always kill their victims - or each other - and the country was filled with amputees who had lost one or another limb to a rival faction, often aided and abetted by Charles Taylor and company. It is difficult for me to know, regarding some of these internal conflicts - not being an Africanist - how much had to do with ethnic or tribal disputes and how much was simply a power conflict. In any case, we worked very closely with the Brits who, in fact, took the lead in trying to bring in the African Union to help out in Sierra Leone.

As a side note, I might mention a very interesting program known as the Fellowship of Hope (actually, it had a different name during that period) whereby diplomats from friendly or allied countries would spend a year working in the State Department and our FSOs would similarly spend a year in the Dutch, British, or other foreign ministries. The reason I bring this up at this time is that a young man who represented the British Embassy at our various discussions on Sierra Leone had his own State Department badge due to the fact that he had spent the previous year working on our Japan Desk as part of this exchange program and totally knew his way around our building and our world; consequently not surprisingly, it was a very amicable working relationship.

Q: Did Liberia, was this also under your-?

TONGOUR: I worked on Liberia at the beginning of the tour. It was part of my portfolio but UNOMIL was wrapping up when I started the assignment. So my work was sort of a "mop up" role, dealing with administrative issues and questions related to ensuring that prior peacekeeping efforts held and Liberia remained at peace.

Q: Well, did you get any feel for these, say African forces, you know, peacekeeping forces because one gets various reports, you know, sometimes they come in and they are more of a problem, more looting by them than by the enemy forces. What was your impression?

TONGOUR: My impression and that of others in my group was that this was an early period, just the beginning for the African Union forces. Later, they would be involved in many different operations and their actions and behavior would change over time. Our concern at that moment was less centered on looting and more on competence or the lack thereof. We were doing exactly what you referred to in the context of Tajikistan - essentially looking for ways to get others to do this work in our stead. However, African leaders in some instances were simply grabbing guys off the street to send on these peacekeeping missions, and many of the troops sent had no more idea which end of a gun was which. In other words, most had extremely limited experience but the alternative was to send our own troops, and that was definitely not popular.

Q: Well, were we looking at the time to develop competent forces, including our own? I mean, for a long time the American military resisted; they had a peacekeeping institute which they dissolved and all of a sudden I think they reenergized but how did we- what were we doing?

TONGOUR: What we were doing at this juncture - again, our position shifted over time - was primarily to focus on civ-pol activities, not only in Liberia or Africa but also in the Balkans and elsewhere. We saw this as our value added or particular positive contribution to train police, and we still do train local forces to maintain law and order. Our goal was to gradually shift the balance of responsibility so that local police and military forces would eventually be able to take care of their own society. Similarly there was to be a broader component which involved encouraging African state to have a greater vested interest in the region and fostering the sense that this was not just another colonial enterprise. In other words we wanted them to recognize that we were not just seeking to take them over or even save them from themselves and that African nations should play an active role in the peacekeeping/peacemaking process. While it is all relative, these goals were reasonably well thought out and well-intentioned.

Q: Well, while you were doing this what was your impression? I mean, were things kind of- were we a force, a positive force in this whole effort?

TONGOUR: The United States? I think we were a positive but limited force in this whole effort. In other words at that juncture, unlike let us say our later "coalition of the willing" in Iraq there were quite a few countries providing at least some troops operations such as UNMOT and UNOMIG, the UN peacekeeping operations in Tajikistan and Georgia, and at any given time there might be Dutch, French Italian or Brazilian troops on the ground. These were not strictly U.S. operations and ours would be a relatively small presence on the ground, even though we were a major contributor in terms of the overall financing of the missions. So I think we were viewed generally in a positive light. The big issue for us then was not our actions in the field but rather what we and others were doing in New York. In other words, the central question for us was the extent to which we want to back the UN approach or alternately to trim the UN sails, or even the degree to which we wanted to be involved in selecting leaders of peacekeeping operations and determining their overall activities. These were our concerns. I'm sure there was some resentment over our making all sorts of rules and regulations and telling the UN what to do without allocating too many troops of our own for these missions. There is a certain irony in all this because essentially some UN officials seemed to be saying the U.S. should be more engaged on the ground and not be simply calling the shots from New York and Washington. Other nations tended to resent our "American exceptionalism", the notion in this instance that while it was okay for Dutch, German or other troops to be in danger zones in Georgia and elsewhere, the U.S. seemed unwilling to put its own troops in harms way. We would see the other side of this coin later in Iraq.

Q: I guess he was out of the business but did John Bolton come across your radar?

TONGOUR: Not really then, but he was not a "player" during the Clinton era.

Q: During this time obviously we were- Well, let us talk about Haiti. Did you get involved in Haiti?

TONGOUR: Yes, to a minimal extent. There was a UN "police mission", a program specifically geared towards training Haiti's police force. Unfortunately, the French expression "la plus ca change".. holds true in this instance. One could pick up a newspaper article almost at any time dealing with Haiti - five, ten years, it doesn't matter - and think you are in the exact same timeframe. When I was covering this portfolio, we had weekly or twice weekly working group sessions that would meet to discuss what all the different agencies were doing in the region, their various contributions and what was happening - whether democracy was breaking out or poverty being alleviated. I am not being cynical . It is just that this conversation was repeated so many times; it really was a tragic situation. It seems the last few years have been calmer, and one does not hear as much about developments in Haiti, which may actually be a positive sign.

Q: Maybe it shows improvement if people basically are staying there.

TONGOUR: That is right.

Q: Alright. Well, let us turn to the Balkans. Did you get involved? Madeleine Albright was secretary of state and she took a pretty strong stand on the Balkans. The Clinton Administration had initially, when it came in, had been pretty dubious about the whole thing and wanted to stay out and then she sort of got dragged in, kicking and screaming.

TONGOUR: And we were definitely involved.

Q: But by the time you got there we had already gone through the Bosnian exercise.

TONGOUR: Yes, but we had Macedonia to deal with and later, at the very end of my tour, the issue of Kosovo.

Q: Well, what was Macedonia that you had to deal with?

TONGOUR: The situation on the ground was that the UN had on the order of 1,000 troops there. The Pentagon and others, if I recall correctly, wanted to ensure that our numbers were limited. As it turned out, about one-third of the troops in the Macedonia mission were Americans, and that represented a significant force for us. Again, our office was involved in only a small part of this equations. We had to work with DOD and other agencies and tried to convince them that this was (a) a worthwhile utilization of our resources and that (b) it was important for us to be involved and play an active role. Many of our counterparts were dubious about this in the beginning and were not thrilled with the prospect of our engagement. So, in a sense, the Department was the more proactive player at this point. .

Q: Well, what was the situation in Macedonia that required peacekeepers?

TONGOUR: A mess. I'm sorry to say but Balkan history has been such a tangle for hundreds of years. I guess for the record one would have to say that after the demise of Tito and subsequently the break up of Yugoslavia and the formation of small states in the region, everyone claimed a piece of Macedonia, located basically in the center. That was certainly a key element. Geography was one factor but ethnicity was just as salient. Every group seemed to be represented in some corner or other of Macedonia.

Q: The Bulgarians-

TONGOUR: The Bulgarians, the Serbs and the Greeks. The Greeks themselves have a section of their country which they call Macedonia and which they certainly do not wish to see independent or allied with a former region of Serbia. The latter's move towards independence was very disconcerting to the Greeks. The Serbs also did not want to lose Macedonia. You have the problem of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia coupled with the concerns of neighboring countries and with ethnic element in Macedonia seeing themselves as distinct from all the rest (wishing but not necessarily fully able to make it on its own) and probably wishing for a pox on all of their houses. And on top of all that and in quick succession was the emergence of the Kosovo crisis, which was tricky because in this instance the USG was in favor of Kosovar independence. Yet, historically, the Serbs had, at least from their perspective, a valid position as well, since the most significant battlefield and region in all of Serbian history is situation in the territory of Kosovo. Ironically, this is viewed as the place where Serbs effectively fell on their swords, in effect making Serbia one of the few countries in the world to celebrate its greatest defeat; nevertheless, this was a critically important event in Serbian history. Thus, for the Serbs to simply allow the land to be chopped off or included in an independent Kosovo was deemed unacceptable.

Q: Also it has some significant monasteries.

TONGOUR: That, too. And also, the problem throughout this region is that these lands have been fought over with considerable bloodshed for centuries, and each region has its ethnic pockets who fear abuse at the hands of the more dominant group in the aftermath of independence. Thus, Serbs have their reason to fear abuse for ethnic Serbs residing in Kosovo at the hands of the more dominant Albanian group. So they are trying to protect their own as well.

Q: Well okay, let us take both Macedonia and Kosovo. What were you doing?

TONGOUR: Actually, these areas were a very small part of my portfolio. I should step back and say that I had some prior academic background and interest in the region and taught Balkan history prior to entering the Foreign Service. However, what I learned from the perspective of our work in the Department was to play a "finger in the dyke role". One typical aspect of our profession is that someone is always leaving an assignment early and thereby causing a staffing gap; someone else has to pick up the slack, attend meetings and do whatever is necessary to persuade colleagues and other bureaus or agencies that our position (notably that of whatever office we inhabit or portfolio we inherit) - in this instance the need to station USG troops on the ground - is the right one. It was a struggle. Eventually, we did, get engaged but there was a lot of "kicking and screaming" along the way. My own role: I wrote a lot of memos, organized meetings, met with colleagues in hopes of persuading them that this was a worthy endeavor; perhaps it helped.

Q: How did you find in IO, this goes across the board in your experience, did it work with the desk because I mean, okay, you are talking about international organizations but the feet on the ground are in Tajikistan or in the former Yugoslavia. I mean, did you have any particular problems with particular desks or bureaus or not?

TONGOUR: I was very fortunate in that regard. I guess one of my strengths in that period was that I had some credibility with the desk officers working on the former Soviet republics because I had considerable experience in the area from my prior assignments working on Soviet issues. I could always use the old Clinton line "I feel your pain" with my former desk colleagues. I understood where they were coming from so I often found myself in the position of translating between my IO bureaucracy and the EUR contingent. I certainly understood the desk officers' positions, at least those working on issues related to the former Soviet Union and the Balkans. With regard to Africa, I did my best but I could not claim any particular insights regarding what the Africa bureau was promoting or any real expertise on the issues.

Q: Well did you sense, while you were dealing with this, any unease at the top of the State Department or something in dealing with these political issues, you know, like still we are not happy with or did not want to get overly entangled in foreign affairs or not?

TONGOUR: Yes. On the political front, the situation was often muddy for reasons that had little to do with our own policies or preferences, and our leadership might well ask why were getting involved or pushing a particular approach. One case in point, for example, involved Macedonia. One of the newly independent Macedonian government's first foreign policy moves was to recognize Taiwan, which created some difficulties for us. On the one hand, we were trying to convince our Pentagon colleagues to put troops on the ground and help struggling Macedonia, while on the other hand, we faced a real possibility of a strong pushback from the PRC. Indeed, we feared that the Peoples Republic of China might veto the entire peacekeeping operation on account of Macedonian actions vis-a-vis Taiwan.

Q: Why did they do this? It sounds like money.

TONGOUR: With Taiwan and China it often is. For instance, when we were talking about the Caribbean, that is where you really see dollar diplomacy in action and where Taiwan actively competes with the PRC for recognition. There are a number of micro states that recognized Taiwan and in return received substantial financial assistance or remuneration. So yes, money was a factor.

Q: Well, how did-

TONGOUR: How did it end?

Q: Yes.

TONGOUR: Well, the mission was delayed for starters. The Chinese, that is the Peoples Republic, initially threatened quite loudly to veto the entire operation, and we took the threat seriously. We in turn "played nice" with considerable proliferation of paper, press guidances, and behind the scenes efforts to persuade the PRC that the Macedonians were neophytes who did not quite understand what they were doing. We urged them not to overreact, which indicating at the same time that we understood PRC concerns. We also encouraged them to not to show up on the day of the next vote. Indeed, the PRC either abstained or simply were not present on that day and the mission did go forward.

Q: Did you have any dealings or reflections of the stewardship of Madeleine Albright?

TONGOUR: I met Madeleine Albright for the first time long before she became Secretary of State, when she was still at Georgetown. I was working as the Hungary desk officer at the time, and she had planned a trip to Hungary and other countries in the region to research a book dealing with what was then Czechoslovakia and Hungary. She came to the Department for a briefing from the relevant desks. I was frankly a bit surprised because she was a professor and this was broadly her field, but she gave the impression of not having done her homework, at not with regard to Hungary. But then again, this was a very limited and superficial observation; nevertheless, I somehow expected a bit more or a better sense of what she intended to write about. bout things that they got their material as they go along. I think she probably ranked somewhere in the middle tier of Secretaries of State I have seen. She was not the best, but far from the worst.

Q: Yes, I mean, she came and went and one does not have- I mean, I do not get any particularly negative or particularly positive. I mean, what she did was workmanlike.

TONGOUR: That is right. To give her her due, she was reasonable to work for in terms of work or paper requirements and relatively accessible.

Q: Well, I would also think from your particular perspective working on international organizations her coming out of the UN would have meant she was more sympathetic to the issues, I mean, for the overall bureau she understood the problems.

TONGOUR: Yes. Unlike certain situations within the Department where paper would move forward only to be blocked within one's own hierarchy or where conflicts with out bureaus were rampant, this was not the case in the IO Bureau on her watch. We did not experience a great deal of internal deadlock. Whatever problems we confronted tended to be with our sister agencies. .

Q: Did you find, speaking of sister agencies, how did you find working with the Department of Defense?

TONGOUR: On the working level our relations were quite collegial. We did not always agree but we were friendly. A contributing factor may have been that during this period, our Peacekeeping Office always had two or three military officers detailed to us and they came from various branches or offices at DOD. As a result, we came to understand each others positions quite well, but the fact remained that our hierarchies did not always agree, and therefore, we were not always on the same page. That did not change.

Q: How about the CIA? Were they at all a factor in what you were doing?

TONGOUR: No, not really. I mean, we had intelligence briefings on certain aspects of the missions and sometimes they would attend a group session.

Q: Well then, is there anything else we should discuss about this period?

TONGOUR: No, not really. The truth is that in a broader sense this was a transitional period. After all George W. Bush was not the first president that began his tenure intending to focus on domestic issues and instead wound up doing more on the international front. As you mentioned the Clinton Administration never intended to be engaged in these types of policy issues. In a sense, what we do today without batting an eye was in that period the source of a real tug of war among various USG agencies - State, the NSC, DOD and others - with each intervention marked by significant interagency tension. Now, while there are clearly other types of disputes among them, these groups, these types of UN missions are not key issues.

Q:: Well then, when and what did you do afterwards?

TONGOUR: I had one other Washington assignment that was somewhat of a return to my old stomping ground. The office I moved to has changed names and no longer exists in the same configuration but it was then known as S/NIS/C which meant the Office of the Special Coordinator for assistance programs to the former Soviet Union. It was then headed by Bill Taylor, who more recently served as our Ambassador to Ukraine. He had been in this sort of assistance business for a long time, initially working for Richard Armitage, who later became Deputy Secretary of State and who, like Taylor, had originally come from a military background but one very oriented toward such assistance programs. The S/NIS/C operation had a humongous budget. Essentially, we oversaw all the so-called "Freedom Support Act Funds" that were allocated to the former Soviet Union. A separate office dealt with similar funding for Eastern Europe; eventually these two offices merged. For me this was a completely different type of work from any I had ever done before inasmuch as I had always been a political officer doing work traditionally associated with political cone officers in the Foreign Service. This office was really much more oriented toward economics and as an economic unit, we were divided both geographically and functionally. So I worked on the western region. Specifically, I covered Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus geographically. I also had some functional responsibilities which were interesting. They dealt with nuclear energy; the closing of the Chernobyl power plant; some commercial cases, including cases of businessmen who had had bad experiences in that part of the world; and environmental protection. Another of my primary responsibilities had to do with a project Vice President Gore had sponsored, namely a bilateral review commission, known by the name of the U.S.-Ukraine Committee on Sustainable Economic Cooperation - a real mouthful - whose major component involved improving economic ties between Ukraine and the U.S. In this context, my boss would go once a year to Ukraine for commission sessions, and the Ukrainians would in turn come to Washington. The result would be the signing of numerous agreements technically under the auspices of the Vice-President. This was a quite a big deal and made the Ukrainians feel very good since this was a project the Vice President cared about from the outset. .

Q: Well, let us talk about the Ukraine first. This all struck me that with the Ukraine sort of out of the orbit of Moscow, I mean, at least, well, pretty much out of the orbit of Moscow, you never can really talk about a revival of the old Soviet empire or the Russian empire. I mean, this is a major thing and I would think from our perspective this would have had extreme priority, I mean, just keep Russia from getting too big for its britches as far as we are concerned. Was that the feeling then?

TONGOUR: Russia did not take on Ukraine head-on at that time. Russia had so many other problem areas to deal with after the breakup of the Soviet Union that it focused principally on developments in Georgia, Tajikistan, Moldova, etc. Ukraine was an obvious elephant in the room but it was not the focal point because Russian leaders basically regarded Ukraine as a legitimate entity even though it the historic heart of the Russian nation also happened to be in Kiev. Still, they recognized that Ukraine could legitimately stand on its own. One big issue among many was the issue of oil and the pipeline through the region; another was the military equipment from Soviet days still in Ukraine; and there were concerns related to geography, notably the status of the Crimean Peninsula and the Odessa region. Thus, the question of how to square the fact that a predominantly Russian-speaking region and a very Russian-oriented city (Odessa) were now part of Ukraine - this was very much on Russian minds. Even in these commission meetings we had with the Ukrainians, 75 percent of those involved spoke in Ukrainian but a few cabinet ministers still preferred to speak officially in Russian. And then one confronted a problem that was of genuine concern to us, and remains an issue even to this day, namely Russia's role in Ukrainian elections in support of traditional, Soviet-style, eastward-looking , Russian-speaking candidates as opposed to individuals who might be more democratic in orientation. . Certain old habits die hard, and there continues to be a great deal of corruption. And just because someone claims to espouse democracy does not automatically make him a saint. Ukraine has had several Prime Ministers or Presidents who were known to be quite corrupt, one of whom was literally indicted by U.S. Justice authorities for a laundry list of offices. I'm sure the Justice Department would have happily deported him if we could have found a country willing to accept him - thereby sparing us the whole rigmarole of trying a former Ukrainian top official in a U.S. court. For a time, some smaller Caribbean countries were under consideration for such a "non-vacation" destination, but I don't know what happened in the end.

Back to your previous question regarding our concerns about the Russians. Sure, we were concerned on many, many levels, but we were not worried that the Russians were going to send in troops to Ukraine as happened in Transnistria. .

Q: What were you, in this job we are now talking about, in the Ukraine what were you mainly doing?

TONGOUR: Well, several different things. One primary responsibility was to monitor what AID was doing with U.S. Government funds in assistance programs in Ukraine as well as the activities of other agencies. A key objective of our office was to oversee and coordinate all assistance efforts so as to avoid duplication. What you did not want was for ten different offices or agencies to be implementing identical or even similar types of democracy programs in a given country. So coordination was truly the name of the game - our main function. Another was to work with Ukrainian officials and with our own energy-related agencies here to help in the process of dismantling and ultimately closing Chernobyl, as well as addressing the issues associated with what might replace it, and of course, how to move forward. For example certain deals were struck. The Ukrainians indicated that they would move forward with the decommissioning of Chernobyl if we would support the development of an alternative type of heat pump system. However, they were supposed to contribute as well to this project and seemed to be reneging on their promised payments; consequently, we had to negotiate to ensure they would fulfill their obligations.

We were also working on a number of crosscutting regional themes or issues such as trying to secure positions for scientists who had worked on sensitive types of technology in the former Soviet Union's nuclear or biological weaponry field, in other words to make sure that there were places these people could go. Health was another regionally crosscutting theme; specifically we focused on how to deal with the spread of tuberculosis which was becoming a pandemic in the former Soviet Union.

Speaking of disease, one of the things that gave me personal satisfaction was to help the area, but initially Moldova, which experienced a series of droughts and famines, by coming up with some sort of systematic humanitarian assistance and food relief to keep them from going off the edge, and we did a lot. In fact, one of the more unusual projects to come across my desk involved a very strange and severe disease that broke out in several rural villages in Ukraine that resembled a skin poison , which particularly affected children. The Ukrainian government was afraid that if this leaked out that 50-100 children were showing burn-like symptoms on their skin, mass hysteria might become a real problem. So they asked for our help. It fell to me to try to assemble "lickety-split" a team of people from CDC (Centers for Disease Control) in Atlanta and a few other agencies that had medical diagnostic skills and send them to Ukraine to work with Ukrainian medical authorities to see if they could come up with something. Eventually, they did come up with something - namely they discovered that there had previously been some sort of weapons depot in the area and that there had undoubtedly been some leakages of chemical connected with this. Moreover, the kids had played in the area where the seepage had occurred. This finding did not totally solve the problem of causation but came fairly close or at least close enough to address the burns. The situation was kept relatively quiet . While this was not a national secret or anything of the sort, the goal was to avoid creating widespread fear.

So these were the types of projects I worked on. I was also what was called the Executive Secretary" for the US-Ukraine bilateral commission, which meant that I would be the one responsible for coordinating the paperwork - whether drafting it myself or getting papers from others - and the overall organization for the meetings we held twice a year.

Q: Well, around '94 or so I was in Kyrgyzstan and the place was awash with these non-governmental organizations and missionaries and everybody else going out to do good, you know, often at cross purposes or quite ineffective and some were very effective. Did you get involved in trying to get these things- was this part of the effort?

TONGOUR: We could not really control the NGOs but what we could control to a certain extent were other USG entities. In other words the EPA was working on an environmental project...

Q: Let us stop.

This is tape six, side one with Nadia Tongour. Yes.

TONGOUR: While we certainly met with different groups that work in our part of the world, our actual oversight responsibilities strictly involved those who received U.S. o We met with them and that was another thing; we would meet with lots of different groups that were going to our part of the world but essentially we were- our oversight responsibilities had to do strictly with those who received USG funds. Also we were responsible for keeping Congress informed. Since the money ultimately came from Congress, we were constantly sending up "15-day notifications" for all the various programs we oversaw. In other words, we did not actually veto EPA or any other government department from carrying out its projects but rather they would basically funnel their requests through us. We in turn would approve the requests, notify Congress and then if there were no congressional "holds", distribute the funds. We are talking now strictly about the three countries that I oversaw and specifically the Freedom Support Act funds, which were on the order $250 million at that time. The overall budget for S/NIS?C was approximately $875 for assistance funds.

Q: A big hunk.

TONGOUR: That is right. And this was strictly USG support funds and didn't include money from NGOs or other groups.

Q: Did you get any feel for dealing with the Ukrainian embassy and all and how they operated? Did they have much connection with you?

TONGOUR: They had substantial contacts, not only with me and our office but with many USG agencies. You mentioned earlier a group that had strong local community-based involvement. Ukrainian-Americans were extremely active in this regard, but they were also very divided amongst themselves; it often seemed as though there were hundreds of Ukrainian-American organizations. This was a problem because they split along religious, geographical, and political lines. As you know, a considerable portion of the region is already divided between the Orthodox and Catholic faiths, but in addition, Ukraine had the Uniate Sect, a third branch essentially between Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, not to mention other smaller sects that have flourished. But, Ukraine was further rent by an East-West split, with the Western part more Catholic and linguistically Ukrainian versus the more Eastern, more Russian-speaking steel mill and mining towns which were more conservative and more oriented toward Russia and Eastern Orthodoxy. Then too, there was the issue of Crimea and its long Russian connection. Finally, there was the gamut of political views associated with different waves of ï¿½migrï¿½s, with some having been more pro-German during World War II and others who were more pro-Soviet, and so on. Each of these myriad groups would weigh in with the State Department and advocate for their respective positions.

Q: I am trying to think, is there any other sort of issues that you were dealing with and did these ï¿½migrï¿½ groups have any particular clout?

TONGOUR: They certainly had a measure of clout first of all because Ukrainian-Americans were well represented in various USG agency. For example, in the Department of Commerce two of my closest colleagues dealing with Ukraine were themselves Ukrainian-Americans. Now, they actually were quite balanced in their views and were simply doing their jobs; nevertheless, they were always on the receiving end of petitions. Moreover, we were all constantly being invited to attend this or that speaking event to here a notable from Ukraine or from the Ukrainian-American community on a particular set of issues. In all fairness, this was a time of great enthusiasm for Ukraine. At the same time, we were fairly aware of the fact that there was some foot dragging on various Ukrainian government commitments to us. with regard to projects they claimed they wanted in order to become more democratic or to get beyond Chernobyl and become a really viable independent country. There was still an awful lot of the "old think" prevalent. Various officials would insist they really wanted to move forward with bilateral democracy building programs, welcoming our aid for educational projects, etc., but, in fact, traditional attitudes and behaviors were quite pronounced. .

Q: Did you get a feel for a new generation coming through? I am thinking of various programs, our visitors programs, students, Soros and these efforts to get basically freedom in a new generation. Was this taking hold?

TONGOUR: Very much so. What we found was that among the younger generation, many ha already learned English, which had not been the case with the parents' generation. Older diplomats did not all have English, whereas the younger ones definitely did. Soros eventually established programs in Ukraine but he was also very active in Moldova as well as Hungary, Romania and elsewhere in the region. However, at the time, I would not say that he was especially focused on Ukraine, but other donors certainly were.

Q: Was there a phenomenon that one notices, you know, you could go to the beach resorts or anything else that today most of the waiters or waitresses, mostly women, waitresses are from Eastern Europe and from the Ukraine and all coming over for their earning but going back out obviously, becoming quite, well I would say almost Americanized or at least understanding our culture.

TONGOUR: Yes, yes. And it is not just in the waitressing field. I noticed this at a camp my son attends. It seems that any number of the counselors are from Ukraine and other parts of Eastern Europe. I mention this only in passing but it definitely appears that many of their young people were and continue to make their way here and do quite well

It's probably worth mentioning that the office I was in (S/NIS/C) later fused with a similar office that dealt exclusively with Eastern Europe and is now known as ACE - covering the entire region of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Obviously in the following years, the Eastern European countries have come a long way, with many having joined the European Union and some having sought admission to NATO. Not surprisingly, in the course of less than a decade Freedom Support Funds were reduced substantially and are considerably less than what they were then.

Q: Looking at this exchange, people coming to the West to the darker side of trafficking, particularly of women into prostitution and all that because I understand the Ukraine was a major supplier.

TONGOUR: It still is. And I can share with you an amusing experience that demonstrates this, which occurred in Kiev during one of those Bilateral Commissions I mentioned. A colleague and I were the designated note takers for the session. We had planned to work on our report at the hotel but there really was no office space available to do so. Therefore, that evening we sat in the lobby of our hotel, drinking cups of coffee and drafting our report. The hotel was quite westernized and it was teeming with young "working women" who, whenever I stepped away for a moment would approach my male colleague and essentially proposition him - saying things like "why are you sitting here writing a report when you could come have fun with us. Subsequently, I have seen Ukrainian and other East European women in scattered countries obviously working as prostitutes. e, coming over to my male colleague and sort of saying, why are you sitting here writing your report with this woman. Why do you not come and have fun with us? The economic situation has improved but the old dichotomy of people from small towns and rural areas, who are still hurting, often come to the big city and often find themselves in these situations - either becoming prostitutes in the city or meeting someone that ships them abroad for similar purposes.

Q: Did you get involved at all in the problem of the ones who ended up sort of in the hands of Western European managers? That is a fancy term for pimps.

TONGOUR: No, we did not. In a later assignment, working on human rights issues, my office highlighted this in our annual human rights report. At this particular juncture, we were still dealing with more basic issues, related to the country's recent independence, specifically economic and governance concerns, but not this particular problem.

Q: What about the Russian-Ukrainian split? I mean, was there the feeling that this is going to work itself out or is this going to be a long term problem between the two ethnic- I am not sure they are even ethnic groups but whatever you want to call them.

TONGOUR: Well, they certainly see themselves as distinct. Yet, they are all Slavs. However, historically, there has been so much intermarriage especially from Kiev to the East regardless of whether they choose to speak Ukrainian or Russian. There is invariably the situation where someone has a Russian mother or a Ukrainian father or Polish uncle who married a Russian or Ukrainian. In other words, there has been an awful lot of interbreeding, which in some ways helps keep the frictions in check. Still, underlying frictions remain.

Q: Well, what about the Black Sea Fleet? I mean, when one looks at this, I mean, there was a tremendous endeavor on the part of the Soviet Union to build up a magnificent fleet. I mean, I am sort of a navy buff and I look at some of the beautiful ships and they are all rusty. And the Russians really have, I mean, there is nothing you can do with them, particularly.

TONGOUR: That is a very good question.

Q: Did that come across your desk at all?

TONGOUR: Not really. It was one of those background topics that comes to the fore during military discussions. Our group was more focused on economic issues. Arguably, the status of the Black Sea Fleet was both an economic and a military issue, but I am not sure where it stands right now.

Q: What about Chernobyl during the time you were there what were you doing Chernobyl-wise?

TONGOUR: Chernobyl-wise, there were extensive negotiations but internally (within the USG) and with Ukrainian officials regarding alternative sources of energy.

Q: A quick question: was Chernobyl producing power at the time?

TONGOUR: It was still producing some power. As a result, there were serious discussions on technical, scientific questions related the decommissioning or completely sealing off of the reactor. And there was a considerable amount of work that needed to be done to seal off and close Chernobyl forever. Plus, there was the associated technology of the heat pump I referred to earlier that was essentially supposed to replace the reactor. The problem was the heat pump was quite expensive and Ukraine was supposed to cover some of the costs, specifically an amount on the order of seven and a half million dollars, whereas we were to contribute the balance of roughly $30 million. However, the Ukrainians tended to back pedal on paying and as a result, we had to press them repeatedly for their share of the payment. In the end, it all turned out fine, and there was a major ceremony held to mark the official closing of Chernobyl, and our Ambassador traveled to the site to participate. Of course, we spent a great deal of money trying to (a) help them with alternate fuel sources and (b) assist them with the social aspects associated with the closure. One of the side issues connected to the closure was the fact that locals in the area generally wanted to keep the reactor functioning because of the jobs involved. Power plants provided relatively well-paying employment, after all, for substantial numbers of people. Consequently in addition to funding for the heat pump, the Ukrainian government sought our financial contribution to deal with the "social costs". In fact, we do some things - instituted various programs aimed at job retraining and relocation, and so forth. It was a tricky situation to get people who had spent their entire lives working in or around Chernobyl and working on these reactors, simply to move. Where do they go? What sorts of transferable skills do they have? Those were the kinds of issues we had to address.

Q: Well, you are an old Moldovan hand; did Moldova, was that part of your portfolio?

TONGOUR: It was. But in the case of Moldova, we focused on more traditional aid programs, including democracy promotion and educational projects. The key question for us was how best to build civil society. AID had a number of educationally oriented programs which unfortunately really didn't address the problem of how to build a democracy in a divided war-torn country. In truth, theirs were the more traditional assistance programs. We did visit Moldova and tried to carve out new niches for our assistance. But the country in the region that we attended to least, at least in a positive sense was Belarus, which was still too much of an old line state.

Q: Well, were we sort of writing off Belarus because of its leadership and all at that point?

TONGOUR: Yes and no. To the extent that we could, we tried to help those individuals who represented voices of reason but without placing them in jeopardy. Sometimes we had to be very careful so as not to "help them" wind up in jail. We had to walk a tightrope, both seeking to assist dissidents while not creating problems for them. Essentially though, we recognized that until the leadership changed, there was only a limited amount we could really do.

Q: How about other countries, Germany, France, Britain, Scandinavia; were they playing much of a role?

TONGOUR: I think it probably varied from country to country and in terms of those with a particular interest. Some helped particular favorites, such as the Baltic Republics. Likewise, there was considerable support for the traditional East/Central European countries such as Hungary and Poland. I suspect, but don't know for a fact, that the French might have helped the Moldovans via Romania since there were some ties to the latter. Nevertheless, we were clearly the "big kid on the block" with our Freedom Support Act funds dwarfing anything others could provide. At the same time, I must admit that other countries were often more effective in their allocation of resources than we were and often got a bigger bang for their bucks, in the process.

Q: Well I think probably in size and oversight, which often means too much effort is put into oversight, you might say, accounting and all this.

TONGOUR: One aspect of our assistance programs that has often saddened me is the fact that so much of AID's huge budgets (as well as that of other agencies) is spent on supporting itself or supporting contracts. Consequently, when you get right down to it, recipients don't always fully appreciate the amounts officially spent on their behalf because in many respects the results aren't always tangible. For our part, we often think that the recipients should be more grateful but what they actually receive or see is sometimes not nearly as great as it might seem, given the substantial amounts spent in the process.

Q: Well then, is there anything we should cover that we have not covered in this?

Regarding your question of whether other countries were involved, I should probably mention an organization known by the acronym PAUCI, which stood for Polish-American-Ukrainian Initiative. The idea behind it, which we initiated, was - was, to encourage involvement from Ukraine's neighbors in the area of development. As was the case in African peacekeeping operations that we spoke of earlier, we believed we should not be the ones telling Ukraine how to develop economically or move forward. Rather, we thought that a country with more relevant and recent experience, such as Poland, could play a constructive role in the process. So, we held semi-annual meetings between representatives of our S/NIS/C office and Polish and Ukrainian government officials to address themes related to growth and economic development. Poland by this point had made a great leap forward on this score, and the idea was to help Ukraine move along a similar path. It was a worthwhile venture. Still, there were frictions among the parties, particularly related to funding levels and leadership roles in the process, but it wa a good idea.

Q: Well then, what is it, about 2000 when you left this?

TONGOUR: I stayed until the summer of 2001. After that I had an assignment that I jokingly described as one that provided me with more titles than staff, which was to be the DCM/Principal Officer/ Chargï¿½ in Grenada, where I arrived in August of 2001, just three weeks before 9/11. But to sum up the two Washington assignments we were discussing, they were both very interesting and informative, but I found that I really preferred working in what we term a regional bureau. These had been "functional" assignments in which I had many responsibilities, but no single country that you could call "yours" as was the case when I worked as a desk officer for Hungary or Georgia.

Q: Well, I think probably it would be a good idea to pick up the Grenada tour.

TONGOUR: Yes, which is a tiny country in the Eastern Caribbean.

Q: Oh yes, oh yes.

TONGOUR: Working in Grenada was a totally different situation, where we have had a mission ever since U.S. intervention there in 1983. Nineteen American soldiers died during our intervention there. As for Grenadians, even to this day, they refer to our military operation on the island as an invasion or a rescue mission, depending on their political persuasion. The term intervention is the most "neutral". In any case, in the immediate aftermath of the intervention - this was the Reagan era after all - there was a great deal of sentiment in favor of keeping an American presence in Grenada; in fact, initially, in the 1984-85 timeframe, we had quite a large Embassy there. Its worth pointing out that in recent years, throughout the Caribbean, we have cut back on the number of posts we have in the region. Right now most of the islands are covered out of Barbados, or with a few handled out of Trinidad to the south or Jamaica further north. In years gone by, we had posts in Martinique and Antigua as well as Grenada. Grenada is the only one of the smaller posts remaining. Yet, after the intervention, there was a large AID presence as well as military personnel on island. Over the years, the staff was steadily reduced. Today it is a miniscule post; nevertheless, it is called an embassy, which makes for an interesting situation. Technically, the post is an embassy because Grenada is an independent country; therefore, the mission can't be a consulate. However - and this is why I had so many titles - the Ambassador resided in Barbados, and served as Ambassador not only for Barbados and the countries directly covered by Embassy Bridgetown but also for Grenada. As long as she wasn't on island in Grenada, I served as Chargï¿½, but when the Ambassador came to Grenada, I served as DCM. It tended to be confusing, especially since when I bid on the position, it was listed as a Principal Officer slot. In any case, I had a small staff and I had to deal with a number of "residuals" from the intervention period.

Q: We have got time; why do we not talk about it?

TONGOUR: We can certainly talk about the history, which was quite fascinating. Many countries in the Caribbean obtained their independence from Britain in the late 1960s or 1970s. Countries differed in terms of the specific year. Barbados was one of the early ones, becoming independent in 1966, I think; elsewhere, most of the smaller island nations gained their , independence a bit later, in the '70s. Unfortunately, most were totally ill prepared for independence at the outset. Very shortly afterward, in Grenada, as was the case in several other countries, a highly charismatic figure came to the fore and garnered a considerable amount of power. Initially, the first crop of independence leaders tended to come from the ranks of those who had either "fought" for independence early on or had been active in local labor movements. They were genuinely quite popular and at first truly focused on local needs; however, over time, some wound up becoming despotic or corrupt. In the case of Grenada, this pattern was complicated by the prevalent or growing Cuban influence in the region. Plus, you have to recall that there was a whole generation of so-called "children of the 60s" who now in the 70s had gone on to study law or be in some ways influenced by leftist philosophers or leaders such as Castro and Che Guevara and wanted to change the power-mongering and corrupt systems they saw in their own country. As for Grenada, the early hero of the independence years, Sir Eric Gairy, over time increasingly began to fit this model. Then, too, he started acting a bit crazy and openly spoke of his belief in extraterrestrials.

Q: This was Bishop?

TONGOUR: No, not Bishop. This was Eric Gairy (who subsequently obtained the title "sir"), who preceded Maurice Bishop. He wound up becoming rather arbitrary and corrupt, as well as deemed crazy by some, which prompted a group of young, bright-eyed idealistic leftists to carry out a coup against him. The group that seized power consisted of a number of persons who became known as the "New Jewel Movement". The individual who was most widely regarded as the head of the movement was Maurice Bishop, himself a very colorful character, with substantial appeal to many Grenadians and a bit of a Che Guevara "look-alike". His main side kick was named Bernard Coard, who will play a key role in the events that triggered the U.S. intervention. Coard was not as charismatic as Bishop, and by all accounts a more traditional, hard-liner - less flamboyant, less outwardly sympathetic, but possibly more intellectual, or at least more of an ideologue. Essentially from late 1978 or early 1979 until 1982-83, these two and their leftist/socialist cohorts were in charge. They did not call themselves communists at that point but they were definitely influenced by Cuba. It appears that many of them would have happily accepted assistance from the United States; some might even have welcomed being "adopted" by us - or so they later said. But the USG implemented the same types of polices that have been, as we all know, ever so "successful" in Cuba, and completely turned its back on them, denounced the leaderships and made it clear we wanted nothing to do with this leftist regime. For its part, it was indeed moving further to the left and began to look more and more toward Cuba for assistance. The Cubans were more than willing to help out, especially with the building of a big, international airport, which was not something the USG viewed with equanimity. So to summarize, in the midst of increasingly economic problems and political isolation, the Grenada regime looked increasingly to Cuba for support and in the process grew increasingly radicalized. Over time internal conflicts arose, as well, between a faction led by Bernard Coard, and individuals still loyal to Maurice Bishop. Eventually, the situation basically came to a head or boiled over, with Bernard Coard and his confederates carrying out a second coup. Not only did they overthrow Maurice Bishop, but they killed him and a number of his supporters, resulting in fighting in the streets and considerable concern abroad, particularly in the U.S. regarding civil unrest and its potential impact on American citizens, particularly medical students at St. George's University. The conflict was not quite a civil war, but the threat of it - coupled with the perceived danger to our citizens and the fear of Cuban/Soviet involvement - triggered our intervention on October 19, 1983, which lasted roughly a week. Not this is just a summary version of events. There were many keystone cops aspects to the intervention, which occurred without a great deal of information regarding the actual lay of the land on the island, a shortage of useful maps and disastrous communications systems. Moreover, as I previously mentioned, 19 American troops died in the process. However, by October 25, Bernard Coard and his cohorts were rounded up, and calm was gradually restored. Thereafter, the United States was in charge for the next six months to a year, and tried to restore order to the country. AID came onto the scene with sizeable staffs from Barbados to provide assistance; plus we had a fairly large mission on the ground. Coard and company were tried and imprisoned - many for life - and most are still incarcerated. But there was a considerable division in Grenadian society between those who viewed the American involvement as a rescue mission and those who described it as an invasion. The more balanced or middle of the road types used the term that we ourselves use, namely intervention. As I previously mentioned, Maurice Bishop and his associates were initially quite popular and remained so for a number of years, but as they grew more radical in their positions, they themselves became increasingly arbitrary, even "despotic", imprisoning all sorts of enemies, real and perceived. I know a gentleman who has a successful tour business today who spent three years in jail for no particular reason apart from the fact that he was deemed a supporter of Sir Eric Gairy, whom the New Jewel Movement had overthrown. The problem for a small island like this one is that everyone not only knows everyone else but knows who did what to whom. People who pulled triggers and killed others, and many families were split. Much later, a truth and reconciliation commission was established, which we might talk about later, but the fact remains that in a small society with scarcely more than 100,000 people, everyone is either related or aware of one another, and a great deal of residual resentment from that period remains. Every year Grenadians celebrate October 25 as a national holiday of Thanksgiving, but it's a very specific sort of Thanksgiving, name for the American intervention. While I was there, we had a presidential delegation (not the President but his representatives, including a key military leader of the intervention) to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the event.

Q: Well, you were there from when to when?

TONGOUR: I arrived in August of 2001, three weeks before 9/11, and left in the summer of 2004.

Q: By this time had Grenada pretty well disappeared off our list of interests in the Caribbean?

TONGOUR: Well, it seemed that each year, at least while I was in Grenada, there was a serious discussion in Washington about whether or not to close the post. And every year those wishing to keep it open were able to beat back elements advocating closure. There were several valid arguments on both sides but the prevailing view centered on paying homage to President Reagan and the nineteen Americans who died during the intervention. A second factor was the large expat contingent on island, as well as the students and staff of St George's University, which certainly deserve to be mentioned.

Q: The medical school.

TONGOUR: It was an offshore American medical school, which at that time had no more than at most a couple hundred students. However, when the conflict among the various factions escalated and when it was clear that there were Cubans on the ground, there was great concern about the safety of the American students. Today St. George's is not simply a medical school, but an actual university with 5-6,000 students in a variety of disciplines, including a major veterinary program and various other divisions in addition to the large medical school. Obviously, there is now a substantial community of American faculty and students who are voters - or in the latter case, their parents are - and they are very interested in what's happening on the island, as well as in retaining some official American presence there. There is also a large expat, mainly retirees who have been known to contact their congressmen to ensure that the island keeps its embassy. Given the fact that the post was technically an Embassy, I tried something innovative in terms of the resumption of visa services. Until then, and subsequently, residents of the Eastern Caribbean had to travel to Barbados or Trinidad to apply for a visa to the U.S., which could be quite costly for the locals. So we came up with a way to try to do visas in Grenada, using roving consular officers from Barbados, which was very popular while it lasted.

Another noteworthy factor in our dealings with Grenada was that the Grenadian government was comprised of many individuals who had spent a substantial portion of their lives in the United States. The Prime Minister himself had been an American citizen. According to Grenadian law, a government official cannot have dual citizenship. As a result, he (as well as several others) had to renounce his American citizenship. Similarly, the Foreign Minister had attended college and law school in New York; had married a South Carolinian who still works in their law practice in New York. Those are just two examples, but as I said, there were others. So, there were definitely many links. Also, and it's probably worth noting, that at the UN General Assembly, Grenada's one vote has the same weight as that of China, and every once in a while we do recall that our Embassy in Barbados covers seven island nations, which together with other states in the region can constitute a considerable voting bloc in international organizations.

Q: How did you find, did you have one or more than one ambassador?

TONGOUR: I had two ambassadors.

Q: How were they?

TONGOUR: Barbados always had political appointees.

Q: I would assume so.

TONGOUR: And some are better than others. The second ambassador , a woman from Iowa, who had been a key figure in that state's Republican Party, was actually quite good. I think she may have been the Party Chair for her state and had been an active supporter and fund raiser for George W. Bush, playing a significant role in winning Iowa for him in 2000. She was a no-nonsense person who really understood local politics. By her own admission, he originally knew next to nothing about international relations or the Caribbean region to which she was assigned. In fact, when she was informed that she would be ambassador to Barbados, she told me she bought a book to figure out exactly where she would be going. But, as I said, she did know how local politics worked; therefore, she was very good at grasping what politicians in various islands she covered were concerned about. In short, she was effect. She was honest and did not pretend to know more than she did; local leaders responded well to her.

The first one was a more complicated case. He was a successful businessman from North Carolina. He also had had no international experience, but in his case he, outwardly at least, looked the part of an ambassador. However, he got into some trouble socially while in Barbados, and let us say seemed to have a penchant for seamier sides of life on the island. Apparently, he was discovered in some less than appropriate situations for an ambassador and was asked to return home. I don't really know the details, but I think I've said enough.

Q: You put it very diplomatically.

Q: Was Cuba at all an influence while you were there?

TONGOUR: Absolutely but not in the way we tend to think. The Cubans, like many others were very savvy about stretching limited resources so as to maximize their impact. And what is it that Cubans do well? As a generalization, they do medicine. They have ample doctors and education programs for doctors. Their programs may not be top of the line, not comparable to the Mayo Clinic, for example. Yet they do have medical schools which welcome Caribbean students, as well as a number of other academic programs for students who might not be able to afford studying in the U.S. or elsewhere. Apart from training, Cuba also provided medical "resources". When Grenada desperately needed a new hospital and we could provide next to nothing, they turned to the Cubans. And what did the Cubans do? The Cubans did not have money to offer but could provide labor. While I was there, large numbers of Cuban laborers came to the island to help construct a new hospital, and arguably winning a few "hearts and minds" in the process.

Q: How come we have got a big medical school there and no hospital?

TONGOUR: No connection. That's not completely accurate because there are connections between the medical school and the government, but the medical school itself is an interesting phenomenon - in that it does not train students in a hospital setting on the island. The program at St. George's is technically a five-year medical program with the first two years spent on island and the remainder spent elsewhere generally back in the U.S. or England, or possibly some other country in a training hospital. They follow this up with their residencies wherever, just like any other medical school program. However, they pay St. George's for the full program even though in a sense they get farmed out to hospital schools in Boston or wherever. While in Grenada, the students take their basic anatomy, biology and other classroom courses. For whatever the reason, they never worked it out with the government to establish a separate hospital for the university - perhaps cost was a factor but I'm not sure. Nevertheless, some of those who do the training, the professors, are themselves doctors, and they sometimes provide medical assistance to residents of the island. . The island itself has some decent doctors; it's just that the facilities were long lacking. When I first arrived, the general hospital was horrific. I remember thinking when I first saw it, please don't let anything happen to me or my son while I'm here. By the time I left, thanks largely to the Cuban contribution, Grenada had a brand new, quite beautiful hospital. It might not have had the latest, state-of-the-art equipment, but as a facility it was complete.

Today is the 24th of March, 2008. Nadia, alright, you are just back from a trip to Grenada so the island is fresh in your mind.

TONGOUR: ...Looking back on my early days on island, many Grenadians seemed somewhat wary of us or retained negative, albeit mutedly so, attitudes towards the U.S. even 20 years after the intervention. Those who had been very pro-U.S. tended to be rather less enthusiastic than before because they felt the U.S. had not done as much as it might have or what they hoped for. To put it differently, one could almost imagine them making a plaintive cry to the effect of "Daddy, why have you left us". After all, given the large contingent (by local standards) of U.S. troops, Embassy personnel and AID staff, there was clearly an expectation that the U.S. would provide substantial economic assistance - a bit of manna from heaven. Unfortunately, as we all know, there were competing demands. It was the bad luck of the Grenadians that the fighting in Lebanon broke out at the same time, and the focus of attention quickly shifted. That has happened repeatedly over time and seemed normal from our perspective. However, from a more insular viewpoint - and islanders could be considered somewhat parochial in their orientation - the world stopped there, so why did the aid "dry up"? Not surprisingly, many felt let down by the dwindling support over time. In fact, while in the ensuing period, Washington grappled with whether even to keep this small post open, Grenadians were baffled by the continual drawdown in the size and functions of the embassy until what was left was a tiny post with very little by way of assistance. So, there was some disillusionment, a sense of somehow being let down.

In any event, when I arrived in Grenada in 2001, people were certainly polite enough, but there was not initially any particular warmth or even contact from government officials. In contrast, the expat community was very welcoming; yet weeks went by before anyone in the government deigned to meet me. In part, this was undoubtedly due to my August arrival, when many officials were on vacation. After 9/11, there seemed to be a complete reversal in attitudes. Obviously this occurred throughout the world, but in a small society such as Grenada the outpouring of sympathy was quite visible. People actually put flowers in the openings of the chain link fence that surrounded the Embassy building. There were spontaneous church services, including one in the local cathedral to honor the dead and show respect for the United States - overall, an incredible show of support on the part of Grenadian and expat society. For a brief honeymoon period Grenadians seemed to forget whatever negative feelings they had had from the intervention era. Gradually, the overwhelmingly positive feelings subsided, but that, too, was common throughout the world; we seem to have squandered considerable goodwill in the years that followed. By the way, there were also two Grenadians who died in the World Trade Center bombing. They may have also been U.S. citizens, but Grenadians regarded them as their own.

Q: So, I mean, there was a personal sort of-

TONGOUR: They felt it. And I guess another factor worth emphasizing is that while arguably on a small island such as this an embassy makes little sense, there is another side to this story, namely the existence of so many islanders - often newly minted American citizens - residing in our own country. It so happens that there are more Grenadian expats living in Brooklyn or London or Toronto than there are in Grenada itself. Everyone has a cousin, brother, parents, whatever living in New York, and most are dual nationals. Others are constantly in and out of the country, and it is sometimes a tricky issue if you think of it in terms of immigration or visas. Many people reside in the States as part-time residents, much as many Americans spend their winters in Florida and return to New York or wherever for the remainder of the year. On the islands, there are the "now birds", who generally build themselves a home on the islands for the winter or retirement and spend the warmer months "back home". In the West Indies, there is a broader phenomenon - not limited to Grenada - wherein earlier immigrants to England often return to their island of origin as they reach retirement age and build themselves grand houses, much larger than anything they could have afforded had they stayed home in the first place. They often return with "foreign" accents, sounding more British than West Indian. And the locals have a term for them: JCBs, which means "just come back". Unfortunately, some of these JCBs also return with a certain "attitude" about the proper way things should be done and tend to offer all sorts of helpful advice to those who stayed behind. This does not always go down well with the locals. This pattern is less true for those who went to the U.S. Although some do return, or at least buy property with that intention, a larger proportion simply come back to visit. Where this all leads in that out of any government cabinet of say 12 to 15 people, more than half at some point have had dual nationality. However, according to Grenadian law, Grenadian officials could not retain their "other" nationality and serve as a high level elected offical. By law, they were expected to renounce their former citizenship but sometimes they neglected to do so.

Q: You know, when I came into the Foreign Service in 1955 my first post was Frankfurt, Germany, and I had a _____ of vice consulates and doing American services of German Americans who had left Germany not so much when Hitler came in but before when the inflation started and all, went back to the States in 1948 and there was a currency reform in Germany where it started to perk up again and they came back and then they were saying, you know, I went to my village and they did not listen to my advice, you know.

TONGOUR: Exactly that, yes.

Q: I mean, really, you cannot go home again; America does things to people anyway, they make them feel- and Britain too, I am sure, make them feel quite confident that they can tell the people who are probably leading a different lifestyle at a different pace how to go.

TONGOUR: Early in my tenure there, the "scandal" broke out that the Prime Minister still retained his American citizenship. The issue had, in fact, been festering for some time and he had actually submitted his paperwork for renunciation some time earlier but it fell to me to accept formally this renunciation. Interestingly, inasmuch as he was the PM, he wanted me to call on his office to take care of the paperwork. I explained that while I would always be happy to call on him, and, I implied, be appropriately deferential, when it came to submitting a renunciation, it would be more appropriately handled at the Embassy. He agreed.

Q: So you could not do it anyway.

TONGOUR: Could not do what?

Q: Take his thing. You were not a consular officer.

TONGOUR: I was indeed. I had a consular commission.

Q: Did you?

TONGOUR: Oh yes, but this had all been previously worked out in Washington. In this instance, I was basically the "transfer person" - transmitting already agreed upon documents. .

Q: Well, you were there as chief of mission, were you not?

TONGOUR: Yes, and I actually had three titles. Technically I was Chargï¿½, DCM, and Principal Officer. In addition, I signed all the adoption forms, Consular Reports of Birth, etc. So yes, I legitimately functioned as a consular officer.

Q: Because you know, there is this divide, somebody who is an ambassador cannot sign a visa or do consular work or any kind.

TONGOUR: True, but I was not technically an ambassador. However, the logic of that rule escapes me. You can be a DCM in a proper Embassy as well as a Chargï¿½, but how can one be a Principal Officer in a separate country at a post designated an Embassy. Usually Principal Officers are at Consulates. And again, why is that an Ambassador cannot do consular work. I'm sure there are specific rules but it remains a bit esoteric to me. On a practical level, what made the situation a bit complicated for all involved was the fact that Grenadians most of the time were either oblivious to the fact - or didn't really care - that an ambassador residing in Barbados was really "their" ambassador. They basically regarded the person in charge of the post in Grenada as the ambassador;, and even though I never pretended to have that position, many people insisted on calling me "Madam Ambassador" or referring to me as "our ambassador". Clearly, our Embassy in Bridgetown was well aware of this attitude and did not care for it. In fact, Embassy Bridgetown advocated closing the post in Grenada. So this was a point of friction between the two posts.

Q: Well, I cannot remember exactly what we have talked about so correct me if we get off on a track that has already been covered; did we talk about- I assume our military presence, there was no need for any military presence.

TONGOUR: No, not during my time there. However, military attachï¿½s or staff assigned to Bridgetown or even Caracas would occasionally come through. But we did have a wonderful, temporary military presence in the form of so-called New Horizons projects, which were very popular on the island. Have you heard about New Horizons? or perhaps Trade Winds, another military exercise in the region?

Q: No.

TONGOUR: The Southern Military Command (SOUTHCOM) based in Miami would periodically stage training exercises throughout the region. I imagine other regional commands likewise had such programs, but I can only speak for the exercises carried out in Latin America and the Caribbean. In any given year, SOUTHCOM would schedule a certain number of such projects in the region, and these projects or training exercises would include an engineering and medical training component. So, after considerable planning and preparation in conjunction with the host government, our troops would come to a particular country and build a school or an old age home or whatever structure might be needed. Essentially, a government could request a specific construction project but it had to meet certain criteria, notably that the structure could be completed within a fixed and relatively short period of time. The construction project would last for approximately five or six weeks. In addition to the engineers, medical teams would go out into the countryside to work in rural clinics, examining patients or providing services that were often not available or scarce locally. You could not win more hearts and minds - these exercises were truly popular. While I was in Grenada, a New Horizons team built two schools and an old age home. One of these schools they built from scratch; the second involved adding to an existing structure. Plus they built a 20-person facility for the elderly. And, of course, they had teams of doctors going out to rural parishes to treat residents who did not see doctors on a regular basis. So it was wonderful.

Q: You were there from when to when now?

TONGOUR: August of 2001 to August of 2004. And Hurricane Ivan hit a month later.

Q: What did the hurricane do and what was the response?

TONGOUR: It came after I had left but I went back to visit a year later.

Q: Oh yes.

TONGOUR: The timing of my departure may have been fortunate for me but difficult for my successor. By the time I left, I had been there three years and basically knew a lot of people on the island, whereas my successor had only been at post for a few weeks went Ivan struck. It was undoubtedly a nightmare for her, both personally and professionally inasmuch as she had an elderly mother living with her, whom she did not want to leave in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. Apparently, she stayed cooped up in the residence for a few days rather than venturing out, which resulted in some negative reactions regarding her handling of the situation. As it was, she had a number of distraught American citizens and countless Embassy issues to deal with, and it was all too much. She did not stay more than a few months.

In the aftermath of Ivan, USAID provided substantial assistance, I think, on the order of $30 million. How much of that translated into visible results was unclear, which is often the case with AID projects because much of the funds go to contractors or to programs that are not readily visible to the public. By contrast, the Venezuelans or the Cubans or even the Chinese come in and engage in highly concrete and visible projects. The PRC, for example, ascertained that the most important project from the standpoint of the Grenadian Prime Minister was to rebuild the sports stadium, so that Grenada could take part in the international cricket competition. To clarify this point, the cricket work cup was scheduled for 2006 and was to be held in various venues throughout the Caribbean. Grenada had been expected to host a few of the matches; however, hurricane Ivan had completely demolished the stadium. In fact, the original stadium would have had to be upgraded in any case even without the onslaught of Ivan. Just prior to Ivan, the Prime Minister had been weighing his options regarding continued recognition of Taiwan or the possibility of switching Grenada's allegiance tot eh PRC. Heretofore, Grenada had been one of the 16 or so countries that still recognized Taiwan, and the government of Taiwan had always been quite generous in its support. However, the "other" China eventually made some very appealing overtures to the Grenada government. I don't wish to sound cynical but dollar diplomacy was very much at work here, and the PRC's terms were more lucrative. Indeed, shortly after Ivan, the Chinese sent scores of workers and materiel to Grenada and in short order built a brand new stadium. Moreover, a sizeable labor force was left behind which now does contracts for all sorts of labor intensive projects, and to some extent competes with other local construction firms.Likewise, several other countries also provided tangible assistance. The Venezuelans, in particular, built a large number of low-cost housing units. That was one of their contributions. But we did considerable good as well. .

Q: I am not sure of my timing but was any sort of Venezuelan Chavez phenomenon going on when you were there?

TONGOUR: Absolutely.

Q; How did this translate to where you were?

TONGOUR: The Venezuelan presence took two main forms. First of all, and this is a regional phenomenon, the Venezuelans have traditionally operated very successful cultural and language institutes that offer free classes in Spanish to local participants. I have seen such Venezuelan Cultural Institutes on a number of different islands in the Caribbean, and they are all very popular. I myself brushed up on my Spanish there, as did many people I knew. This was not officially part of the Venezuelan Embassy and functioned largely as an independent entity. What was fascinating to me about both the Institute and the Embassy was the anti-Chavez attitudes several individuals more or less openly displayed. Their Embassy was quite small, consisting of only a handful of people, two of whom were openly disdainful of Chavez and one never lost an opportunity to criticize him as a leader. How she managed to do her job for as long as she did was rather remarkable. Still, she did come from an upper class family and was quite well connected. Nevertheless, it was unusual to hear a diplomat describe the head of her government as a monster or a nincompoop. Another officer, albeit more discreet, was also quite negative. Likewise, the Ambassador, another woman, was careful in terms of what she said, but did not seem to be a big fan of Mr. Chavez. However, what you are really asking concerns the economic or political impact of Venezuela on the region. And this manifested itself in cheap oil. Chavez instituted a program called PetroCaribe, which aimed at creating an oil monopoly in the region. He did not succeed as evidenced by the continuing existence of Texaco and other oil companies still active in the area. Still, the idea was to provide relatively inexpensive gas to the island nations - obviously in return for their support and allegiance. To a certain extent, the approach worked. Compared to other countries, gas prices in this region were not astronomical; while gas was not cheap, it was manageable, which was definitely a Venezuelan "contribution".

Other forms of Venezuelan support were mainly symbolic. For example, Grenada's National Day is February 7, and every year the Venezuelans would send in a big a ship loaded with marching bands and acrobats, including people who jumped out of helicopters, which created quite an impression. We, on the other hand, did very little to commemorate their holiday. Frankly, it would have been much appreciated had we routed some vessel sailing around in the Caribbean to Grenada basically to "show the flag". It had been known to happen in years past, but while I was there the most we did was to have our Ambassador or Defense Attachï¿½ come over from Barbados to attend the National Day parade. I say this only to make the point that on a small island with only half a dozen embassies, whatever one does in such instances is always noted and known to all.

Q: How stood Grenada and the UN voting context?

TONGOUR: Better than some, but in most cases Caribbean states would vote as a block. In many instances, particularly on matters that were of importance to us, they would insist on CARICOM (Caribbean Community) unity and vote more or less as one; thus, we would not be in a position to divide them. Periodically, there would be some major event or crucial issue that would prompt lead to the representatives of the various island nations getting together in Bridgetown to meet with some visiting Washington dignitary or other. Overall these states tended to be fairly pro-American in terms of the way they voted. In other words, for the most part, they voted in ways that were favorable to our views or positions, but when they did not, they would oppose us as part of the CARICOM block.

Q: How did the Iraq war play there?

TONGOUR: Badly. But they were very shrewd in that regard. Deafening silence is one way to put it. They were studiously polite in many instances; when they did not want to deal with an issue and simply chose not to discuss it. And Iraq was a case in point. However, I'm not exactly sure where things stand now in the islands on the question of the Iraq war. While I was there both the government and the opposition in a somewhat odd way "used" the Iraq war to score political points at home. As it turns out, there were a few Iraqi families that had somehow managed to come to Grenada. As was the case in many countries of the region, Grenada had an economic citizenship program. Are you familiar with that term?

Q: No.

TONGOUR: Essentially you buy your citizenship. But the term is a bit more gentile. One makes a commitment to invest a certain amount in the country and acquires status as an investor. By providing a substantial contribution, one in turn receives a passport.

Q: Even if you were not really a resident?

TONGOUR: For the most part these economic citizens were rich enough to have various residences, and some of them were not very savory characters. A few also bought diplomatic titles as well. At that time, there were a number of offshore banks, and again, not all were of the highest caliber. The situation improved - cleaned up - considerably while I was in Grenada. Meanwhile, the Iraqis I referred to had managed to get economic citizenship in Grenada sometime before, which provided the opposition politicians with a useful weapon to use against the government. Specifically, the opposition publicized the fact that these Iraqis had traveled to Barbados in hopes of obtaining U.S. visas and apparently had not succeeded in their quest. The opposition in turn blasted the government for having allowed "terrorists" into the country and providing them with refuge. The problem with this scenarios was that this particular group of Iraqis happened to be Christians and extremely pro-American, at least initially. We discovered this because shortly after the onset of our engagement in Iraq, an Embassy guard informed me that there were some Iraqis outside who wished to see the American Chargï¿½. While I was not really thinking about terrorism, I did wonder if they were asylum seekers. I recall thinking that if I let them into the building I might be faced with a problem if they did not want to leave. After all the embassy was technically American territory. To play it safe, I went outside to talk with them. On meeting, they simply said they wanted to thank us, specifically mentioning President Bush, and were effusive in their praise - certainly more so than anything I had heard in a long time vis-a-vis our actions. They also asked me for an American flag. I replied that I would try to obtain one for them. I checked with Bridgetown, and everyone was so excited that these Iraqis had asked for an American flag that I was authorized to give them one.

Q: Well, I was wondering, did the issue of Puerto Rican independence; was that something that came up at all?

TONGOUR: No. As far as the Eastern Caribbean islanders were concerned, Puerto Rico was basically a transit point, an airport, which they wished they could avoid transiting. There really was an extremely limited interest in issues affecting more distant areas - not counting the U.S. or the United Kingdom.

If you look at a map, Puerto Rico is a very long way away and the biggest concern was how many hours one would have to spend in the San Juan airport in order to get to the U.S. However, your mentioning independence reminds me that this very concept which we value so highly was not initially something many islanders were terribly keen on. Of course, the sentiments varied from place to place, but for many, it seemed as though the Brits just kicked them out of the nest, and it came as quite a shock. Many West Indians were well aware that they were really not prepared for independence when they obtained it. Even later, many would joke that it would be nice if we or some other nation could adopt them - make Grenada or some other island a 51st state. That was a not uncommon theme.

Q: Well, this is, of course, true of some of the Stans, you know, part of the Soviet Union. I know Kyrgyzstan really had profited by being in the Soviet Empire.

TONGOUR: That is right. One of the more interesting or complicating aspects of my assignment had to do with the Cuban mission on the island. As I mentioned, we had a very small diplomatic community, and the Cuban Ambassador and I were always invited to the same events. Moreover, the Cuban residence was just down the street from my own residence - less than a quarter of a mile. So it was difficult to avoid him and his wife. Moreover, they had spent a number of years in New York at the UN and enjoyed talking to anyone about his experiences there. Had he not been the Cuban Ambassador, I'm sure I would have enjoyed getting to know him and his wife. But that was not to be the case, although it's virtually impossible to sit in stony silence at a dinner table when you are all thrown together. In any event, he enjoyed talking about going to the New York Yankees baseball games and things of that sort - a genial type, much liked by the Grenadian authorities. Once again, those Grenadians that had been pro-Cuban earlier continued to remain sympathetic and the government as a whole managed to essentially, I would not use the word milk, that is too strong, but derived whatever benefit they could from whatever source they could. So, as I told you last time, the hospital, building construction project and so on.

Q: Did Jamaica, it is sort of the big boy on the block and did it have a certain amount of resentment or did it have any influence there?

TONGOUR: Yes and no. To understand the region, one needs to think of a triangle in which Trinidad, Barbados and Jamaica make up the points - albeit an oddly shaped triangle - with a number of other island nations wedged in between. Jamaica was just far enough away as to have a positive influence, and many Grenadians did go to the university there, if they didn't wind up studying in England or the U.S. Since it was fairly distant, Jamaica did not have the negative connotations that were associated with Barbados or to a lesser degree Trinidad. In truth, it is hard to dislike the "Trinis", as they are generally perceived as pleasant and fun loving. Barbados is somewhat of a different story. People here always assume that other countries in the region would like to emulate or draw closer to Barbados, but for many Barbados represented the big kid on the block for whom they had a certain distaste or resentment, which might have benefited Jamaica and Trinidad in terms of regional ties. Some believed the "Bajans" (local term for Barbadians) were convinced of their own superiority or had their noses in the air. I remember hearing them described as the Swiss of the Caribbean, not a concept exactly synonymous with fun.

Q: How did the ex pat community, did it have much, was there much work for you or not?

TONGOUR: It is a large community for the size of the island largely because of the medical school and university, which has now grown to several thousand students - from the roughly 100 or less at the time of the intervention. It's a beautiful campus, absolutely gorgeous - in fact one of the loveliest I've seen. How many college campuses are perched over the Caribbean, and filled with pastel colored stucco buildings. As I already mentioned, the university had virtually exploded in size, with programs in many fields, including the liberal arts. As a result, there was a doubling or even tripling in the size of the expat population. In addition to the students, there were administrators and faculty who receive substantial salaries, who like to purchase imported items. Food-wise, you can buy practically anything in Grenada, including items not to be found in Barbados or other larger islands. If you wanted smoked salmon or exotic cheese or interesting wines, they were all there, giving the island a certain touch of sophistication not found among some of its neighbors. Then too, the largely American student body wanted pizza and other goodies, which were available as well. On top of the university crowd, there was yet another expat contingent comprised overwhelmingly of retirees. They had certain needs, such as social security checks which were sent to the Post. There were also deaths, births and other welfare and whereabouts issues, usually involving tourists who would occasionally get robbed or have some other problem, and all of these cases took a fair amount of time. That said, the expat community was a congenial group that contributed substantially to my pleasant life in Grenada. .

Q: Did you find you were in a position or it was necessary to form sort of associations or something, American associations, you know, something both that you could reach out to them and to make them feel happy there and that you were a presence and all that sort of thing.

TONGOUR: Absolutely. First of all, the Embassy itself had what was known as a "warden system'", whereby we could communicate information to the broader American community, and the wardens would meet with me periodically. In previous years, when the embassy had been larger, there had actually been an American school - technically an international school - which eventually folded. This was unfortunate for me since my son attended school in Grenada.

Q: How old was your child?

TONGOUR: He was in the fourth to the sixth grades while we lived in Grenada, and that made for an interesting situation. Although he went to a private school where children of foreigners living on the island mostly attended, it was technically a West Indian or Caribbean school, named Westmorland My son was actually one of the few foreigners in his class and he wound up taking, among other things, courses in West Indian agriculture, cricket (for p.e.) and so on. Moreover, inasmuch as he was there in the sixth grade, he also wound up taking something known as the "eleven plus" exam - otherwise known as the common entrance ex. It was an interesting process, in that while literacy rates were quite high throughout the English-speaking Caribbean, the number of high school slots were somewhat limited and at a premium. For example, the island might have 4,000 students in the sixth grade taking an exam for admission to approximately 1,000 high school spots in the country. What that meant, of course, was that the remaining 3,000 or so would not be going on to secondary school, at least not at that time. There were, in fact, provisions to re-take the text and some other options, but in general the system was rather restrictive.

Q: Were these British run exams?

TONGOUR: They were similar to the British system of exams but were more Caribbean in content and approach.

Q: This is not a Grenadian?

TONGOUR: No, these are regional exams, offered throughout the Caribbean "Commonwealth" at the same time each year. The reason I stress this distinction is that the exam included questions that probably would not be on the British version, questions having to do with agriculture or West Indian cricket stars, etc. I should mention that it was considered prestigious to place within the top 100 candidates; as it turns out my son placed 64th in the island. To elaborate, making it into the top 100 wins you considerable praise, making it into the top 1,000 earns you a mention in the local newspapers where the top 1,000 individuals are listed in rank order, with the name of the high school they plan to attend. There was a lot of hoopla associated with the publication of the list. Much to my surprise, my son was ranked "the top boy" in his school based on his exam score. I mention my surprise because his grades were normally not that high and there were a number of girls ahead of him in the pack. One of his girl classmates was 8th in the island and , of course, "top girl" in his school. It so happens that her parents were friends of mine, and the father called to congratulate me on my son's performance. I remember saying I should have been the one calling them, to which he replied "Oh, but you are not West Indian". In other words, the locals were surprised that a foreigner had done as well as he had. I, in turn, commented that I was unaware mathematics was geographically linked. "Yes," he said, "but not every American knows the local cricket players". In sum, the vast majority of students did not go on to secondary school but attended what was called a school-leaving program up to the age of 14. And of course, they could take the common entrance exam a second time, and many did.

Q: Well, was there any push to get more into the upper ranks or was this-

TONGOUR: To create a larger more American style school system? Certainly but money was a major problem. And one other sad aspect of schooling throughout these islands was the fact that while the public schools, especially on the lower levels were for the most part adequate, the students or their families had to pay for their uniforms and books, which often were quite expensive. Invariably, you would run across situations where a woman would work as a domestic for the express purpose of earning money to pay the school fees and books for nieces, nephews or cousins. Families would pull together to obtain the wherewithal for their kids to go to school.

Q: Did you notice, was there a color system?

TONGOUR: Certainly there was an informal one. In one of the neighboring countries, there was a joke to the effect that there were at least 20 different names for color shades among the populace of the islands. By comparison, Grenada was a fairly "dark" island, with an old whitish upper crust. I visited the home of a couple who were descended from the local aristocracy, if you will, who were basically a shade of tan year round. They lived in a mansion that resembled a 19th century castle . According to local lore, at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century a West Indian ha gone to England and brought home a bride. He had considerable money and built her what he thought she was used to, namely a type of gothic castle. Well, whether it was the man or the castle, we don't know, but what was certain was that she ran off after only a year. The castle remained but changed hands a number of times over the years. The current occupants have a whole wall of photos of various ancestors. It resembles a model UN, with every imaginable shade. Interestingly enough, , while the owner did not mind the fact that he had all sorts of black ancestors, he did not want to be mistaken for an East Indian (from India). Yet, clearly some of his ancestors also came from that part of the world, based on facial characteristics. Yet, he somehow saw that as a stigma.

Q: One always thinks of, often or not-

TONGOUR: Of race? It's in the background.

Q: But the whole Indian community, was there much of an Indian community on Grenada?

TONGOUR: Some but not especially and for the most part its members had become quite successful. Many of the East Indians in Grenada had more recently migrated from Trinidad, where their ancestors had come as poor indentured servants. Over time, they or at least their children prospered, notwithstanding their humble roots.

Q: Okay, you were talking about- well, before we get to other aspects, I was wondering, we were talking about sort of social life. In some islands, I think maybe Jamaica, members of the ruling classes would actually bring their second or third wife to social functions. Did you find this to be true in Grenada?

TONGOUR: Not really. This type of behavior may have been more prevalent in larger islands. Even in Barbados, there was a culture of the so-called "outside woman" in contrast to the "inside woman" (the legal wife) and the Bajans were more daring in bringing outside women to certain events. But in a small society like Grenada people would always know who the "other woman" might be. The good or the bad aspect of being in so small an island was definitely the gold fish bowl quality, or the lack of a real private life. One more or less had to behave or else not care what others thought because most dalliances were quickly discovered. Arguably, this may have served as an enforcer of good behavior. Still, like everywhere, there were "few saints" and a share of "sinners", and it was well known which government official or local leader was having an affair and with whom. And so it goes.

Q: Well, let us talk about some of the aspects of the political life up there.

TONGOUR: When I arrived the word on the street was election would occur shortly, and they did occur about a year or so later; more recently, another round of elections were held this year (2008), and the opposition party took over the government. In terms of which parties were in existence then, it's probably worth mentioning that the "oldest" party, or the one that had been ousted by the New Jewel Movement and its more radical followers - whose activities eventually triggered our intervention - was the party headed by the late Sir Eric Gairy. As I mentioned earlier, he had initially been perceived as an early national leader and a key figure in events leading to Grenadian independence. However, over the years, he came to be regarded as somewhat eccentric, if not crazy, due to his claims of seeing flying saucers and so on. He had formed a political party called the Grenada United Labor Party , the GULP, which for many years had been the leading vote-getter in the country. More recently, it had fallen on hard times, and Prime Minister Keith Mitchell (in office until 2008) was one of the early leaders of a breakaway group called the New National Party (NNP). He was in power for three five-year terms, but the NNP lost out to a rival party in the 2008 election. Mitchell spent many of his earlier years in the United States, attending Howard University and obtaining a PhD there. He owned property in Maryland and prospered in the U.S. On his return to Grenada - after the intervention - he was regarded as a national figure, not actively linked to the preceding revolutionary movement. But after a number of years in power, certain less savory aspects of his administration came to the fore, including his support for offshore banking enterprises, some of whom were deemed less than clean. Then, too, there was the economic citizenship program which our Treasury Department officials deemed, if not corrupt, somewhat inappropriate. Plus sums of money seemed to disappear or alternately "appear", as in a much heralded case wherein the Prime Minister was videotaped accepting a suitcase filled with cash in a hotel room - an incident which has resulted in legal action. The case was rather bizarre, though I'm not sure exactly how or whether it has as yet been resolved. This type of incident over time leaves a bad taste in peoples' mouths even though many businessmen and community leaders traditionally supported Mitchell and his NNP in part because he was smart and capable and secondly was not perceived to be a leftist.

Now, you might wonder, why is this significant today? Because over the years, a number of the more intellectual types, you might say the island's intelligentsia (some of whom had earlier been associated with the New Jewel Movement) gravitated to the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC). The names of these two main parties , and to some extent their policies, might be seen as interchangeable. However, during my tenure, Prime Minister Keith Mitchell and his NNP was the government and the NDC represented the principal opposition party. By 2003, there was a widespread sentiment that the government might conceivably lose the upcoming election; if not, it might still lose the overwhelming majority of seats it had held for many years. The main issue of the day was corruption and the need for change. Whatever else the opposition was, it was for the most part not judged to be corrupt. The key problem for the NDC was the fact that some of its members were former "revolutionaries" who were still regarded as leftists. So elections were held and the outcome resulted in an eight-seven split, and frankly there was considerable controversy surrounding one NNP seat. While the NNP retained the seat and won the election, the results could easily have gone the other way. An Organization of American States (OAS) mission monitored the elections which came down to the wire on the sister island of Carriacou, where the recount went on for several days, but in the end Foreign Minister Elvin Nimrod held on to his seat. And Mr. Nimrod himself is an interesting man. Married to a South Carolinian who lives in New York, he went to college and law school in New York and owns a law firm in Brooklyn that continues to function and is now operated by his wife as a family business. When he returned to Grenada and joined the government, he had to give up his American citizenship.

Now (2008), Grenada is facing another round of elections, and the opposition is expected to win. Today, when you drive around the island, you can see a veritable building boom, with gigantic houses popping up which neither you nor I could ever afford. The roads have been repaired since hurricane Ivan and there are directional road signs all over the island - something I promoted during my tour. I remember pushing the idea that road signs would be very helpful if the government wanted tourists to visit. In any case, most of the buildings in the downtown area have been repaired or rebuilt, except, interestingly enough, for the churches and the Parliament building. Were you to visit Grenada today, you might well wonder why Parliament and two or three major churches don't have roofs yet; otherwise, you would not know that there had been a devastating hurricane a few years before. So, with a lot of help from their friends, the Grenadians have done a good job.

However, the government apparently has been selling off national assets such as prime lands and national parks without exactly informing the public - basically the national patrimony. The corruption level is high, and there are many who claim the place is totally bankrupt. Individuals are certainly buying and building homes, but the government is reputedly broke. Elections are due any time now, and as I mentioned the opposition has a good shot at winning. What makes the upcoming race especially interesting is the fact that the leader of the opposition is considered by be a very decent, honorable man, who is not only widely respected but is also known for having spent three years in jail during the revolutionary period thanks to the very New Jewel Movement, many of whose members are now in his party. In fact, his leading deputies, the so-called second and third in command were both active members of the revolutionary regime who are now both lawyers. They have modified their views of the world somewhat since then. (Note: Since the aforementioned was recorded, the opposition NDC won the 2008 election, with Tillman Thomas named the new Prime Minister; Keith Mitchell, however, retained his parliamentary seat and is the new leader of the opposition.).

Q: I would think it would have been a prime place for drug money to go to.

TONGOUR: Some, because there are many inlets and harbors. This is not necessarily a place to stash money anymore since most of the offshore banks have closed in recent years, but it certainly serves as a transit point. If you consider drug routes, you'll see that Grenada is not that far from the northern part of South America, and with its extensive shore line, there are many places for drug runners in so-called cigarette boats to pull in. .

Q: Well, while you were there did you sort of have a permanent investigating FBI, Treasury, whatever you are thinking about-

TONGOUR: Yes.

Q about who is doing what to whom because of our concern about both, well, narcotics and also I suppose terrorism and illegal money?

TONGOUR: Terrorism, no. We were still too far down the food chain for that. By the time the terrorism issue reared its head in the region, I was practically out the door. We did do some interesting contingency exercises for a hurricane disaster, which included some training on how to handle a terrorist threat, but it was not a major focal point. In order of priority while I was on island, the biggest concern dealt with money matters. It seemed for a while that there was a near permanent presence of bank investigators thanks to the agreement of the Prime Minister to clean up the offshore banking sector, which had been hurting his relations with the U.S. Treasury as well as the country's standing with various financial institutions such as Standard and Poor's. So Price Waterhouse teams were frequently on the island as was the Legal Attachï¿½ from Barbados.

Q: Legal attachï¿½.

TONGOUR: Yes, legal attachï¿½. Basically they were checking on the whole offshore banking system in conjunction with an ongoing legal case in the U.S. which involved a horrific pyramid scheme wherein lots of little old ladies had invested their life savings into a bank, whose name now escapes, set up by a guy from Oregon, who, in fact, possessed next to nothing aside from one large jewel that he had somehow obtain in Uganda. It was to Uganda that he subsequently fled with all these people's money, but his so-called bank had been a fixture on the offshore banking circuit in Grenada for some time. The actual investigation of this case had been going on for several years before I arrived, but I recall receiving all sorts of letters sent to the Embassy from citizens in small towns in eastern Oregon and Idaho bemoaning the fact that the senders had invested their life savings in the bank, with nothing to show for it. The bank had gone under and the banker had absconded with their money - so our officials were investigating the case.

To a certain degree there was close collaboration between the local government and our Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Narcotic Assistance Unit (NAS) based in Bridgetown. Our agents would come over and be very discreet in their dealings with the local coast guard units, providing them with various forms of assistance. This was one area where our assistance was very effectively deployed, namely our aid to the local coast guard in upgrading their boats and repairing them as well as training their officers in how to interdict the cigarette boats and other vessels entering the harbors. And there were some successes that came out of this.

One of our priorities at that time were cases of American citizens who had been defrauded by various scam artists operating in the region as well as money laundering and the prevalence of offs-shore banking, which I had previously mentioned. Drugs, of course, were always a concern. Terrorism, less so, except in Trinidad where a few years earlier there had been a small radical movement that had an Islamic orientation, and included among its membership Indians and Pakistanis then living in Trinidad. Since they seemed to advocate violence and other somewhat threatening objects, they had been a source of considerable concern and obviously a focus of attention. But this was not really an issue in Grenada.

Q: Well, what were you, sort of back to the relations business, was there concern that Chavez was trying to do anything there outside of sort of good works?

TONGOUR: I think it's important not to underestimate the significance of good works, especially given the limited amount we were doing in this region. One point I should stress is that when I arrived there was no real assistance budget for Grenada. AID had already cut back its operations in the entire region. Officially, the Caribbean regional operation was by then based in Jamaica, although a few AID officers remained in Bridgetown. To be sure, they would occasionally visit or sponsor a project but usually this was a low-profile endeavor. When I arrived I quickly discovered that everyone had their hand out for assistance, and I had no funds to give them. The trouble wa that what locals wanted or needed most did not fit into any of our aid categories. In other words, USAID does not provide funds to host a dance aimed at raising money for a new floor in a school. Or there was no money to buy a school on computer or a community center one sewing machine. I used to think the Brits had a brilliant system. They never had much money either but they did have a little "slush fund" or $25,000 or $30,000 which could be used for such small scale projects. .

Q: Well, I thought ambassadors and- have this but-

TONGOUR: But the chargï¿½ did not. The ambassador could allocate small amounts of money but usually these were spent on emergencies. In essence, I was constantly being asked to donate for this, that or the other; since there were no funds designated for such activities, more often than not I simply paid for the tickets for the dance or whatever as a personal contribution. What I did manage to accomplish in this area was a form of creative financing, which meant tagging on to events that Bridgetown was having. For example, if a little theater group was coming to Barbados to present an HIV/AIDS awareness program, we persuaded the powers that be to allow them to come to Grenada as well. While we could not technically charge money for the performance, we would suggest donations, and any donations provided would then be donated to the local HIV AIDS program. Similarly, if there was a speaker coming somewhere in the region, we would try to get them to come to Grenada as well, to give a talk or put on a workshop - and we received positive publicity for our efforts.

But back to the subject of the ambassador's fund, because the ambassador did indeed have a fund for small projects, including a program for heritage/tourism development. Grenada happened to have some ancient petroglyphs from the time of the original Arawak and Carib inhabitants, which were quite interesting stone carvings. Moreover, the northwestern part of Grenada where the petroglyphs were located had very little tourism even though it was very pretty. Yet there was a beach and these stones that could be developed. Since I knew some people who were involved in environmental cleanup and tourism projects, I spoke with them about possible proposals they could submit. Specifically, we spoke of a plan to clean up the local beach and the rocks so that the petroglyphs could more readily be seen and also to set up a cafe and other amenities to make this location more appealing and desirable as a tourism destination. Anyway, they did submit a proposal, which I helped edit and amazingly enough the proposal was selected. In other words, the Grenadian group won the prize. It was only $10,000, but still $10,000.....,

Q: Can go a long way in that part of the world.

TONGOUR: It did indeed. The local group cleaned up the beach and the rocks; gradually people started selling artwork and souvenirs in the area. Whether they are still doing do, I don't know. For a while, at least, there was visible progress in the area. So, what does all this have to do with Chavez? Well, at that point, Chavez had not yet come across quite as crazy as he later seemed, even though he already had plenty of foes. Still, he was engaged in what you called "good works projects", as were others. And since we did not appear to be doing very much, one really had to jump through hoops to be visible in the same way.

Q: How were your relations with the ambassador? Who was the ambassador?

TONGOUR: I think I mentioned that I served under two during my tenure. The first one only came over to Grenada a couple of times, which may have been one reason why the locals did not focus too much on Embassy Bridgetown. The first ambassador was an old friend of the Bush family and had been a major fundraiser as well as a successful businessman in North Carolina. I may have mentioned that he did not last very long and was recalled for various reason. Leaving aside his personal behavior, one difficulty his staff faced during his tenure was his attitude towards Foreign Service officers. He made it clear that he did not have a lot of use for us as a group, which created some difficulties for us, especially when he openly questioned why we were not more motivated by profit or when he pointedly asked why there were so many single mothers in the Foreign Service. It so happened there were a number of women at post raising children on their own, and such comments weren't appreciated. In terms of Embassy Grenada, he seemed a bit perturbed by the fact that the house rented for the Chargï¿½ was quite lovely, a new home that in some respects was nicer than the Ambassador's residence in Barbados. I'm not imagining this because he mentioned it to me on several occasions. He also made no secret of the fact that he wanted the place closed. He also made it clear that it wasn't personal - he seemed to like me well enough - but that he simply did not approve of the idea of having a mission in Grenada. My saying that I did not set the rules regarding the existence of the post and that it predated my tenure made no difference. In any event the second ambassador was far more successful in her work in the region and in her relations with the staff.

Q: Who was that?

TONGOUR: Ambassador Mary Kramer, from Iowa. She had been a prominent figure in her state Republican Party hierarchy, playing a key role in securing a victory for George Bush in Iowa in 2000. She had also been elected to the Iowa state legislature, if I recall correctly. Initially, as I may have mentioned, she had no idea where she was going when first offered the position of ambassador to Barbados. She may not have know her geography, but she certainly understood local politics, and Caribbean politics was very similar to electoral politics in a small state. She was quite adept at dealing with all the various types of people she met in the region, from the Prime Ministers to the local staff at the Embassy. In short, she was very effective.

Q: Well, this is one of the things that I have picked up in these interviews I have done, that often politicians who get jobs can sit down and talk to the politicians in the country to which they are assigned on a much more practical and understanding position than a Foreign Service officer who never had to meet a ballot.

TONGOUR: That is right. She was excellent, but in all fairness it's hard to say whether her predecessor would have been good or not since he did not have too much time to demonstrate his skills. .

Q: How about the British, I guess it would be high commissioner, the one during the Grenada invasion or intrusion or whatever you want to call it, did not get on too well, was not too happy. The British government, the country's unhappiness, was not pleased with the fact that we went in there although we had more at stake than they did. By the time you were there what was the British-American relationship on the island?

TONGOUR: Absolutely wonderful. We were the best of buddies, if I can put it that way. Let me rephrase that. The first British Resident Representative (ResRep) and I overlapped only briefly; while we were very cordial, we were not close. The second ResRep, however, was someone who had spent considerable time serving in various capacities at British Consulates in the U.S., knew the states well and enjoyed his time there. We were very good friends. In fact, when I returned to visit a year or so later, I stayed with him and his wife. Not only was the relationship close, but there was a strong sense of our being in this together, the big kids in the neighborhood who had to cooperate. We actually got together quite often with the representative from the OAS for lunch and discussion of local issues. Basically, we tried to foster an esprit de corps among the local diplomats, especially since we were all thrown together quite often. For the most part, it was a compatible group. And we definitely cooperated with the Brits on security and drug enforcement programs.

Q: How were your relations when you were there with the government? Was this one where you could sit down and have a meaningful talk with the prime minister and others or not?

TONGOUR: Yes. I understand, having just visited Grenada, that the current Chargï¿½ calls on the Prime Minister quite often. I did not - didn't want to overdo my welcome. It made sense to me to call on him when I had something relevant to report, but people differ and there's no right answer. The problem was that it was easier to approach to government when you also had something to offer that was of interest to them. Unfortunately, all too often, we made demarches, calling on them to take specific actions but there was not necessarily something for them in return. I did not have wiggle room to be able to provide meaningful aid. Later on, after hurricane Ivan, there was more substantive assistance, which I assume made things easier. And as I said before, both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister had spent years in the U.S. and felt quite at home there and with us. In, on occasion the Prime Minister seemed to forget himself and speak as though he were an American, musing about "what we should be doing" about one thing or another. I tried to keep from smiling because I don't think he really meant to say it quite that way. In any case, relations were generally fine.

As for Foreign Minister Nimrod, he was very Americanized and seemed to know more about U.S. history than his own. When the first ambassador of my tenure came to present his credentials, the Foreign Minister hosted a very amiable lunch. Mr. Nimrod clearly enjoyed talking about North Carolina and other parts of the U.S. where he had spent considerable time. At one point our ambassador, demonstrating that he had done his homework, asked about the current state of play regarding the Windward Island Federation (a long standing project to unite the four Windward Island states). Specifically, he asked whether there would, in fact, be a unified Windward Island government. The Foreign Minister had a slightly blank look on his face. He really was not up on the Windward Islands Federation, a plan much discussed during the years he had been studying and working in the U.S. Since I had focused a great deal on this project during my earlier tour in the Caribbean, I teased him a bit, saying we ought to switch roles, since he knew so much more about the U.S. than the West Indies. I said it jokingly but he allowed that this was probably correct. So yes, we were friendly enough.

But they did not agree with us on any number of issues, and they had their own objectives. Scholarships were a case in point, and a topic they constantly raised. Apparently, President Reagan had promised hundreds of scholarships for Grenadian students. What happened to these scholarships, the Grenadians wanted to know. There were, in fact, various scholarship programs used by Grenadian students to attend American university, but we don not have a specific USG-sponsored undergraduate scholarship program for students coming from the Caribbean. The Cubans, on the other hand, were very generous with scholarships for anyone wishing to study medicine or other subjects in Cuba - hundreds of scholarships of this type were readily available. The PM would often throw it up to me that we could win on much goodwill through scholarships and subsequently good jobs for Grenadians in the U.S. He would in turn stress the absence of jobs for Grenadians in Grenada. Unfortunately, we're not in a position to encourage greater migration to the U.S. for ill-defined jobs. That is not our primary objective as diplomats.

Q: Did you get many calls from members of Congress about visas?

TONGOUR: Some. We also had a few CODELs as well as a very interesting Presidential delegation to commemorate the 20th anniversary of our intervention. As for congressmen and staffers, they frequently called on behalf of some constituent or a rich, politically plugged in friend, who might be West Indian or American, who invariably had a made from their residence in the West Indies that they wanted to take to their other home in the U.S. They, the prominent individuals, always insisted they could vouch for the person in their employ. I would try my best to explain our regulations in a nutshell to them as well as the fact that no one could truly vouch for another adult human being, who could readily walk out their door and remain in Kansas or wherever. But, yes, we did have many such calls.

Q: I have that role to play and we have our role to play.

TONGOUR: That is right. And the stories are never ending. Just recently when I was visiting in Grenada, I attended a dinner party and an American guest told me about someone there who was returning to the States and wanted her employee to come visit, but she did not want to spend the time or money required to go to Bridgetown to apply for a visa. This led to a discussion of how good it was when Grenadians were able to obtain visas in country. That, by the way, was something that won us enormous goodwill for a period, but it didn't last. For a time, I was able to get a consular officer from Bridgetown to come over once a month or so to do visa interview in Grenada, thereby saving locals the cost of a roundtrip and pricey ticket to Bridgetown for an interview. This was discontinued, but it was truly popular.

Q: Well, you left there when, in 2004?

TONGOUR: Yes, a month or so before hurricane Ivan, yes.

Q: What did you do when you came back?

TONGOUR: I came back to work as an Office Director in the Bureau of Human Rights and Democracy and served as the editor-in-chief responsible for the Department's annual human rights reports; since we also dealt with asylum issues, the office was called "Country Reports and Asylum Affairs" or DRL/CRA. It was a fascinating experience in that I have never had a similar assignment. I was the only active duty Foreign Service Officer in an office with a staff that varied in size from about a dozen or so on the low end to approximately 35-40 during our "eak" period when we were producing the human rights reports. The vast majority of this "surge" consisted of WAEs. To explain, the core staff, who were there year round were mainly civil servants or presidential management fellows, or other special types of entry personnel, including interns, if you will. But for several months during the year, we would augment our staff with WAEs.

Q: These are When Actually Employed, i.e., retired Foreign Service people.

TONGOUR: Exactly. All were retired Foreign Service personnel, many of whom had been quite senior Foreign Service officers, who would return for several months at a time to work as editors of the human rights report. It was a very interesting staff composition, wherein there were some very junior people just entering the workforce or student interns, combined with very senior retired FSOs, which made for a very interesting group. And we edited more than 170 reports from all over the world - including every country but our own, plus some areas that are officially not recognized countries as well. The first drafts were always produced at post, after which we would do considerably editing - both stylistic and substantive because there was frequently a certain degree of clientism reflected in the initial drafts.

Q: Well, tell me about- all I can think about this is the pressures that must be on you. You know, I can think of a couple of cases, particularly China is one and of course Israel is a problem. And they were probably above your pay grade, was it not?

TONGOUR: I got into the middle of it, and I will tell you how it works. I used to joke that even a lowly editor could handle the conflicts or pressures emanating from posts in the less developed parts of the world. What I mean by that is not exactly the same as how the term is generally used. Rather, there is somewhat of a hierarchy in terms of the reports. Looking at them with a very critical eye, one could honestly say that 70 percent of the reports were really first rate. And those are often reports, the best reports, with the most honest reporting, are produced for countries with which we are not terribly involved. In other words, it is relatively easy to do an excellent job, a truly honest report when pressures and clientism is minimal. There are, exceptions, of course. One example that comes to mind was Rwanda, where for several years the editor responsible for the report would wind up battling it out with the post, and even prompting the Ambassador to way in on occasion. In general, however, in much of Africa, and actually in much of the world, the issues were manageable, at least from the perspective of editing human rights reports. Likewise, reports on countries that were widely or universally deemed as "bad" caused us relatively few difficulties.

In fact, in some cases involving the "worst offenders", we occasionally had to hold the line to prevent posts from painting an already dark situation even darker. Or to put it differently, posts might include instances or examples in their drafts that would never see the light of day elsewhere. In one of our least favorite countries, drafting officers tended to include even trivial incidents - someone brushing past a "victim" with a potted plant that touched the person - and calling it abuse. Well, there is plenty of real abuse without having to mention potted palms. In general, though, we could handle whatever pressure we faced in dealing with these worst case countries. Nevertheless, we did face pressure from various quarters, including some from posts in the so-called best countries - in human rights terms - that did not want any criticisms at all in the reports. The fact is that all countries, even the best, have some problems and can usually handle a bit of criticism. Even so, I recall one case in which a country had an indigenous population that was not consistently well treated. Yet, the government in question balked -or our Embassy there did - at any negative references to the treatment of this group. And so it goes.

But then you had roughly a dozen up to 20 countries, mostly in the Middle East, parts of Central Asia or South Asia that were dealt with in more political terms. In these parts, the key question was how to characterize certain developments or events. And I have to say that the best thing that ever happened to us in this regard was the very existence of a number of organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, which provided a counterbalancing or countervailing, if you will, pressure to the "clientism" of certain posts. Their pressure on us was to "tell it like it is". This was a very real pressure because if Human Rights Watch or Amnesty investigated claims of abuses in a particularly country which may have been an ally of ours, we invariably would go back to our posts and seek clarifications of the allegations provided. Even though our posts might argue that the NGOS in question might have their own particular agenda, the fact that they had widely publicized an incident compelled us to at least acknowledge the allegations or simply the fact that a case had been widely publicized - thereby casting further light upon it. This is where the pressure would escalate - reaching my level and up the chain of command. I vividly recall receiving an e-mail that had been sent to our Assistant Secretary and myself from a very well-known ambassador in which the latter stressed that he and his staff had tried to cooperate and work with DRL but that we were not bending. Specifically, he maintained that we were being inflexible in seeking to include information about an attack by the host government on its own citizens in a border region. He indicated he understood the pressure we were under from NGOs but wanted to ensure that we conveyed in our report that the government in question had done its best to minimize civilian casualties. I responded to the e-mail by thanking the ambassador profusely for his understanding but explained that the purpose of the reports was not only to be factual but in a sense "deadly dull" in that we did not use "colorful language" or ascribe motivations to various players. Specifically, we could not claim that a government did its very best to prevent civilian casualties, etc., but could simply note it had taken measures toward this end. Ultimately the ambassador said he could live with such a statement, and that's what we said.

Q: How about Israel? Because here I would think that, you know, all objectivity is off on Israel. I mean, how did you find this?

TONGOUR: Painful, because everything else was more or less negotiable. Just to get it on the record some of the other consistently problematic cases - and there was usually at least one per continent - should be mentioned before moving on to Israel. After all, there were a number of headline makers that involved serious issues and in some cases abuses that warrant mention. Colombia, for example, was always a complicated case, not necessarily because it was a worst offender but rather due to the fact that the situation in Colombia was a classic case of a glass half full or half empty and our dilemma was one of focus - how much to emphasize improvements, which were real, versus continuing abuses, which likewise existed. Obviously, we also had to deal with the continuing problems and abuses in countries allied to us, especially those engaged in the "war on terror", such as Pakistan. Then too, there were newspaper articles in the New York Times and Washington Post and on-line pieces dealing with the rendition issue, which we had to address in some fashion.

Q: You might explain what a rendition is.

TONGOUR: The way the term is used today involves the act of sending people to prisons in other countries that perhaps have less restrictions on how prisoners are treated than we do in the U.S. where they might, in fact, be tortured. In specific media reports, the term was also linked to what became known as "black prisons" or facilities in friendly countries, particularly in Europe. Although not "proven", the media strongly alleged that individuals who were deemed possible terrorist threats were sent to special facilities to be "interrogated" before being "transited" elsewhere - and I deliberately put this in the passive voice. And the question then arose for us stemmed from the outcry from a regional bureau, which was always proud of the high standards of human rights in the region, over how we would dare to write about their countries in conjunction will allegations of human rights violations in these so-called black prisons.

Q: We are talking about basically in the European bureau.

TONGOUR: Yes. Specifically, counterparts in the European Bureau challenged our inclusion of the countries involved in these renditions as violators by claiming that if "their countries" were involved in such renditions, they were probably doing so at our behest or in order to please us; therefore, EUR insisted we should refrain from citing such possible cases in Europe. That was one instance of bureau pushback in which we lost. Consequently, the newspapers wrote freely about the renditions to European facilities - naming countries - but we could not. Q:

Q: When you say lost it, who was winning?

TONGOUR: Well, let me rephrase the notion of battles lost in the context of human rights reporting. We all became clientists in different ways, but our clientism was centered on our own image of the truth. While we recognized that there were certain topics that simply could not be covered, our basic premise was that we had to "tell it like it is". It was not appropriate for the New York Times to publish articles dealing with events that we could not acknowledge or even acknowledge allegations related to the incident. My usage of the term "lost" refers to cases in which we knew that something had happened or was alleged to have happened to be more precise but could not mention it. By contrast, a victory, would have been to recognize that the media or NGOs had alleged that such and such had transpired. More often than not, the references or allegations would be attributed to Human Rights Watch, some other credible source, or occasionally, albeit rarely "unconfirmed" sources. Ideally, we only cited truly reputable sources who could confirm actual events; however, there were rare occasions, particularly in countries with bad human rights records or where access was denied making it difficult to confirm sources, where we had to note the allegation without hard evidence or confirmation. And there were always case in certain Middle Eastern countries where torture was regularly alleged.

In fact, after Abu Ghraib became known, information came out that certain individuals who may have engaged in suspicious behaviors might have suffered uncomfortable levels of interrogations - whether you define it as torture or not is another question. However, there would invariably be instances in the region where either an ambassador or someone in authority at post or in the regional bureau would weigh in strongly, in effect insisting that certain information should not be included in the report. Such practices continue. You may have seen Al Kamen's "In the Loop" piece a few weeks ago in which he wrote of a supposedly leaked State Department e-mail between a Deputy Assistant Secretary in a regional bureau and a Deputy Assistant Secretary in DRL regarding whether it was really necessary to use particular language about the human rights situation in a country with which we were currently engaged in delicate negotiations. How this e-mail found its way into the newspaper was unclear. Al Kamen obviously has excellent sources. But leaks of this sort could be considered a serious breach; yet, I don't think anything subsequently happened.

To get back to the subject at hand, topping our pyramid of difficulty were the two reports for Israel and the Occupied Territories. Essentially, these were scrutinized, edited and re-edited multiple times; sometimes, it came down to very small issues. It seemed hard to believe that they would arouse so much passion at the NSC but they did. One of the more interesting cases I had to deal with was the now well-known story of Rachel Corrie, a young woman who died after being run over by a bulldozer in the West Bank town of Ramallah. Are you familiar with this case?

Q: No.

TONGOUR: Actually a theater in London produced a play on Rachel's story, which was supposed to open in New York, but it was cancelled at the last moment. Meanwhile, Rachel's family was committed to ensuring that that the truth about what happened to their daughter, whatever it was, would emerge. The family maintained that Rachel was in Ramallah as part of a peace-oriented international organization - deemed by many to be pro-Palestinian in orientation - that sought to prevent the tearing down of buildings and homes in the West Bank, especially in Ramallah. Bulldozers, Israeli bulldozers, were operating in the area, and members of the group would position themselves in front of the machinery. In the case of Rachel, this resulted in her being bulldozed to death, raising countless questions about why and how. Did the operator see her or not, was his action deliberate, under orders? These were the kinds of issues that emerged. The family wanted a real investigation, not the cursory review they believed had actually been carried out. Moreover, prior to my arrival on the job, the family had submitted a Freedom of Information request for information on the case, and the documents obtained indicated that there had not, in fact, been a thorough investigation. Specifically, there was material from the Consulate in Jerusalem confirming the view that the Israelis had not carried out a thorough investigation of Rachel's death. Given this background, the question for us was how to deal with this case in the human rights report, and the issue received considerable congressional attention, especially from representatives from their home states. Further complicating the situation was the fact that this family in many ways seemed to represent the best of America or the perfect American family. The father had served in the U.S. military. He did not want money or to be "bought off" in any way. The whole family was wholesome looking and appealing; all they wanted, they insisted, was full disclosure. Yet, from other perspectives, full disclosure was not necessarily regarded as a good thing. In addition, we were somewhat hamstrung by our own "three-year rule", whereby if there were no major developments in a particular case or related to an incident after three years, it would not be covered in the annual human rights report, except in very rare cases. Needless to say, in a case such as that of Rachel Corrie, an enormous amount of energy and seemingly endless debate - often at very high levels, including the NSC - went into discussions related what was included in the report.

Q: Well now, in the NSC, would these be political appointees who were- I mean, the people who were objecting or doing this, were they looking at it really from a political point of view as opposed to a truth point of view?

TONGOUR: I should probably mention that the acting Assistant Secretary for DRL when I arrived at the job was Mike Kozak, whose career up to that point could not be neatly characterized as political. He had been a career civil servant at State, initially as a lawyer, but later served as Chief of our Interest Section in Havana and as Ambassador to Belarus. He cared passionately about issues related to democracy and human rights. After DRL, he was seconded to the NSC where he worked directly for Elliot Abrams, and Elliot Abrams seemingly was equally passionate about the Israel/Occupied Territories report.

Q: Well yes, Elliott Abrams came from, I mean, is the name that keeps coming up. I mean, it comes out of the Neo-Con, New York Jewish intelligentsia. So he represents, if one wants to call it that, a Jewish constituency in the body politic he is part of it.

TONGOUR: I'm not sure whether that's an apt description. I certainly know many individuals in the Department, who while Jewish, take diametrically opposing views on this and other issues related to Israel and are hardly neo-cons. It's not strictly a Jewish issue but in a broader sense, part of a more complicated set of issues related to Israel, particularly for many who might be Jewish. Regarding the reports, one set of questions or arguments centers on the standards used in the production of the reports and whether the Israeli report is held to the same or different standards from other reports. According to one viewpoint, there is a need for a fair or level playing field. Specifically, the argument goes that there are enough people already beating up on Israel for its treatment of the occupied territories - in the UN and other fora - that we should not "pile it on" by adding countless and perhaps gratuitous examples of abuses. And I do understand that position. However, there has been a tendency during the past few years for the Israeli report to be "slashed" in length, by as much as a third, either by or at the behest of the NSC. Actually, the situation was more complicated than that. For starters, the staff at ConGen Jerusalem would not always agree with Embassy personnel in Tel Aviv on certain aspects of the report, and they in turn might not see eye to eye with the Near East Bureau (NEA) back in the Department, with whom we might have had some differences - especially with their lawyers - and only then would NSC get into the act. Very often, we would find ourselves negotiating on many levels - first the post or posts in the case of Israel, and then just when we believed we had reached agreement within the Department on language for any one of a number of disputed issues within the reports - as I mentioned there were separate reports for Israeland the Occupied Territories - they would be sent to the NSC where they would effectively be gutted or at least substantially rewritten, which virtually never occurred with other reports.

Q: Well, who had final say?

TONGOUR: That, too, was complicated, but in this case, the NSC had the final word. In probably 95 percent of the reports, DRL with the concurrence of the Ambassador had the final say, because the NSC did not challenge us much on the other reports. There might be a few differences, quibbles or recommended changes, but we basically had a civilized discussion with NSC staff regarding this. In other words, not only did the NSC not interfere in most reports but NSC suggestions regarding language or constructive criticisms about a particular point were often quite useful. So this is in no way a major criticism of the NSC role vis-a-vis the human rights reports overall. In general, relations with the NSC were fairly amicable, and most of our battles tended to be internal or with ambassadors at posts. But on the Israel report, while we could quibble on minor points after the NSC made its determination, they rarely budged on key issues. Technically, we always said the ambassadors had the final word, and that was often the case, but not in this instance.

Q: Well, was there an opportunity as there are in intelligence reports to footnote it?In other words to say this came out straight, I mean, no qualifiers.

TONGOUR: Not exactly. Leaving aside Israel and the Occupied Territories, generally if there were strongly divergent sources of information about an incident or case of abuse, we would normally acknowledge them as such. For example, take the Philippines, where they may have been some incident in Mindanao about which we had limited or questionable information or no first hand sources but lots of hearsay. What we would do in such cases was to note that there were conflicting reports or competing credible sources, sometimes even acknowledging the dearth of reliable data. The problem with the Israel report was quite different. There the issue was one of sheer volume. We had tons of information, but had to grapple with how much to include, specifically how many different kinds of cases or examples should one cite or whether to include certain incidents at all. Again, there was no shortage of source material, but simply, from the NSC perspective, whether all that data was necessary or by "piling it on", we were being needlessly prejudicial to Israel.

Q: Well now, on the Corrie thing, how did it come out?

TONGOUR: I guess you could say it was basically a draw. There were certain modifications in our coverage over the years, and the case of Rachel Corrie did come up three years in a row while I was there; subsequently, it was not mentioned because of the so-called three-year rule. We also had different assistant secretaries during that time and attitudes toward the Corrie case shifted a bit. What the family wanted went beyond changes in the human rights report, and certain of their requests could only be addressed by the regional bureau. But, I do recall one event from early in my tenure in DRL that is worth noting, namely a meeting hosted by Secretary Powell's Chief of Staff Col. Larry Wilkerson, who had come over to State with Powell. In fact, he had been attached to Powell for much of his career. You probably have heard of him or familiar with his name since he has been quite outspoken in his comments on various radio programs and in the press in recent years, saying things that Secretary Powell might have wished to say but could not, notably regarding his views on discovering the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, etc. In any event, the Corrie family had contacted him, and Wilkerson met with them several times, asking for updates and indicating he would follow up personally with regard to their requests. In sum, there was considerable high level interest in this case, both in our chain of command and on the Hill. We tried to be as forthright as possible with the family. I remember telling them that we would bend over backwards to try to meet their legitimate concerns but there were certain things we could not do - in any of our country reports, not just Israel. For example, we would not say that State Department officer John Doe said "x or y" since we simply did not use our own officers as sources or cite them in the report. So the family did not get everything it wanted on that score.

Q: Well, you did this until when?

TONGOUR: I did this from the summer of 2004 when I returned from Grenada. I intended at the time to make this my last two year Foreign Service tour, and I found it very satisfying, rewarding in many ways despite the internal battles I previously mentioned. In some respects, the office represented the best of the Foreign Service in the sense that there were really decent, intelligent people working at something they believed in, doing the best they could in a very collegial environment, at least within our own shop. We were a bit removed from other issues of the day. The staff felt as though we were really on the side of the angels. After I had been there for a year or so, I decided I would like to extend, if possible, my tenure in the job for another year before retiring. However, my initial job did not last quite that long because a new assistant secretary decided to change the configuration of the Bureau and in turn the parameters of my job. In other words, while I did extend for a year, the assignment I had during the last period was quite different from that of the first two years. So my job as editor-in -chief of the human rights report lasted two years.

Q: So then you retired, is that-?

TONGOUR: No, as I mentioned, I extended for an additional year. What happened was that at the end of the initial two-year period, the bureau itself was reconfigured, and I became the Office Director for a new office that dealt with Asia and Western Hemisphere issues within DRL, with somewhat different responsibilities. While I was still an office director, the office itself was now responsible for both the human rights reports for these regions and for the promotion of human rights and democracy in the area. As you can imagine, this also entailed a shift in orientation. In the "old" regime, the staff saw itself as maintaining its lily white purity because the office was not obliged to actually promote anything, beyond obvious human rights goals. In other words, the former office personnel functioned more or less as analysts, writers and editors, but we did not, to use the vernacular, tell anyone how to suck eggs.

Q: Well, I am looking at the time and Nadia, do you mind coming one more time?

TONGOUR: That would be great to wrap it up.

Today is the 8th of April, 2008; Nadia, let us talk about your last assignment. You were in the human rights bureau, were you not?

TONGOUR: That is right.

Q: Who was the head of the human rights bureau?

TONGOUR: During my three years in DRL, we actually had three separate individuals at the helm. The first was Mike Kozak, who I spoke of earlier and who moved over to the NSC. After his departure, we briefly had a career Foreign Service Officer named Glynn Davies as Acting Assistant Secretary. He subsequently became the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) in the East Asia Bureau. Finally, I served under Barry Lowenkron who left around the same time I did to work for a private foundation. So, there was quite a variety of work styles and paper requirements.

Q: Well, you were doing this from when to when?

TONGOUR: I returned from my last overseas posting in the summer of 2004 and started in DRL just in time to begin work on the annual human rights report.

Q: Okay. What did we cover, do you remember, on the human rights reports or had we gotten into it?

TONGOUR: We had just started discussing the work of the office and various divisions within the bureau. One interesting separation or divide stemmed from the fact that my office was physically separate from the rest of the bureau. We were located in "SA-1", otherwise known as Columbia Plaza, which had its advantages but also made us feel somewhat apart from the others in DRL. Occasionally, we felt as though we were the orphan children of the bureau, which was ironic in that every year, or rather once a year, our assistant secretary would proclaim to Congress and the media just how important were the annual human rights reports. For much of the rest of the year, however, there was a sense of our simply being out of sight, out of minds. Yet, during those few months when we were churning out the reports, there was some attention paid to the work of the office.

Q: What were the main, I mean, I imagine most of them are fairly routine, but where were the sticking points of these reports?

TONGOUR: I think the main disease is clientitis, which we've discussed at some length before. Obviously many individuals wanted to ensure that while the reports were fair, they also took into account existing problems or circumstances in a given country. Moreover, there were roughly a dozen countries, primarily in the NEA (Near East) and South Asia Bureaus where because of post - 9/11 developments, we had to rely on the support of these countries in the war against terrorism; consequently, there were issues related to how we covered their actions and behaviors. Essentially our biggest problem was how to depict X, Y, or Z activities in specific countries that under normal circumstances could be regarded as torture or, at a minimum, human rights abuse.

Q: When you mention the word "torture" we are coming up to the present era where, particularly under the Bush Administration, torture, to the repugnance of many people, including myself, torture is sort of condoned. How did we treat that?

TONGOUR: Well, we fought the proverbial good fight as best we could. We're diplomats, after all, and we understood our limits. Still, we had to deal with a new phenomenon, which probably warrants mention, namely the increasing encroachment of lawyers into the process of producing these reports. Until a few years ago, we adhere to the dictum of an earlier DRL Assistant Secretary, who insisted that the Department's lawyers stay out of the business of writing human rights reports. His position - and one we tried to uphold - was that the reports were not legal documents but were intended to serve as our best estimates of conditions around the world. In other words, this particular Assistant Secretary, himself a lawyer, sought to keep the Department's lawyers at arms length.

Q: What was the problem with the lawyers in his perception or her perception?

TONGOUR: His perception was that he wanted us to be as honest as we could be. He wasn't saying "damn the consequences" but at the same time, he did not want a protective cadre of lawyers trying to expunge materials from the reports which might not be palatable to one office or constituency or another. And more or less, at least in the beginning, we were able to do this. We would certainly share our drafts with the lawyers and listen to their suggestions, but they did not have veto authority. Increasingly, over the years, lawyers, particularly those dealing with Middle Eastern issues, would weigh in more and more. This is not to blame them. However, you asked how we dealt with the question of torture, and increasingly we were forced to split hairs. For example, we were told not to use the word "torture" except in very rare case. On the other hand, we were allowed to describe actions. Initially we did use the word "torture" when the term seemed appropriate, but by my last year in the bureau, the editors were very much restricted in their usage of this word.

Q: Well, say on the torture thing, which of course is not a minor issue at all; in fact, it has been very much to the detriment of American foreign policy and our moral stand, but were the lawyers responding, would you say they were looking at this as a political thing in order to cover the administration's stand or what?

TONGOUR: I don't want to accuse anyone of excessive cynicism. Who knows what happened after I left, and really don't want to speculate on later reports, but in any case the situation became quite "convoluted" and not very pretty. Here again, we need to be careful on this score because even earlier we were grappling with the often raised question of how did we dare to judge others when we were guilty of certain misdeeds of our own. This is a fundamental question that the rest of the world is not shy about asking us. Our standard response was that we did not pretend to be perfect but we tried to correct our mistakes; moreover, we were not writing a report on ourselves. Rather, we would leave that to others while we concentrated on the rest of the world. There were certainly ambassadors, lawyers and heads of regional bureaus who repeatedly raised two key arguments. First, how could we judge country X with regard to a particular action when country X claimed it was doing it either at our behest or for our benefit. For example, if a monstrous person came through their country and they interrogated him, albeit roughly, and in so doing protected the world from a terrorist attack, were they abusers or human rights violators. We heard rationalizations related to the "lesser evil" a great deal, particularly couched in terms to the effect that "they were doing it to help us." In addition to this set of arguments, we often got the message that not every abuse needed to be spelled out. In other words, there were enough other factors detrimental to our war on terror that we didn't need to advertise every problem. And then, too, there were instances that did not involve the Middle East where we faced certain awkward situations. For example, as a case in point, both The New York Times and The Washington Post carried front page stories about facilities in European countries that were being used as rendition centers to detain potential prisoners in transit to other less "enlightened" countries in terms of their treatment of possible terrorists.

In short, we certainly faced our share of pressure, and we tried our best to be fair and accurate; yet the problem of how to treat the actions of friendly countries that are "helping us" in a cause or are allied in some effort, remains.

Q: How were matters, from your perspective and I realize that some of these battles got fought higher up, but how were matters resolved?

TONGOUR: Quite honestly very few were resolved higher up. I think I might have mentioned this last time, when I said a dozen, and I meant that literally. Actually, most disputes were resolved at a lower level. In other words, if a member of our Africa team, who truly understood the situation in Rwanda and had spent considerable time working on that report during a temporary assignment in country and wound up editing the report back here - if he disagreed with the embassy, he usually had enough expertise to work it out on his own level with post counterparts and negotiate the language to be included. He could easily point out to post that we could not omit a particular atrocity since it had been well documented or widely covered in the media. On the other hand, he might well agree with the post that not every single incident had been fully shown to be true, some questionable cases could be left out. Such discussions were common, and most - 75 or 80 percent - could be readily resolved at the working level.

Q: You could get the offices dealing with this go TDY to the trouble spots?

TONGOUR: I would like to talk about this further but to finish up on the prior topic, we invariably wound up in a situation in which perhaps 10 percent of the dispute would come to the attention of my deputy or myself, cases in which we would talk to the relevant desk officers or to the DCM at post or even the Ambassador in smaller countries in an attempt to reach an agreement.. And then we were down to the last half dozen or so that would get "bounced up", starting at my level and then moving up to the DRL regional deputy assistant secretary before reaching the principal DAS in a few case. In the end, there rarely more than one or two that ever involved the Assistant Secretary.

Q: Let us talk about the half dozen; which were they?

TONGOUR: The ones that I would get involved with?Q: Yes.

TONGOUR: Essentially in Latin America the major disputes centered on Colombia, with Haiti occasionally causing some difficulties. Colombia was definitely the "problem child" among the Latin American reports.

Q: Because of the drug wars there and the anti-drug wars and the-

TONGOUR: Our involvement and support for Colombian government efforts to combat narco-trafficking. But, in terms of the report, the main problem was that during this period we had an incredibly pro-active ambassador, who was was very intelligent but passionate on issues involving his bailiwick. He not only read the entire report but made his own line by line edits and would often insist on very specific language. But this was a rather special case, and the only one in the Western Hemisphere where the ambassador had such a hands on involvement. In any case, the Colombia report received an inordinate amount of attention.

Russia, also, was often the focal point of considerable interest, but there the situation was different. It really was not a case of clientitis but rather the fact that everyone working on the report in Embassy Moscow and the Consulates really knew his stuff, which resulted in all sorts of almost philosophical debates over nuances related to Russian practices.

Q: China I would imagine-

TONGOUR: China became a problem.

Q: A huge problem.

TONGOUR: A huge problem because with China there were at least several different interest groups in the pictures, with quite varied objectives and conflicting orientations towards developments in the country, resulting in pitched internal battles. Interesting enough though at the working level, people were often quite good at resolving particular issues. The editor of the China report really didn't need my help, although sometimes the negotiations over specific points or language seemed to take forever. Occasionally, a dispute would escalate and be handled at a considerably higher level.

It's probably worth mentioning that almost every year there would be one totally unexpected problem report, one that was never anticipated. One such example comes to mind. An ambassador in a small European country happened to read the previous year's report concerning a neighboring country and decided that the human rights situation in the neighboring state was no better than in the country to which she was accredited and insisted that the latter receive a more favorable characterization than what might normally have been the case.

I should probably explain that in my first year on the job, there was a system in place, which has subsequently been eliminated, known as "holding sentences" which were used to succinctly describe the overall human rights performance of a given country. In other words, the introductory paragraphs of all the reports followed a set format or structure, and in the fourth paragraph, let us say, we would include one of five generic statements. For example, we might say that country X generally respects the human rights of its people, etc. There were five basic options to choose from and "generally respects" was the highest accolade we could give.

Q: That is sort of an accolade by default almost.

TONGOUR: That is what the Europeans thought. Many of them wanted or believed they deserved an unqualified "respects". Our position was that there was no such thing as a perfect country, warranting a 100 percent in terms of adherence to human rights norms. Not surprisingly there were disputes over this - and we're talking about the so-called high end countries here. Elsewhere, in truly bad or even horrible situations, there were arguments over the language in the "holding sentences" as well. Eventually we did away with using the holding sentences, but we still have problems depicting the overall conditions in problematic countries such as China, Colombia, Russia as well as much of the Near East and South Asia. Mostly, as I said, the battles are resolvable at the working or Office Director level. However, there are always a couple, notably Israel and the Occupied Territories that require the highest levels of intervention within the Bureau, regardless of who is in charge.

Q: Well, I was wondering with Israel, we will come back to the others but with Israel, I mean, this is a battle that has been fought ever since the inception because the Israelis are pretty tough people. I mean, they are under the gun and yet there are people who feel passionately about them in the United States. Politically it is a third rail. But I would think you would almost have a-things have not changed much over the years so you could almost have a boilerplate Israeli thing representing how this thing has been compromised out or something.

TONGOUR: Well, one might think so but I must say that every year I was in the Bureau there was at least some dispute over the length of these reports and the number of examples cited.

Finally, I ought to tell you that the Cuba report was also problematic but for different reasons, mainly stemming from the preponderance of "true believers" in the evils of the regime, who regarded every aspect of life on the island as a human rights violation. I am not being facetious here. The position we took in our battles with the Cuba Desk was that battle we fight with the Cuba desk is let us be real, folks. There are enough bad things to do in that country that we do not need to use every minor instance of someone knocking into a potted palm. So that is the other extreme of showing it as...

Q: Well, is the hand of the Cuban exile community in Florida trying to make you come up with more horrible things?

TONGOUR: In this particular instance the Cuban exile community did not have anything to say about the specifics of the report, but there was a certain mindset that often affects people at post. In essence, they themselves begin to feel a bit under siege, and they are obviously already empathetic to the dissidents; consequently, there is a tendency to be hyper-observant of all the ills in the country. I use this only as an example of a case where we had to walk a post back and insist on using the same standards in Cuba as we use anywhere elsewhere when describing human rights violations. If we talk about people being killed in Burma, we talk about people killed in Cuba in the same manner; likewise, other equivalent levels of abuse should be handled or described in comparable terms. We don't need to look for gratuitous incidents or pad the reports. So the "attack of the potted palm" I mentioned earlier didn't make it in to the report Whereas in the case of Israel, there were many interested parties seeking to ensure that we did not overdo it by including an excessive number of cases in the report. Ironically, we were not "adding" material; the data itself came from drafting officers working in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem who provided the bulk of information used, which we subsequently edited. But again, within the NSC the concern was that we not include too much. .

Q: This has always been- Well, how about the foreign embassies? I mean, do you get Israeli or Chinese diplomats coming in and saying what the hell are you doing?

TONGOUR: Yes, but usually it would come up during a discussion of wider range of issues. More often then not, such complaints would also occur at a higher level. For instance, Ambassador X might call on the Secretary or the regional Assistant Secretary to discuss 10 different items and in the discussion, cite specific objections to the previous year's human rights report. As the office director, I might have occasion to meet with an Ambassador or DCM from a smaller country, such as Romania or Morocco or have contacts with the Taiwanese Mission, which always sought to develop closer ties. As you know, we have all sorts of restrictions on what we can do in terms of the Taiwanese. We also have a separate report on Taiwan.

Q: Yes, and we do not have official representation there but that is-

TONGOUR: We have an Interest Section there.

Q: Interest Section, and we do a report on Taiwan?

TONGOUR: Absolutely. Overseas, the situation can be a bit tricky, especially in countries such as Grenada which at the time I was there recognized Taiwan. As I previously mentioned, Grenada had a very small diplomatic community, so one would be thrown together with the Taiwanese representative, as well as the Cuban Ambassador, on many different occasions. Our official "non-dealings" with the Cubans are well known, but the rules regarding our interactions with the Taiwanese representatives were somewhat arcane, yet quite interesting. I could interact with the Taiwanese Ambassador in many venues. I could go to dinner, for example at a restaurant - in other words, we could be seen in public. However, I could not invite the Ambassador to our residence or to any official U.S. function, nor could I attend their official functions or visit their residence. So we got to know each other informally in local restaurants.

Back to more recent events in DRL, many representatives would, in fact, call on us and express their concerns about the human rights reports - and often their concerns were quite random. Generally, they wanted to make sure we knew that their human rights situation was improving. For examples, the Greeks insisted they were not mistreating Macedonians, and New Zealanders wanted us to know that they were currently quite correct in their treatment of indigenous people. These were the kinds of issues we confronted.

Q: What about Egypt? I would think Egypt would be a problem.

TONGOUR: Egypt could be a problem, but what was more of an issue related to Egypt was the fact that the Bush administration's policy toward Egypt vis-a-vis human rights was inconsistent. Initially, the focus may have been on human rights, but in subsequent years scant mention was made of the real abuses in that country - making us look quite hypocritical.

Q: Well, do you get, I mean, were you able to see developments and- I mean, how did you feel about these reports? Were they sort of going out there to everybody's- gnash their teeth and all but nothing would happen or were you looking, you know, as keeping score; gee, we are making some progress?

TONGOUR: I think I mentioned earlier that in my office the staff often felt as though our leadership barely noticed our existence except for a brief period each year surrounding the release of the human rights reports. Then, the reports did seem to really matter. This was demonstrated in various ways, including messages from dissidents who would later thank us for mentioning specific incidents or particular abuses, thereby keeping their concerns alive and possibly preventing further abuse or keeping the lid on repression. In the days after the release of the country reports, there would be more than a hundred thousand computer hits, with people all over the world reading parts of the report.

I think it's probably worth mentioning that for most of the staff in DRL, especially those working in the Country Reports Office (CRA), there was often a sense being on the side of the angels, at least some of the time. In turn, they tended to feel quite strongly when they were pressed to include information they did not feel was accurate or to delete information they believed important. They took it personally. For the most part, though, we saw ourselves as generally winning our battles, and during that period we received a great deal of positive feedback from NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as the Hill, and we took that to heart as well.

That said, as we've already discussed, there were a few instances where reports were substantially "edited" at a higher level, and that definitely was not seen as a victory by the staff. .

Q: Well, on something as human rights reports, obviously this stirs the emotions and particularly, oversimplifying, but younger officers, I mean, who, you know, after you have been ground down in a bureaucracy you understand compromises have to be made and the political realities. But when you are a fairly new officer, yes we have all been through that, both stages; did you have problems of almost revolts on your staff?

TONGOUR: I'll tell you where there were almost revolts, and this sort segues into the next phase of my tour. Although there were some individuals who really felt they did not want to make necessary compromises, they generally tended to leave - rather than revolt - after a while. These cases were rare. I took some pride in the fact that I could generally persuade those who were initially disgruntled to stay by highlighting how much they had, in fact, achieved and how many battles they had won, as well as occasionally using the argument based on the old clichï¿½ of knowing when to "fold 'em" that it was important to know when to fight and when to let go. No one likes to concede in crucial cases, but most were quite professional and generally stuck it out because they believed in the overall goal.

Problems arose in my second year when our new assistant secretary - believing there was a poor allocation of work among the various offices - decided to reconfigure the bureau. He believed quite rightly that CRA had an unusual work cycle with six or seven months of difficult work and a few months where we really did not have an excessive amount to do. Of course the staff had work since we also covered asylum cases, requiring the review of substantial numbers of documents. People also did TDY assignments, including travel and support for other bureaus. This proved to be a real win-win situation for all because if an officer was working on Africa and had the opportunity to go to the Central African Republic to work for a couple of months, he could both help the post fill a staffing gap and gather materials for the human rights report, not to mention acquire additional expertise in the area. We had a very, very limited travel budget combined with young officers keen on traveling to their posts. So I developed a plan for stretching our few dollars, based on the notion of reaching out to the regional bureaus or posts and asking them to help defray some of the costs. In other words, if they wanted to have a TDYer spend the summer in Rwanda, then what could they offer in terms of support. Specifically, could they provide housing or partial per diem or even airfare? In sum, what could we ask posts to provide so as to enable our personnel to travel there and make a real contribution? For distant posts, we found this particularly useful since sending a person to India was truly a costly proposition in terms of airfare. If a post could help with the airfare or housing, it made it much easier to spread our meager resources around. I took a lot of pride in being able to stretch our budget so that virtually everyone got a trip, either an orientation trip to a country on which he worked or a couple of month TDY to a post in their region.

Q: When you say "TDY" for somebody who is not-

TONGOUR: Temporary duty.

Q: Temporary duty, which would mean that they would go and fill in as a political officer or a consular officer or something like that.

TONGOUR: Exactly. Typically in many countries, especially in the so-called Third World, posts might have a very small political section, and staff would need to go on leave or would be transferred; there were inevitable staffing gaps. To have someone, particularly someone knowledgeable about human rights and political developments in the region who could fill in was enormously helpful to the post as well as gratifying for the officer. Moreover, it provided them a real change. While editing human rights report is certainly meaningful and worthwhile, at times it can become quite tedious, and involve incredibly long hours, especially toward the end of the cycle. These TDYs were a great treat and would break up the workload.

However, our assistant secretary was concerned that another office in the bureau, which was responsible for actually promoting democracy was overworked year round. He thought that by merging our two offices and then dividing the resulting office into geographical units, the new configuration would allow everyone to do some of everything, with a more balanced workload in the process. This was a very good idea in theory and ultimately has worked well enough in practice; yet getting from point A to point B was quite a painful process for some, basically for the very reason you mentioned earlier - namely how people regard making compromises. As I mentioned before, the two offices had dramatically different orientations and, if you will, "cultures". My staff saw themselves as purely providers of fact and analysis, as "clean", as opposed to promoters or advocates for a particular position. They saw themselves as simply "telling it like it is". Meanwhile, those who were in the business of promoting democracy had little or no desire to edit reports or be analytical drafters. They wanted to go out and save the world for democracy and human rights, with a greater emphasis on the former than the latter. With my staff the emphasis was the opposite. To reiterate, there were these differing attitudes, with one set of "promoters" not keen on the seeming drudgery of editing versus the "writers" who did not want to be seen as "flag wavers", especially in that particular environment. At the time I had offered to extend, I was told that I could help bring the merger into being. Initially, I assumed that I would basically continue on in the job for which I had originally been hired; instead , I wound up being one of three office directors handling a geographical element of this newly merged (and then divided) office. So for the last few months of my original tour and my extension year, the focus of my job shifted. Although I technically supervised my staff's work on the human rights report, I now had a new responsibility to bring to fruition this merger, and there was a lot of gnashing of teeth and staff stress regarding what this would mean in both the previous offices. People were concerned as to whether there would be favoritism for one group versus the other and whether those who had never previously had to draft or edit papers would not be willing to do so, etc. We had countless meetings and discussions. We even brought in outside facilitators to try to unify our ranks.

Q: Facilitators are sort of counselors.

TONGOUR: That is right. There was a gentleman who recently died, Max Sedaris, who normally worked with civil service personnel as a counselor, but he led a workshop for us on team building. Frankly, I think I spent much of my time that last year focusing on morale building or team building among people who were suddenly thrust together. To further complicate the situation, we were not only merging the old CRA, which handled country reports and asylum issues, with the office that promoted human rights and democracy, called PHD, but after bring them together we divided the new office into thirds along not completely obvious geographical lines. In other words, I wound up with an office that covered Latin America, or rather the Western Hemisphere, and East Asia. Another office covered Europe and Africa, while the third dealt with South Asia and the Middle East. Our leadership essentially divided the world in blocs. In some ways, Latin America and Asia worked well together. We not only shared the Pacific Ocean but had a number of cultural similarities, as well. Likewise, one could argue the colonial linkages between Europe and Africa, and so on. Initially, however, there was considerable confusion and a sense of artificial togetherness. I have to say though that by the time I left my teams really worked together as a cohesive unit, with staff working on Latin America showing some interest in Asian developments and vice versus, with Asia hands even acknowledging that some things could be learned from Latin Americans.

Q: Did you find that when you moved over and incorporated the promotion of democracy, this was sort of a buzzword of this administration and as with every administration when they get a buzzword going you have got to show progress. Did you find this sort of pretty political?

TONGOUR: Yes. Yet, I was lucky in not having to work on the Near East and South Asia, which bore the brunt of the pressure to show progress. I think we all learned two things from the merger experience. First, to make the merger real, everyone had to do a little of everything. In other words, those who had previously been in PHD had to edit some human rights reports, but not as many as CRA officers previously had to do. In that regard, we were quite fortunate in that we still could rely on the so-called "WAEs", retirees who had handled a substantial amount of the editing load in the old office and joined us in the new. So everyone did wind up editing reports, but no one had to deal with scores of them, as in the past; that was the good news. Much of our time that year was spent on mastering the learning curve since it did take time for those who had never done such reports to learn how to edit hem. Likewise, staff who had not previously engaged in program development or been responsible for overseeing democracy promotion programs had to learn the ropes, too. We were quite fortunate during that period in that the demands on us were kept to a minimum. We were not expected to work miracles overnight. Moreover, much of Latin America, from the State Department's perspective, is considered to be democratic and therefore requiring only limited amounts of democracy promotion activities. Improvements were always welcome, and there were some, but there were fewer mountains to climb in Latin America, leaving aside Cuba, as compared to Asia. Cuba itself was a complicated situation because although human rights improvements were always welcome, they were not the primary goal for the Administration, which was more focused on more fundamental changes in the regime.

In Asia, considerable attention was paid to questions related to developments in Thailand, where there had basically been a recent coup. Once again we ran into competing demands of various USG agencies and groups regarding the extent to which we would attend to conflicts in other smaller countries as opposed to focusing primarily on Thailand. After all, there were also a number of "islands in the sun" with major problems, not to mention China, which everyone was interested in. As for China, there was always a great deal of "push-pull" on that account. Yet, within our office, it could be said that those handling our most problematic countries basically selected them themselves. For example, our China person had been promoting human rights in China for a long time before the merger, and continued to do so thereafter. What was disconcerting at times were the mixed messages emanating from the administration itself. The Olympics was a case in point. There was considerable discussion regarding whether we should have had an Olympic strategy vis-a-vis China and human rights. Certainly the notion had occurred to many, the goal promoted and the policy raised, but for quite some time it was clearer what other nations or governments were doing than what we ourselves were. As you can well imagine, there was a lot of butting of heads between different segments within the USG on the appropriate approach on this score. I mean, the question had been publicly raised as to whether the president should attend the opening ceremonies or not. Should any actions be taken? These were the types of questions that were brooded about and discussed for months.

Q: Well now there is tremendous conflict over the Chinese repression in Tibet and the Olympic torch is being smothered by mobs in London and Paris, etcetera, etcetera.

TONGOUR: That is right. We definitely concerned ourselves with this type of issue or problem, of which there were many. More often than not, when we did see improvements, they were minor or incremental at best. I recall talking to my supervisor shortly before I was about to retire on the subject of whether we really had anything to show for all our efforts. We were sort of musing on the theme of progress, when he pointed out that we really weren't in the business of creating miracles overnight. Diplomacy does take a heck of a long time, and sometimes the best we can hope for is to prevent things from getting worse while in other cases we do see incremental progress or at least we keep the issue alive. However, it is easier to see the results of our efforts when there is a coherent or cohesive administration positive, such as a fully agreed upon view that Burma is engaging in human rights abuses. In such cases, circling the wagons, speaking with one voice and even ratcheting up pressure within the international community is much easier. Where the situation is more complicated is in cases where we have competing interests within our own government with regard to a particular part of the world. In the broader scheme of things, I think, much of what we do as Foreign Service Officers is manage and "educate" up our bosses - providing them with the reams of paper or briefings so that they can go out and make our - office, bureau or agency - case vis-a vis their counterparts. In the case of DRL, whenever my boss either had to speak about the human rights reports or human rights conditions around the world, we produced enormous quantities of paper to prep him. And this was the case in every bureau, regional or functional, in which officers generated endless amounts of information in the service of our superiors. How they used it might not always have been the way one would have wished, but the material was there. I'd have to say that on average for every Foreign Service Officer who reaches middle and upper levels in the service, at least two-thirds of his time is spent in servicing superiors, mentoring and team building with one's staff and subordinates, and simply creating order in the ranks; if one is lucky, the remaining third might be devoted to more substantive work, whether it be producing a good report or promoting a program beneficial to one group or another.

Q: Well also, implicit in that is that you are training a new generation of officers coming up.

TONGOUR: That is right.

Q: You know, an example and a direction to their outlook on major problems.

TONGOUR: Yes, and frankly, for me that has been one of the more gratifying aspects of the career, and one I was better at. I was less enthusiastic or skilled in managing up.

Q: You mentioned your office dealt with asylum. Can you explain what that was and what you all were doing?

TONGOUR: That is a tricky one to explain at this juncture because the role of the unit involved has also changed. But, in principle, though not always in fact and for somewhat historical reasons, the State Department nominally had the last word in asylum cases. What that meant was that INS, the former immigration authority would send copies of all asylum request to the Department. Now, you can image the sheer reams of paper involved; there was no way humanly possible that our office could look at all that paper, and in fact, no one expected us to. Rather, INS wanted another agency to have the official responsibility for such decisions. In other words, the onus was on us. While the Department did receive the documents in questions, what INS really expected us to review were what we termed "judges' letters". There were basically two levels in the determination of asylum cases. First, there were routine cases, which would be easily resolved by immigration officers. They would send us copies after a decision - notably an approval - had been made. Cases that were more difficult or unclear would be forwarded to an immigration judge who in turn would, in some instances, request a State Department advisory. We would then review the case and answer the mail. If we had nothing substantive to add, we could simply note that fact in our response. In some instances, however, we did; that's when we would make a real contribution. In our off months, when staff were not working on the human rights reports, they would, in fact, be soliciting information from our embassies and other sources regarding such asylum cases, specifically as to whether or not a particular individual might have a well-founded fear of persecution. After all, there were definitely instances in which a person had no such well-founded fear. In addition to gather specific case information, we also produced various papers, including country profiles and issue papers about specific problems in a particular country.

A country profile is basically an overview of key country conditions. These were 10-20 page research papers describing all the major human rights concerns and issues in the country. Say for example, we are looking at Indonesia and you are a Christian in Indonesia. How would you be treated; would you be oppressed or not? Alternately, you could take a very specific slice of a country profile and produce an issue paper - usually two or three pages that could be sent to the immigration judge focusing on the treatment of Christians in Indonesia. Thus, when the judge is reviewing a particular case relating to a Christian in Indonesia, a paper of this type might be helpful to him in making his determination. We ran across many genuine problem cases. On the other hand we also received cases that were clearly fraudulent. In those instances, we could go back to the judge and say, for example, that Russians were not routinely persecuted in Belarus or whatever.

However, during the last few years, there was a move afoot to stem the tide of all this paper and to try to persuade our immigration colleagues that it served no one's interest to keep sending all the papers over to State. That said, in my last year, after the actual merger, the asylum segment was removed from my former office and a new, small section was created, theoretically, to deal with asylum. Nevertheless, the situation remained muddy because this new unit did not have sufficient staff and was forced to look to the new regional offices for help. So, the "la plus ca change" scenario held true here. In other words, notwithstanding the major reconfiguration of the bureau, some of the same people were working on the same types of cases.

Q: You left when?

TONGOUR: I entered the retirement course in September, and officially retired in November 2007.

Q: Two questions I have. First, let me, one more immediate- What was your- the- we are reaching the end of the Bush II administration, he leaves in 2009 but this has been a controversial administration and foreign affairs has been way at the top. How did you personally find dealing with it in matters- did it cause difficulties for you sort of personally in your work or not?

TONGOUR: I think to a certain extent it did, more so back in the Department than in my overseas assignments. In my last posting in the Caribbean there was considerable good will toward the United States after 9/11. Initially, as I may have mentioned , there was an incredible outpouring of support that lasted for many months. In a way it was something of a reprieve because while much of the world was somewhat puzzled by our election of President George W. Bush, after 9/11 you could say we were granted a form of dispensation, and most people were willing to be supportive. Unfortunately, much of that goodwill gradually dissipated. Back here, however, there was something that I had not seen in a long time, namely a type of "true believer" mentality. As Foreign Service officers, we are professionals and serve whomever is in power, and we try to do the best job we can along the way. Yet, in this particular administration one was very much regarded as being with or against the regime or whether or not you were an adherent of the true faith, whatever that might be. I recall when the last DRL Assistant Secretary came on board. I called on him to express my enthusiasm for working with him and to convey my interest in staying on in my job for an additional year. His immediate response was "why". I answered something to the effect that I really believed in the human rights work we were doing. I also acknowledged that at times we had to be practical or pragmatic but that I was truly committed to the work. He basically made clear to me that pragmatism went out the window in 2001, and we all had to be essentially "true believers" now. So, definitely, there was a certain righteousness prevalent in my last few years at State that grew increasingly distasteful to me and contributed to my decision to retire. I did not have to leave since I had not run up against the proverbial State Department clock. I just felt that promoting the policy of the day was not something I wanted to continue doing at that point.

Q: Did you feel sort of disillusioned with the human rights aspect of things?

TONGOUR: Certainly. While it is a good question, one can also question just how high a priority human rights had been previously. Whenever one comes into a new bureau, one that one has not worked in before, it is not always clear what the attitudes were five or 10 years earlier. Obviously, there had been other administrations that had to some degree or other been defenders of human rights. To give this particular administration its due there were instances in which there was a convergence of various interest and considerable attention was paid to human rights cases and the promotion of democracy. For example, Burma was a country where our leadership actively sought to promote improvements in human rights and democracy. Of course, cynics could say that Burma fell into the "bad country" category, where it was relatively easy to support just causes.

Q: Well it is an easy-

TONGOUR: It is an easy target. So I do not want to say that this particular group was any better or any worse than others. Perhaps the difference was in the degree of hype or in the more recent vernacular "spin". In other words, if you insist on "talking the talk", you should be willing to "walk the walk". There was definitely a great deal of talk about democracy and human rights, which made the rather sordid exposes of USG abuses at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere all the more distasteful.

Q: Another question just on this, I obviously do not want to get into details, but was the CIA a contributor? I am talking about information coming out of Langley to your reports.

TONGOUR: Not really. What most people do not realize is that the human rights reports are based exclusively on unclassified information. Or rather, the final product is an unclassified report, available to all. So we neither looked to the CIA for information, nor did they volunteer it. One caveat to this was not directly related to the contents of the draft report but rather to information provided to us from NGO sources or from the media. In rare instances, we might report on an incident - real or alleged - and a colleague within State might indicate there may be more to a particular story than meets the eye or involve some other agency, and we should, perhaps, tread lightly. But that was about it.

Q: Yes. What was your impression of the non-governmental organizations that sort of keep watch of human rights, Amnesty International, of course, is a major one; you mentioned Human Rights Watch. What was your impression of their concerns; were they over the top, were they pragmatic, true believers; what?

TONGOUR: Let me give you a very concrete example related to Colombia. To address some concerns of the NGO community, my boss, the DRL Principle Deputy Assistant Secretary (PDAS) and his counterpart in the bureau for Latin America (WHA) met monthly with a group of NGO representatives focusing on the region. Each month, the NGOs would provide us with a virtual laundry list of concerns related to disappearances, killings and abuses, and each month we would take on board their concerns and try to address them by providing additional information, trying to ascertain what the Colombia government was doing about particular cases and pressing it to do more. These sessions were not always pleasant . Although most of the NGO representatives were highly professional and polite, there were always a few that would make gratuitous jabs or be testy in their comments. Yet, these get-togethers were important for us - keeping us honest and accountable. If we said we would look into a case, we did. They were good at keeping our feet to the fire and in that they served us very well. I would also go so far as to say that at least 75 or 80 percent of their work is truly valuable. Like every group or individual, they have their blind spots or one track minds and in some instances might push in areas where their recommended actions might not be fully warranted. That said, I think both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty were careful in presenting their findings, and for the most part, the work they do is quite admirable.

Q: Okay. Well sort of a big question; just looking at your career and we are still I think sort of a revolution is almost over now as far as women in the Foreign Service but you were doing- there during the revolution when women were being brought in, what are your impressions of what happened to you and how things have changed?

TONGOUR: I think the fact that this is a non issue in most respects now is probably the biggest change of all. Historically in most professions there has always been the exceptional, brilliant woman who was able to get into the field and get ahead. We all know about the women prime ministers and the occasional assistant secretary - or more recently actual secretaries - at State. What matters more, I think, is when an organization reaches the point of allowing women to be as "mediocre" or middling as their average male counterpart. That in a sense is when you have real progress. That fact that today at State there are women at all levels and of all calibers - just as there are men - is a real sign of change. I think on the whole the progress, while slow in coming, has been real, and given the starting point, impressive..

Q: Well, for you, did you feel that when you came in things were of one state and that things were changing as you moved up the career ladder?

TONGOUR: Absolutely. And I think that the State Department deserves to be commended on that score - whether it did so voluntarily or was pulled into changing is irrelevant at this juncture because in terms of women, minorities and the disabled major strides have been made. I know we've talked about how it used to be - before I entered the service - when women officers had to leave if they got married. Even beyond that, for quite some time there were other more subtle forms of discrimination with regard to career development, specifically in terms of "conal designation". I happened to have been one of the so-called "fortunate" ones in having started out as a "political cone" officer, but that was rare then. When I entered, there was a four cone system, which has evolved substantially over time. Then, entering officers were simply assigned a cone, and traditionally women were assigned to the consular or possibly the administrative cone. It was much more unusual for a woman to be assigned to the political cone, because that was the cone for future ambassadors or those expected to rise quickly within the system. In those days, people actually referred to political and economic as the substantive cones. So one of the biggest changes over the years - and linked to some extent to a class action law suit - is the distribution of women more evenly among all the cones. And women from various cones have in recent years risen to become ambassadors, deputy assistant secretaries, assistant secretaries and so on.

Now that said, the Foreign Service remains a tricky career on the personal front, in ways that has little to do with the official system but rather with the lifestyle choices of its members. Very recently a high ranking Foreign Service officer and a former ambassador publicly berated the Department for its policy on domestic partners. He himself was openly gay, and a major factor in his decision to retire when he did was the Department's unwillingness to make accommodations for his domestic male partner. For women, especially for women with children, or for women officers with spouses or male officers married to professional women - the career comes with a number of specific problems associated with uprooting families every few years and transporting them to various parts of the world. While the State Department has done a fairly good job in minimizing the attendant disruptions, the problems are partly inherent in the profession itself as well as tied to conditions in other parts of the world. In other words, it is still a wonderful profession for a man who brings with him a wife, who may well be accomplished and capable in her own right but is not burning to have her own career. I recognize that this scenario may come with other problems, but and everyone faces certain difficulties in adjustment. Nevertheless, the configuration of officer, spouse and a couple of kids still may be the optimum configuration for the type of life we live in the service. How to make the system more user friendly for other types of individuals and families and those seeking to balance the tradeoff between personal and professional development is still one of the toughest nuts to crack in our profession.

Q: And that is getting more and more difficult-

TONGOUR: Possibly so.

Q: What do you plan to do with the rest of your life?

TONGOUR: Well, , interestingly enough, I recently began a temporary assignment with the Board of Examiners, the office that admits individuals into the Foreign Service and would like to do some other TDY work in the future. I also teach literacy to English as a Second Language (ESL) students, take classes for my own pleasure, and look forward to doing more traveling and volunteer work in the future. Perhaps I'll consider a "third career" in a travel related field.

Q: Good.

TONGOUR: Yes. I've enjoyed it so far and look forward to the adventures ahead.

Q: Well, I think we will stop at this point.

End of interview