

Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR ALAN J. BLINKEN

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background

Born and raised in New York
Harvard University

Private business; Wall Street, New York City

Dreyfus and Company
Wertheim and Company

Charitable Organizations

Africa Medical and Research Foundation

Personal History

Marriage
Study expedition to Mozambique
Political interest and activity
Candidacy for State Assembly (1988)
Relations with Al Gore
Work with Democratic National Committee
Bill Clinton
Participation 1992 Presidential Election Campaign

Ambassador to Belgium

1993-1998

Offer of Ambassadorship
Ambassadorial Seminar
Views on Career Foreign Service
Belgium as US trading partner
Belgian support in UN
Flemish/French speakers
Relations
US investment
European Union
Dealing with local government

American Chamber of Commerce
United States NATO and EU ambassadors
Diplomatic entertaining
The King of the Belgians
Congo
Belgian Peacekeepers
Belgian role in Africa conflicts
Iraq
Croatia
Belgium's European trading partners
Land mines
Trade and Globalization
Work stoppages
Education
Presidential and other VIP visitors
French Prime Minister Mitterrand funeral
Dealing with the Department of State
Relations with Congress
Embassy inspections
"Are Ambassadors really necessary?"
Paying for international conferences

INTERVIEW

[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. Blinken]

Q: Today is the 21st of May 2001. This is an interview with Alan J. Blinken. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. Let's start at the beginning. Could you tell me when and where you were born?

BLINKEN: I was born in New York City. I now qualify for senior tickets at the movies, December 24, 1937.

Q: Could you tell me something about your family? Let's start with your father. What was he doing? What was his background?

BLINKEN: My father came over from Kiev in 1904, and like many Americans of that generation, put himself through high school. He only had a mother and a brother. He put himself through college, got an accounting degree and then got himself through NYU Law School, class of 1924.

Q: Where did he go to college?

BLINKEN: He went to City College and the NYU Law School.

Q: *It's a really classic case, isn't it?*

BLINKEN: Absolutely.

Q: *You must be very proud.*

BLINKEN: It's another wonderful case of you can make it in America. He practiced law for a short time and then went into business. Before he retired, he was president of one of the largest chains of men clothing stores in the United States, but had many other interests. But, as you say, a classic story of you can make it in the United States.

Q: *Well, did you get any feel from your father about the family? Why they got out and why they came here?*

BLINKEN: Well, Kiev in Russia, or the Ukraine today, was not a place that was comfortable for somebody who was Jewish. His father had been a well-known playwright poet. In fact, my father, before the Berlin Wall came down, commissioned somebody to get all the writings of his father that could be found there, which were then brought over to the United States. My father had them translated and published here, and given to many universities, public libraries, etc. So, my father came from there. My mother's family was already first generation. Her parents had come over from Germany during the 1880s during that period of migration from there. Of course, being German Jewish - somebody from Eastern Europe, especially somebody whose family had no business, didn't know much. As history would have it, of course, my mother's family lost everything in the depression. My father was up and coming and doing very well. He ended up supporting them.

Q: *This is the new arrival, the new kids on the block. I find this whole story just fascinating. I think of that book called *World of Our Fathers*, about the New York Jewish experience. Did your father get into the clothing trade right away?*

BLINKEN: No, no. He was a lawyer. He was in the import-export business with a big group in the United Kingdom. Then, he was asked to run this chain of men's clothing stores in the south and the southwest, which he did. He built it up, and then actually started a company that came about because of an invention of an uncle. Later, that became a public company that our family had a large interest in. We finally liquidated, or merged it into another company in 1986. So, Dad had, in a sense, an eclectic life, but as I always like to say, his speech is in Europe, because they look back, and we in the United States, look ahead. It's a marvelous thing, the United States, because here I am, technically, a first-generation American, and my brother, Donald, sometime after I got to Belgium, was made our ambassador to Hungary. So, you have two American ambassadors who are first generation. The family, obviously, has done reasonably well.

It's not a typical American story.

Q: No. I've done a significant number of these interviews, and it's amazing how many, coming particularly from the generation born in the 1920s and 1930s... the great majority... As a matter of fact, your background is a little better, because your parents went to college, whereas an awful lot of our people - the last generation didn't go to college. The kids, for the most part, weren't really "to the manor born."

BLINKEN: Also, in speeches, I would always say, in Europe, what they have to remember about the United States is 80 percent of Americans alive today is second generation or less. That is quite remarkable when you are in countries where they talk about families going back three, four centuries, no fewer generations. But, that is the strength of our country, it always has been.

Q: Now, the process continues.

BLINKEN: Absolutely.

Q: What was family life like for you and your brother when you grew up?

BLINKEN: There were actually three brothers, a middle brother, between my eldest brother and myself. We grew up in both Yonkers, NY and New York City. I would say that being much younger than my other two brothers, I had the good fortune of having an easier time growing up than they did, because the third son was easy to deal with. We had a wonderful life. I was fortunate enough, as my brothers were, that our parents sent us to private schools for our education.

Q: Where?

BLINKEN: Horace Mann School in New York. All three of us went there, and then all three of us went to Harvard.

Q: Obviously, your father was a very busy man, but what sort of home life was it? Did you sit around the table and discuss things, or was there even much of a chance to do this?

BLINKEN: Oh, yes, there was some conversation, but unlike the way we dealt with our children, or even our children deal with our grandchildren, it was different. My father would come home from work late, and he would sit and have his drink. Mother would say, "Now, don't bother Dad because he has had a hard day," but there would be lots of family parties. We didn't have dance clubs that didn't open until 11:00, and we weren't going out all the time. Nevertheless, we had a good family and community and school life.

Q: Now, when you went to Horace Mann, you went from when to when?

BLINKEN: Horace Mann went from sixth to twelfth grade.

Q: *So, this would have been in the 1940s?*

BLINKEN: Let's see. I graduated from there in 1955, so it was from 1949 to 1955. At that point, I guess, my first or second year in Horace Mann, my folks moved back to New York City, which is where most of the kids came from. So, I was commuting every day from there, up and back. It was terrific.

Q: *Up through the high school career, what sort of things were you interested in?*

BLINKEN: Well, certainly, in those days, I was interested in all the sports. I played on the football team, and I wrestled, and I played on the baseball team. That was great fun and great camaraderie. They worked us pretty hard at school too. We had plenty of work to do there.

Q: *How about reading?*

BLINKEN: I hated reading when I was there. I couldn't stand it. I thought it was awful. I don't think it was until college that I really started reading anything other than what I had to read.

Q: *Movies?*

BLINKEN: Movies, sure. We were about the last on the block to get television, so that didn't count, but certainly movies, and certainly weekends with friends. Somebody always had a party. It was terrific. It was a good life.

Q: *What pointed you toward Harvard?*

BLINKEN: Probably, simply that my brothers went there. It obviously had a good reputation. When it came time to apply for colleges, evidently I had done well enough in school, both in terms of academic, but also in terms of sports and class president and things like that, for a few years, I only had to apply to two schools. I applied to Harvard and I applied to Duke. I've never been to Duke. One brother took me up to Harvard once for a few hour visit, and that was it. I knew practically nothing about it until I got there.

Q: *Was your family very religious, or not?*

BLINKEN: Not particularly. We would observe the holy days, but we would be considered reform.

Q: *But, as far as your family, you would say you were reform?*

BLINKEN: Yes.

Q: You were at Harvard from 1955 to 1959? How was Harvard when you got there? What did you think of it?

BLINKEN: It was terrific. Of course Harvard was a little different then. Radcliffe was a separate school. When people asked me about Harvard then, I say, "There was only one way you could get thrown out of Harvard in my day. That was having a woman in your room after 7:30." Today, the only way you can get thrown out of Harvard is not having a woman in your room after 7:30. There was a dress code then. We had to wear ties and jackets for meals and classes. But, it was exhilarating. Professors were called misters as the students were called misters. You were treated as a grown up, and you could go to class or not. It was strictly up to you. Do your work, or don't do your work. It was terrific. It was good fun.

Q: As you got installed in Harvard, what particular subjects and interests did you develop?

BLINKEN: That is interesting. I got there, and of course, the first year, you are taking a few mandatory courses like a writing course and some other courses. Then, you start thinking about what you are going to major in. By the end of that year, I was interested in business, or I thought I would be. I ended as an economics major, which was interesting, in two respects: (1) It gave me good background, but (2) I had two really interesting professors. My thesis reader was John Kenneth Galbraith.

Q: Oh, boy.

BLINKEN: Well, a few years later, he becomes our ambassador to India. It also gave me enough insight into what helps make an economic environment. I basically spent my fourth year, which now called the Kennedy School, which was then the Littauer School, where I mixed with a lot of people from government and business. I found it absolutely fascinating. I didn't have the good sense at that point to go right into government, but went into Wall Street, afterwards. But, what I learned in those government courses, and the people I met stuck with me all my life.

Q: Did you by any chance run into Kermit Gordon while you were there, or was he still the director of the budget?

BLINKEN: No, I did not. I'm trying to remember... As I say, John Galbraith was my thesis reader. John Dunlop, who still today, is used by the federal government as a negotiator, worked with me on my thesis.

Q: What was your thesis on?

BLINKEN: I was at that point the world's expert on labor relations in Pakistan after

partition from India. There was both government in there, there was the labor portion, which Dunlop was helpful with. It was an arcane enough subject that nobody read it, which is just as well.

Q: Obviously, Pakistan was foreign, but did you get much involved in foreign affairs, while you were doing your Harvard work?

BLINKEN: While in my last year, over at Littauer school, some people, including some people in the class, were from India and what had become Pakistan, besides other countries. It was interesting in the sense that you had a separate nation created, but you also had people in the class who had both the prejudices and the experiences of a split, creating a new country, both in political terms and, very importantly, of course, we still have it today, in religious terms.

Q: This was toward the end of it, but did the McCarthyism of the aftermath...

BLINKEN: Oh, McCarthyism, it was the aftermath, but it left an indelible impression on so many professors at Harvard, in particular, as everybody knows. I consider it one of the great disgraces in U.S. history. It left an impression, and you could hear it from the professors, who would openly speak about it. It was also an interesting time because it was a time when Jack Kennedy was getting his campaign ready. He came through, and his brother Robert came through and spoke to summary classes. It was also during the time when Castro visited the United States. When he made his speech at Harvard, it was then that everybody realized that this was a no do-gooder in the revolution, this was a bedrock communist interested in communist control of that country. It was a famous speech he gave at Harvard, and people walked out and said, "We have a problem."

Q: Well, going back a bit, what about your family and politics? I think of New York, particularly coming from the Jewish immigrant group, many of them were bringing western European socialism with them, and some of it moving over to the communist. At the same time, your father was in business. Where did they come out on this?

BLINKEN: Nobody in the family at that point had any real political leanings as far as personal activity, but I would say that everybody in the family then voted Democratic. We have to remember that that circle is totally different from any of the socialist parties, even in Europe today. But, the democrats were favored by most of the immigrants, because it was a party that supported the working classes, supported people trying to make their way in a new country, supported social programs, especially after FDR, with FDR and afterwards, and spoke to really the rights of all the people, much more so, in their minds, and still in my mind today, than the Republican Party did. I never even discussed it with them. I'm sure the family all voted Democratic at that point, but nobody had any real interest in getting involved either in politics or government. I guess I was the first who did.

Q: What about at Harvard and the group you were with, did they have any particular

political interests or not?

BLINKEN: I don't think there was any interest in politics of any of us, except a fellow who I have just gotten to reacquaint myself with, who was in the next room, and that was John Fell Stevenson, Adlai Stevenson's son. Of course, Adlai had just gone through losing.

Q: Yes, two campaigns. Where were you pointing yourself? You had done your thesis on labor and Pakistan, and all, where were you pointed?

BLINKEN: I had to find a job. I guess it is no different today. I was admitted both to the business school and the law school, but then said I had really had enough of the going to classes and writing papers, and doing tests and everything. So, I guess the thing for a young man to do then, when he had no other particular skills, was go to Wall Street. I stayed there for 33 years.

Q: When you went to Wall Street, where did you start?

BLINKEN: Oh, I started at a firm called Dreyfus and Company, for a year, the way most men and women did then, as a trainee, as a security analyst.

Q: What does that mean?

BLINKEN: That means you look at companies and you decide whether you should buy them or sell them, or try to learn all about the companies. Still, the analysts today are very important in Wall Street. Then, basically, it was how you trained. It was how you learned about stocks and bonds and companies, what they had issued and what they were worth.

Q: I'm not familiar with the Wall Street pattern. Does one move around when you are young?

BLINKEN: Absolutely. Yes, that was a typical avenue of training. The other, of course, was coming in as what we call a "producer, a customer's man." I wanted the background of learning something, which I did. After a year, I moved to another firm, where I stayed for 14 years. I basically had two jobs on Wall Street. I stayed at that firm for 14 years and then ended up at a firm called Wertheim and Company, where I was for 20, or 21 years.

Q: Did you find yourself concentrating on any particular aspect of industry?

BLINKEN: I did. I had gone the gamut of the jobs on Wall Street - from security analyst to retail salesman, to an institutional salesman, where they were just beginning to run trading operations, corporate finance, and running asset management, besides at one point, running the firm. I have gone through most of the areas of Wall Street.

Q: Since this interview is concerned with international affairs, did that play much of a

role in what you did then?

BLINKEN: Absolutely not. There is only one reason you go to Wall Street, and it ain't [isn't] philanthropic, it's making money. There's nothing else to be said for it.

Q: I would think that at a certain point, you kind of wonder what you were doing?

BLINKEN: I'm sure for a lot of people, and certainly I was one of those people - you wonder what you are doing. I don't want to say it's boring, but it's repetitive. The question is, "Are you getting anything out of your life, sitting around doing that?" I had some outside interests already, and was building on them. They became more and more of a primary interest and Wall Street was sort of a secondary interest.

Q: What were these outside interests?

BLINKEN: For 18 years, I was the treasurer of something called Africa Medical and Research Foundation, which today is the largest NGO supplying medical training and health care services in Africa. It works in 15 countries. The little tiny part of it that some people have heard of in this country is called I Doctors. For instance, during the problem in Somalia, some years ago, we took care of 472,000 Somali refugees across the border in Kenya. Even to the present, it's the only formal medical assistance and training in all of the southern Sudan. There was a point when it was the only medicine in Uganda under Idi Amin, training and supplies.

Q: Who moved you toward getting involved in this field?

BLINKEN: Two things: A dear friend who had started it 15 years before, Dr. Thomas Frieze, who started in connection with an interest he had, and a British doctor named Archie Macadoo, and the fact that my wife and I spent some time in Africa for recreation. I was interested in the people, interested in the countries. Then, I was asked to get involved, and I did. I found it more than interesting.

Q: Let's sort of get a feel for the person. When did you meet and marry your wife? What was her background? What is her background?

BLINKEN: I've been married twice. The first time I got married, I was at Harvard. It was somebody I had known in high school. That lasted through two kids, 11 years, something like that. I've been married to my present wife, Melinda, and forever wife, since 1970. So, we have been married going on 32 years now. She is Californian, from a big movie family. I met her, fell in love with her. I was ending a bad marriage at that point. We have lived happily ever after.

Q: You say both of you became interested in Africa. When you went to Africa, what was your first impression of the situation? It sounds like it's mainly eastern Africa?

BLINKEN: Yes. All our time was spent in Uganda, Kenya mostly, Tanzania. Since my wife was involved at the Museum of Natural History in New York, and now a trustee, we sponsored and went on part of a three-year expedition to study the Yama in Mozambique. We have had a lot of interesting times over there. It started before we were married, by my going hunting over there. It blossomed to something even more, because Africa is more than the animals and the birds, and the insects. It's the people and the country, and the style of life.

Q: I would think that at the time you got started in this, it was somewhat discouraging, because you had people like Idi Amin. You had Enure, who was...

BLINKEN: Playing with the Chinese.

Q: Yes, and, the form of government he was coming from was an absolute disaster.

BLINKEN: The wonderful thing is that the assets of those countries, for the most part, survive these regimes. Of course, I started in Kenya in the 1960s, just after independence. Though there was, and still is today, lots of corruption, and other problems. The beauty of those countries is there. They are there for some kind of future development, but they are wonderful to see. There are very few places on earth where you get the mixture of everything in those east African countries.

Q: Well, really jumping back... I was wondering, being a Harvard graduate in 1959, did you get involved in the Kennedy campaign of 1960?

BLINKEN: No. I had absolutely no interest. I barely knew what was going on.

Q: It's interesting, because some people were really grabbed by this, and others weren't.

BLINKEN: My wife had worked in the campaign. Of course, then she was out in California. We weren't married, because this was years before. I had no interest, because I was all consumed in becoming both the smartest and the richest person in the United States. I discovered very shortly after starting on Wall Street that I would never be. I had really no interest in politics. The first time I had any involvement in politics... There were two stories: one of my partners at Wertheim & Company came up to me one day and said, "Alan, we are the most important people in the world, those of us in Wall Street, aren't we?" I said, "Absolutely." He said, "We underwrite securities for government, for states, for counties, for businesses. We supply the world's capital. We are the most important people in the world, right?" I said, "As a matter of fact, the third section of The New York Times is business and finance." He said, "We are the most important people, right?" I said, "Absolutely." He said, "Wrong. I want you to always remember something I'm going to tell you. The first page of every newspaper in the world, no matter what it is about, on the front, is politics and government." He then introduced me to Carol Bellamy, who was running for office in New York. That was my first involvement, I helped her. Just before that, my wife, was at the museum and was very friendly with Mary and John

Lindsay. John Lindsay asked me, in his run for senate in 1980, to be his treasurer. We were very friendly with him, but I had no idea. I had lunch with John at the Century Club. I'll never forget it. I said, "I'm happy to help you John, but I don't even know what party you belong to." He said, "That's a good question." I had paid no attention to the fact that John had been a Republican but switched to the Democratic Party. That gave me a spark that I hadn't had about something for a long time. Here is an involvement where people in offices can actually make a difference, one way or the other. It's not always a good difference. Then, of course, came... I'm jumping ahead of my time, but 1988. I had never worked on a national campaign. I was introduced to Gary Hart, who I thought had the best program on education in the United States that I have ever heard. I started to work for Gary Hart. I put in a solid month, or a month and a half work, and raised a lot of money for him. There was a big dinner in New York. Of course, it was the night of that dinner that he went out. So, the next day, or two days later, the seven remaining candidates called me. Evidently, I was a pretty decent fund raiser. I saw some of them, but I wasn't really interested in them. The last one who called me was a fellow named Al Gore. I said, "Listen, I'll just send you check." I felt badly that I was going to call in all these IOUs to raise money for Hart, and now the guy goes out.

Q: For the record, you might explain what happened.

BLINKEN: Gary Hart also changed history regarding the press with presidential candidates. Gary Hart was having some extracurricular affairs, and in effect, challenged the press to find out. He of course got caught on a boat called The Monkey Business, with a girl who wasn't his wife. That ended his campaign. That had never been done before. No one had ever looked into the private lives and personal lives of candidates. That opened the door, and unfortunately opened the door for the folks on the far right to go after Bill Clinton. I don't think we were particularly well served as a country, and of course, Europeans laugh at us, and think this is absolutely bizarre. But, that is what happened.

Anyway, Al Gore came into see me. I didn't know a thing about him, except he was a senator from Tennessee. We sat down and all the other candidates came in with their cheap fund raiser. He came in with some blonde lady, but when introduced, found out it was Tipper Gore. I didn't know a thing about him. I asked him to give me some background. He said that he had gone to Harvard. I said, "What house were you in?" He said, "Dunster." I took a piece of paper and tore it in half and said, "Do you remember your room number?" He said, "Sure." I said, "Write it down on that." He wrote it down and I wrote mine down. We turned it over, and we were in the same room in the same house exactly 10 years apart. That was the beginning of a friendship, a real working friendship. I worked for him in the 1988 campaign, and in 1990, I ran for office in New York, while he was running for senate. We helped each other. Then, of course, in 1992, I was in the campaign full tilt when Al was named vice-presidential candidate for President Clinton.

Q: How did you find your work on Wall Street went when you got involved in the

campaign? Particularly, I'm thinking of on the democratic side, when Wall Street is obviously more...

BLINKEN: My partners all thought I probably had a pre-frontal lobotomy, and needed help, since I was a democrat. On the other hand, in 1988 or 1989, I brought a fellow into our firm named Tony Coelho. He had been a majority whip of the House of Representatives. He joined the firm. The New York Times called me and asked me for a comment on all of this. I talked to him about Tony and his interpersonal skills, and everything else. I also told him that it was interesting because before Tony came to the firm, I was outnumbered by my republican partners, twenty-five to one. The democrats now outnumber the republicans in the firm, two to twenty-five. They didn't care. They didn't care, really, when I ran for office the next year. I basically took most of the year off, though it was obvious to both them, myself and Wall Street, that I wasn't keeping my attention span very long on any given day. But, they were pretty good. Jim Harmon, who had some interest in getting involved in politics and government from me, later in the Clinton administration, became chairman of Ex-Im Bank, and then had a wonderful time. As we speak, he is retiring from that position.

Q: What office were you running for in New York?

BLINKEN: Oh, my goodness. I ran for state assembly on the upper eastside of Manhattan called the silk-stocking district.

Q: That was John Lindsey's old district.

BLINKEN: Yes, it was John Lindsey's old district. Bill Green was the congressman, a liberal republican. I had a wonderful time. I lost 15 pounds, spent a great deal of my own money, and raised quite a bit. I lost by one percent and never regretted running.

Q: What were the issues in that district?

BLINKEN: Oh my goodness. They were local issues. There were so many, there was education, there was seniors. Sometimes, there were issues like capital punishment, which I was against. I thought it was a red herring. My opponent was for capital punishment. But, they were small issues. They were the typical, local issues that people vote on.

Q: That was in 1988, was it?

BLINKEN: No, that was 1990.

Q: How about with the Clinton-Gore campaign? Was it Gore that brought you into this?

BLINKEN: Well, I had gone around the country, or part of the country, in 1991, to see if I thought we could raise the money, for Senator Gore to run for president. He was looking

at it. I remember finishing in California in August of 1991, calling him up and saying, “I believe we have X dollars that we can get for a primary campaign.” Al said, “Let me think about it, and I will call you back.” This was the year two other, sort of milestones, happened in Al’s life. One was that his son had a terrible automobile accident and nearly died. At that point, the Gores and the Blinkens were very personal friends. I know that for Tipper and Al, it was a horrendous event as they watched him being thrown through the air, getting hit by this car, and being in intensive care for whatever it was, 10, 12 days, not knowing if he would live or die. It was also the year Al wrote Earth in the Balance. The book was supposed to be delivered on, I think it was the first week in June, but Al Gore didn’t deliver that book... with all the problems and everything else, because he wrote every word of it himself... didn’t finally finish it until October. So, anyway, having called Al, a few days later, the phone rings and Al says, “I know you are going to be disappointed, but I have too much on my plate and my heart isn’t it, with everything that has been going on, I can’t run.” I said, “I can’t be disappointed, it’s not my choice, it’s your choice.” Anyway, he didn’t run. I didn’t know who to support, and wanted to help the Democratic Party, and work for DNC for a while.

Q: Democratic National Committee.

BLINKEN: Democratic National Committee, I’m sorry. I did that until the spring. Meanwhile, Governor Clinton had spoken to me a number of times about working on his campaign. I declined that, but finally, he flew me down to Arkansas, in, I believe, April of 1992, and we chatted privately for quite a while, and went back home. I’ll never forget - my wife and I went to a party that night. I can’t mention the people’s name, for obvious reasons... But we got to the party, and all the people were talking about were what cars they had bought, what houses they had, who did what to whom, what deal was going on. I said to my wife, (it was a beautiful party with hundreds and hundreds of people) “I don’t find this interesting.” She said, “I don’t either.” I said, “Let’s go home.” I said, “I’m going to go to work for Bill Clinton.” I called Bill Clinton the next morning and told him I would come on full time. Of course, I also had a strong sense that the perfect vice presidential candidate for Bill Clinton would have been Al Gore. I told him so, and I told him why, in a conversation I can’t forget, and I’m sure he didn’t forget. Of course, Al turned out to be the vice-presidential nominee, and it went so well. He did fill in Bill Clinton’s resume, in terms of foreign policy, in terms of the environment, in terms of family values, and in terms of experience in Washington. It was a great combination.

Q: Did you have any reservations about Clinton... I’m thinking particularly on foreign affairs. He had been governor of Arkansas. He is obviously a quick learner, but... sort of on global issues as opposed to...

BLINKEN: Well, my experience is that when you meet Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton... remember (1) he went to school and traveled extensively in Europe; (2) he always had an interest in foreign policy, especially as he related to both our economic and social well being in this country and the well-being of others overseas; and (3) when you talk to the man, you see how terribly bright he is. I had no doubts that with a smart team around him,

which I think he picked, qualified and well-educated people, he would do a very decent job. I believe he did. You don't have to have been brought up overseas or with a lot of experience overseas, necessarily. It certainly helps to have some experience. Just recently, of course, the American people have picked someone who I guess only visited Mexico, which he probably thought was a border state.

Q: He came from a father who was probably one of our most international... His disinterest, I find really amazing. We are talking about George Bush, Jr.

BLINKEN: Which is bizarre, but on the other hand, he has surrounded himself with experienced people. I don't agree, necessarily, with their points of view, but they are experienced. This country has a wealth of intelligent, respected and experienced people.

Q: What did you do during the 1992 campaign?

BLINKEN: During the 1992 campaign, I was in charge of the finance in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

Q: Were there any problems? What was the response to Clinton?

BLINKEN: I think when you really get to that point in the campaign, where the party has got a nominee, and even obvious before then, that it isn't a question of they like Clinton, or they like somebody else in the Democratic Party, because Clinton is the choice. It's a question really of do they want a democrat or a republican? I heard lots of republicans say that George Bush wasn't their choice, and wasn't too bright, and this and that, but you can bet that the republicans piled the money on, absolutely.

Q: Clinton carried those states, didn't he, or not?

BLINKEN: Yes. They are typically more democratic, than the western states, which nobody I know alive today, who is a democrat, could carry someone, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, partially my home state.

Q: What happened? Clinton is elected and assumes office in January 1993.

BLINKEN: I was asked to go down to Little Rock, Arkansas for a chat. I had a chat with then vice president-elect Gore. Al asked me whether I would like to do anything in government. I said, "Absolutely." He knew of my interest. He knew I had run for office, and he knew I cared. He said, "What would you like to do?" I said, "Anything, as long as it isn't Washington." That was the start of ending up being the United States ambassador. I thought Washington would be difficult. It would not be a friendly place, in terms of party politics. Many of my friends said that I was crazy, because the power is in Washington, and no place else. Of course, two or three years later, they asked how I knew it was going to be so unpleasant. But, anyway, that is how it started.

Q: *You were the ambassador to Belgium from 199?*

BLINKEN: The end of 1993, through the end of 1998.

Q: *When you were nominated, how did you prepare yourself for your confirmation hearing?*

BLINKEN: Well, first of all, you have to go back in time. You are asked, what administration and what countries you may be interested in. On three occasions, I was given a list of 10 or 12 countries. There were multiple countries, but in each case, I picked out Latin American countries, where I had some business and social experience. The last list was Belgium, which is the only country I didn't know, but was a western European country, so I put it down as a choice. A month went by, and the phone rang one day. On the voice mail, he said, "Mr. Blinken, the president of the United States." Bill Clinton got on the phone. I think I was one of the very few that he personally called, which was quite something. We had a conversation about political matters for a while. Then, he asked me, quite formally, to be his ambassador. He said, "It's a very important decision. You would have to change your life, and move overseas." I said, "Mr. President, am I allowed to think about it?" He said, "Of course, it's a very big decision." I said, "Thank you, I have, and I accept."

Q: *For your confirmation, did you have any problems?*

BLINKEN: No. The State Department and the other departments involved do a superb job. My firm had had offices in Europe. I ran all the western states.

Q: *Well, you were saying that the State Department had well-prepared you, both for your confirmation and for going out. In what manner?*

BLINKEN: In a number of manners: (1) everybody goes to what they call "charm school" for two weeks.

Q: *That's the ambassadorial...*

BLINKEN: The ambassadorial seminar, where they teach you a great deal of what you cannot do, and they teach you quite a bit of what you can do. But, at the same time, either a month before, or even afterwards, you are also working with the desk officer at State Department for that country, wherever you are going. They really supply you with all the background, historically on the country, and the relationship with the United States and other countries, and with current policy and the people there. So, you are well prepared as far as knowledge. What you are not prepared for (and you either have it or you don't), and I think it's the most important thing - when you arrive at post, how you take charge, in what manner you take charge, how you decide... because there is so much to do, how you decide on your own priorities, as you see it benefiting the United States and our interest, whatever that may be. Also, how you deport yourself, particularly when you are a

political appointee, and not a career officer. I had always worked with an open door in my office. I continued that at post. I remember when I got to post, the first day, when you are meeting hundreds of people, trying to get your residence organized, and you have a whole new life... The first thing I did, though I couldn't sleep a wink on the plane the night before due to obvious reasons of excitement, was I went to the cafeteria for lunch with the staff. I went to the cafeteria, instead of going to residence or someplace else, every day for the five years I was there, unless I had some other pressing business.

Q: Well, while you were going through the ambassadorial seminar and working the corridors, what was your impression of working with the Foreign Service? I have done a lot of interviews of both Foreign Service and of non-foreign service. One thing is that some politically appointed ambassadors come in with a big chip on their shoulder about the Foreign Service, which are sometimes justified, but it also seems to be an awful lot of wasted energy and time.

BLINKEN: I think it's totally wasted energy. I went in with the idea that a career foreign service officer knows a lot more than I will ever know. The people I have met at State, during my briefings and preparation for confirmation, were bright, sensitive, many of them very world traveled, much more so than most people in the United States. You should not try to compare private sector and the public sector because it's apples and oranges. You take it for what it is, and you try to do the best job you can do, and help the people in your embassy work together, to define your goals, and do what you need to do to meet those goals. I'll tell a little anecdote later about the only time I ever gave an order in the embassy. I never had to give an order. It wasn't necessary, discuss things with intelligent people, and they come to the right decision. I know a number of my friends were coming out of the private sector and did not go in with that attitude. Instead, they went in with the attitude that they are the boss and they know better than anybody else. It doesn't work, in terms of their having a decent time at post, and it doesn't work in terms of serving the United States.

As a matter of fact, it was at the end of my second year, I was quite concerned with the fact that too many State Department people, with years of experience, were being terminated because they were not making the next grade at State Department. It was a shame because, for instance, minister councilors, when I was there. At one point, I think there were openings for 16 minister councilors and 300 people in the State Department applying for it. Of those, many of them were in their last year. If they didn't make it, it's up or out, the same as in the military. I wrote Warren Christopher a letter, and I wrote Al Gore, and said, "These are truly the most cooperative people I've ever worked with," both in terms of knowledge, the way they handle themselves and a willingness to work their job, not ours. That's why I had a great experience. Some people tell me I'm lucky because I was blessed with an embassy with a staff of the best and brightest. But, I can't think it's any different from any of the other embassies.

Q: Sometimes the personalities clash, but basically, we both agree, it's a waste of effort to fight this system. In the long run, the Foreign Service is there. If your ambassador

looks good, they look good.

BLINKEN: I remember a very funny stance. I was told that you get to pick your DCM (deputy chief of mission) and your secretary. Your DCM, and you will be given a list of five people, and you interview them, and this, that and the other thing. This is while I'm at school. They said, "We would like you to meet with your DCM." I said, "I thought you get to pick your DCM." They said, "Well, this person has been trained for the job and just got out of DCM school." I said, "Fine, I'll meet this person tomorrow." I met the person tomorrow, a woman by the name of Lange Schermerhorn. We spent many hours at lunch together. She was bright, and she was certainly knowledgeable, served all over the world. It was an enjoyable meeting. I went home that night and I said to my wife, "I met with this person and she's terrific," and everything else. My wife said, "Well, did you tell her you look forward to working with her, or anything like that?" I said, "No, I didn't do anything." She said, "Well, you know, use your instincts. You can interview other people." I said, "I told you, they picked this one out?" She said, "Why don't you call her and tell her?" We were still in Washington. I saw her the next day, and I said, "I just want to tell you that I look forward to working with you over the next few years. I think it will be terrific, and my being a good ambassador will depend upon whether my DCM gets to become an ambassador, because they will have done a good job. It will reflect, not so much on me, but more on you." She thanked me, and said, "I was going to say something to you yesterday, but I thought it was inappropriate, my brother is one of your partners, which he was, at the firm I was in, but I didn't know. Anyway, Lange was my DCM for three years, at the end of which time; it was time for her to move. I wanted to keep her for a while, and was able to keep her for, I think, an extra year, over the protest of the undersecretary, who I didn't get along with, for management. I think it was the only time I called the White House and asked for a favor. Other people did it all the time. But, Lange stayed on and was made our ambassador to Djibouti. So, I knew I did a good job, and of course, I knew she always did a good job.

Q: I have a great fondness for Lange. She was the vice consul in the consular section, when I was consul general in Saigon, 1969 to 1970.

BLINKEN: Those were the famous years when I'm not sure who worked for the CIA, who worked for military, and who worked for the State Department. I think even Holbrooke was there, at that point, swaning around.

Q: We had a whole mafia there.

BLINKEN: Absolutely.

Q: Before you went out to Belgium, did you have, a shopping list of things that you were either told, or you thought, of things that should be done while you were there?

BLINKEN: I would say no that I didn't have any really concrete ideas about what to do, but I did sense that because Belgium was our ninth largest trading partner, and our third

largest surplus in foreign trade in this country, and because there were upwards of 1,500 corporations there, my main involvement would probably be on the business side, which of course, it turned out to be. That wasn't really formed until I got there. You really have to get to the place and see what goes on. It also depends on what the crisis of the week is. From my understanding, if you are in Great Britain, or France, or Germany, and depending on your point of view, you may have more of a choice because in those three countries, our government speaks directly to our opposite numbers in the government, bypassing often, the embassy.

Q: This was my impression.

BLINKEN: So, that the ambassador is... I don't want to say a hotel keeper, because that is totally unfair, but the ambassador has, in a sense, more time to do things, other than State Department to foreign ministry. In Belgium, we did both, but of course, Belgium was easy in a sense that it votes with us more at the UN than any country, except Israel. It's been a support of ours in every military endeavor that this country has taken on. I can give a couple examples of this a little later.

Q: What was your reading on the political situation in Belgium?

BLINKEN: You've got a country that is linguistically between the Flemish speakers in the north, and the French speakers in the south, and a bilingual Brussels region, so it is three regions. The Brussels region has both Flemish and French-speaking people. The net result is that because the linguistic divide is a strong cultural one, beside just linguistic, people tend not to learn the other language of the country, but English. So, most Belgians speak English. Even the French speakers will speak English, where, if you cross the border into France, 10 minutes away from the border town, a French speaker in France will try to speak English. The Belgians also consider us... there wasn't a month that went by, where it was brought to my attention that the U.S. is considered the country that saved them, liberated them, in two world wars. We did have the commemoration, the 50th anniversary of both the liberation of Belgium and the 50th anniversary celebration of the Battle of Bastogne. I was there.

But, as another example, Memorial Day in this country, which is coming up next week, as we sit here today, the question is what picnic or barbecue or party you are going to. In Belgium, on Saturday, the question is which of the two cemeteries you are going to, Henri Chapelle, Ardennes Cemetery, each, at the end of World War II, held nearly 20,000 Americans in it, more than any cemetery in the world, outside of the United States. The ceremonies there are incredible, 10,000 to 15,000 people go to each, 99 percent Belgians, grandparents, parents, grandchildren, great grandchildren, all the incumbents. The old veterans are there with their uniforms and their flags, hundreds of them, a few less, obviously, every year, since they are in their seventies and eighties, hundreds of wreaths are laid, speeches are made, the ambassador, obviously, the King's representative, government people. At the end of the ceremony, which is on a Saturday, there is a flyover by American planes, with a missing man formation, and Taps is played. Then the bands

play both national anthems at the ceremony. On Sunday, we go to a tiny little cemetery, 368 graves, again, an American cemetery, 5,000 or 6,000 people jam into it, and the ceremony is the same, with the flyovers and the bands, except at the end of that ceremony in Waregem, Belgium, the children of the local school sing our national anthem. They don't even know their own. They sing our national anthem. They have done it every year, since 1919. It's Flanders Field Cemetery, from World War I. That is the strength of the relationship between our two countries. You have the political one, standing for two world wars, and you have the economic one, because basically 76 percent of GDP is trade related in Belgium, so there are very close ties with the United States. In fact, the largest Ford Motor assembly plant in the world, including the United States, is in Belgium, which is the second most productive Ford plant. You go to every major American corporation, and most of the Pringles, for that part of the world, Proctor and Gamble makes in Belgium, but, Kodak, IBM, and EVS. The list goes on.

Q: Well, we are speaking on various levels, but on the business level, what was the climate for business? I watch French television every night, and we get the news where I live. It's not a terribly receptive climate to foreign investment, in a way, because of the work relationship, it's sort of a socialist, and anti-big business.

BLINKEN: I understand what you are saying. Belgium is quite the contrary. Belgium, because it relies on trade - remembering, it is a country of only 10 million people, the size of the state of Maryland. Business is very important. In fact, when I first got there and delivered my credentials to King Albert of Belgium, in the Royal Palace (the King talks with you for a few minutes), his only concern was: How does Belgium get more U.S. investment in that country? So, I said, "Your majesty, I'll certainly look at it, and talk with them in the embassy." The answer was simple. The answer was that they needed laws that made foreign investment more attractive to American companies. When I got there, the total U.S. investment in Belgium was approximately 10 or 11 billion dollars. Working with the prime minister and the finance minister, I showed them how creating and changing two very basic business laws would result in Belgium having, if not, a real advantage, certainly a psychological advantage over other countries in western Europe. Both laws were passed by the government. In the period of the next four years, U.S. investment in Belgium doubled to 22 billion dollars, mostly because of these changes in the laws. This was a great example of the ambassador understanding the country he works in and the government, and the people he is working with, in those countries, to create something, not just for the United States and our companies, but also [something] good for Belgium. Of course, they were overjoyed.

Q: Of course, this is where your business experience comes. What did these laws pertain to, particularly?

BLINKEN: Well, one dealt with creating a service and call centers and distribution centers, which in effect gave a substantial tax benefits to a foreign corporation, who would use Belgium as a distribution center, or a call center, or something like that. We also had the government pass a reform where a corporation wishing to come in under the

fiscal regime for foreign investors would, within a period of one month or less, be told what its tax rate would be for the next 10 years. It was an enormous boon to their brilliant foreign investment, and it was an enormous boon to our countries. I was a bit disappointed that neither State, nor even Commerce focused on what our companies really like, and how you go about achieving it for our companies. In return, there should be something for the host country. It can't be one sided. I remember I was there for one week, and a fellow called me from Monsanto Chemical, which had a new product that it fed to cows, giving them 10 percent more milk production. The fellow said that it has been passed by the EU veterinary thing, and it's legal in the United States, and the Belgian government must approve this product. They can't not approve the product. Well, the Belgian government wasn't approving the product, and I said to the fellow, "I don't believe that you tell a foreign government that they must do something." I said, "I think the approach might be better if you said, 'You have a problem,' which they did in Belgium. There was too much manure. They don't know how to get rid of it, and too much, whatever the gases are from it.

Q: Methane, I think.

BLINKEN: Right, and what to do with this stuff. I said, "Your approach to the government... instead of saying that you must do this because you get 10 percent more, (they didn't need any more milk) you say, 'If you use this product you can get the same milk production on 10 percent less cows, with the result, you can cut down on all the waste products. It's environmentally good also.'" He thought that was a wonderful idea and went back to the drawing board. But, too many times, American companies did not understand, and there wasn't the expertise, either in Commerce or at State. Real business people did not understand that you can't tell a foreign national what to do even if it's legal. They have many ways to hold you up, as we have many ways to hold progress up here. So, if you do it in a cooperative sense, working with it, doesn't always work.

At one point, under instruction from State, I went to the minister of agriculture to argue that in their vote at the European Union, Belgium should vote to allow U.S. hormone beef into Belgium and into Europe. In an argument three years later, that is still going on. The EU medical review had shown that there were no deleterious effects, short or long term, from hormone fed beef. Therefore, they had no problem with it, and it was going to be voted on. I said this to the minister with the hopes that Belgium would help lead the way to allow U.S. hormone fed beef in Europe, which was very important to our ranchers. The minister said something very simply, he said, "Alan, I love my job. Belgium produces 30 percent more beef than it consumes, we export it. If I let your beef in here on top of that, I won't have a job." I said, "Thank you very much Mr. Minister." I cabled Washington and said, "This is the fact of life." You can't tell them whether it's legal or not, the guy likes his job. There are lots of incidents like that.

I think another thing an ambassador has to do is, there is a rule on Wall Street: the fundamental rule is "Know your customer," which means don't take risks that they don't want, know what they do want. I remember go to the verenigde kamers for the first time

to have my courtesy call on the prime minister, Jean-Luc Dehaene. We got to his office, and unlike the United States, and most other countries, no security. It was 5:30 or 6:00, at the prime minister's official working office, there were no guards at the door, and we walk in. There was no secretary either. We walked down the hall and heard voices. She said, "That's the prime minister. I know his voice." She said, "What do we do?" I said, "I don't know, we have an appointment. We've already been sitting here for a while. Why don't you cough loudly?" So, she coughed loudly, and suddenly you hear, "Oh, they must be here." Out comes the prime minister and his chief of staff. He says, "Mr. Ambassador, how are you?" Now, remember this is a courtesy call. "How are you and how are you, it's so nice to have you, and it's so nice to be here." We're walking into the prime minister's office and I said, "Mr. Prime Minister, I've come here to discuss something very serious with you, at which point, his chief of staff turned white. We sat down, he grabs a pad, and Lange, my deputy chief of mission turns likewise white and is looking at me [thinking] 'what is going on here?'" and I said, "Mr. Prime Minister, it has come to my attention that you are concerned that in the world cup matches, in six months, in the United States, Belgium will be playing Morocco in Florida, and because it is hot in Florida, you think Morocco will have the advantage. I've come here today, Mr. Prime Minister, to tell you that you are wrong, that what you don't realize is that in June, it often rains in Florida, and if it rains, Belgium will have the advantage. The prime minister and I were great friends from that day until the day I left, and I still see him today, when I go over there.

This also brings two things up: (1) as I said in the country team meeting, which is a meeting of your senior executives in the embassy, and at my first one, I said, "I only insist upon one thing. They looked at me like, 'uh, oh, here comes the new guy on the block,' I insist on a sense of humor, because there will be some difficult days and difficult times, and you have to have a sense of humor to go through everything, and it will make it more fun," (2) Learn and know your client, learning the people in the government, do your homework, find out what they like, find out what they don't like. This allowed me twice, when the United States needed to call the prime minister to tell his office that we wanted to see him, and have the office, on both occasions say, "Come over directly now." They had instructions from the prime minister that the American ambassador is okay, and if I needed to see him... Of course, the second one was when we needed some help in Iraq, and I went over to the prime minister, having said no to the Department of Defense... they wanted to send people over for three days... refusing them country clearance, saying that I think I can do a better job with the Belgium government than some undersecretary, Assistant Secretary of Defense, because they didn't know the people. So, having refused them, and having caused a big stir back in Washington, they finally settled the list of four things they wanted in a 10-page draft. They would hope the Belgian government would do one of four things. I took the 10-page draft and wrote out the four items. I saw the prime minister with my deputy chief of mission and with my military attaché. After we chatted for a minute or so, probably about his local football team, or soccer, as we say in this country. My wife and I would go to games with him. I said, "This is why I'm here, we have a problem with Iraq, Saddam Hussein is a bad ass, we need your help." That's exactly what I said. He said, "Alan, what do you want?" I said, "Here are four things." I had a list, four little handwritten things: one was a medical corps, one was moving assets

with their squadron C130s, I forget, one was a logistics unit, and one was one of Belgium's frigates. The prime minister looked at it and said to me, "I will give you the frigate this afternoon." I may be incorrect, it may be a destroyer, and not a frigate, but it is one or the other. I've been on one with him. I went back to the office knowing that, of course, I should have called the foreign minister first or the ministry of defense first, but because of my relationship with the prime minister, he really decided, not his other cabinet members. I knew where to go and I knew how to do it. He did it. Ten minutes later I called the minister of defense, and he said, "I've already had a call from the prime minister's office, come on over, we're doing it." By the time I called them later in the day, because the foreign minister was busy, he had already received instructions to write up the minutes for a special council of ministers meeting late that night, which would approve it, and it was done. But that tells you, in a sense... I'm not saying you can do that in every country, but if you know who you are dealing with and what they are like, and do your homework, it makes your job easier, and the embassy's job easier.

Q: Well now, with a country that is split along linguistic lines, and cultural lines and all, did you find yourself having to tread carefully, that you were giving due consideration to this, or could you sort of be above that?

BLINKEN: I did something that the embassy cautioned me against, but I did it, and it worked out well. I did just the opposite. Now, the ambassador has two jobs, he has his day time job, from whenever in the morning, until 6:00 at night, and then he has a night time job, because we average going out twenty-six, seven, eight nights a month, entertaining 7,000 people a year. We mixed the linguistic communities and the regions at our home for dinners, lunches, or receptions. We didn't pay attention to it. I represent the United States in the kingdom of Belgium, so we mixed the people, and they respected that. I put together the three regions that had never talked together on business affairs. This was how to improve their business dealings with U.S. corporations. They didn't like each other, but they came to the American Embassy, we lunch, and we did this once a month. It helped. That result is I think our embassy, and I think this ambassador got everybody's respect for doing what was right, and not what might have been easier and more politic at that point. I think I set a different tone for the relationship, because frankly, we just ignored something that to us seemed not really trivial, but not as important as other issues.

Q: How did you find, on the business side, the American Chamber of Commerce and the business people? Were they responsive, or did they sort of need to be brought up to be a little more diplomatic?

BLINKEN: No, not at all. In fact, it's interesting that you mention it. The American Chamber in Belgium is probably the most proactive Chamber in the world, because it consists of, not only the chamber representing the corporation, but also the EU committee of the Chamber representing all U.S. corporations to the European union in Brussels. So, it is the most active. What we did, and what we figured out right away, was that the chamber was always very aggressive in its dealings with the government. We worked out

a system where I would sit once or twice a year with the Chamber. I went to all the chamber events, and spoke there all the time. We worked out with them a plan of action of what American corporations did, what were their first priorities, what did they want to accomplish. This was so the Chamber and the American embassy spoke with one voice. It was slightly different, mine was a little more politic, a little more gentle, but experience as far as business. They would go in and hammer on me, on the government, and it worked very well. So, each year, we didn't take 10 or 15 things, we picked two or three things. That is why when I spoke before about coordination center and call center legislation, and the tax regime, it wasn't just my idea, it was a combination of the chamber. We finally got it accomplished, but it was what the Chamber, their corporate members wanted, and what we both pressured for together.

Q: How did you find, during this 1993 to 1998 period, the role of Belgium in the growing maturity of the European Union and the tendency to be competitive, or opposed to American investment, and all that?

BLINKEN: Well, of course, Belgium wants to be competitive, it wants American investment. In Belgium, it is a total, in every regard, supporter of the European Union because Belgium's strength comes from a more integrated, single Europe. Belgium is a tiny country. Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg are really tiny... they have a vote, but not a lot of sway. But, as things become more harmonized, whether it's taxes, whether it's foreign policy, whether it is now the euro, which is in effect now, Belgium gets it's strength. So, they are a great supporter of the European Union. In fact, during my tenure there, Jean-Luc Dehaene was put up for head of the EU, and had everybody's agreement, except at the end, the Brits decided he couldn't have it. But, that had nothing to do with Jean-Luc Dehaene or Belgium, it had to do with the spat the Brits were having with the French. But, of course, that was great for Jean-Luc Dehaene because he called for elections, and he was reelected without any problem. But, Belgium is a total supporter of the EU, of free trade, all over the place, because it depends on all of them.

Q: When you talk about free trade, I would have thought the EU was of the mind, "Yes, but..." Then, you move into the agriculture field.

BLINKEN: People say that, and it is "Yes, but..." First of all, the Belgians are a lot better. We not only got Belgium a telephone system open to competitive choices, but I was part of an effort which ended in the success of Ameritech and the United States buying 49 percent of Belgium's telephone company, Telecom. No, but the Belgians are quite open to foreign ownership. They are quite open to investment. They don't have, for instance, an audiovisual. They certainly don't have the prejudices for whatever reasons that the French have. They are a much more open business society than Germany. I guess one could say that the closest thing to Belgium in Europe, again, a smaller country, is the Netherlands, which is also somewhat similar. Belgium is called the country of compromising. It does, but it works very well. In fact, Dick Holbrooke talked to me when he was working on the Bosnia business, and wanted to know more about Belgium, because it is just what Bosnians and Dick hoped that might take place in Cyprus. That is a

federation of three regions where there is one of the regions and two languages, and a center region being the capital region, which is bilingual. They hope to model that same with the Greeks, the Turks, and Cyprus, and of course, in Bosnia. It works very well in Belgium. Belgium, of course, historically, became independent in 1830, from the Netherlands, and not in a revolution that caused any war, or fighting, or bloodshed, but at an opera, where an aria was sung about freedom, and everybody jumped up and threw their hats in the air, ran in the street. The next day, Belgium was a country. It's a very peace loving country, but it's a country that has been more than willing, whether it was Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, or Haiti, to help. Belgium was the first country to help us in Europe, then Haiti. They will play their part. They are very supportive of us.

Q: Did you find that, you being the medium to be using Belgium as a way to deal with the European Union, because you have the French, who are traditionally very nationalistic, and the Germans, who sort of snuggle behind the French, but use it for the same purpose?

BLINKEN: They're coming out now, so to speak. I remember speaking to both Warren and Madeleine about it, because obviously, as much as the French are good allies, the French are also some of our most irritating problems. I suggested to Madeleine that we attempt to, in effect, co-opt some smaller western European nations, the Belgians, the Luxembourgs, the Netherlands, maybe some of the Nordics, the small countries, and sort of out flank the French on certain issues. If there was an issue at EU, which there is all the time, our ambassador is in there giving our point of view and what we would like to see done. But, of course, the orders for the Belgian vote come from the Belgian government. So, I would work on EU matters directly with whomever it is in the Belgian government, and the same is true for NATO matters. Of course, they're taken up, and voted upon, or acted upon, at their respective institutions.

Q: How did you find working in Belgium, where you've got at least two other, maybe three other American ambassadors? How many American ambassadors?

BLINKEN: Two. You have the NATO and you have your EU ambassadors, both were fellows who helped me a great deal. They had been experienced; they served under Jimmy Carter. One was Stu Eisenstadt, who then progressed from there to Commerce to Deputy Secretary of Treasury, and Bob Hunter. They helped me a bit. I always kidded them because I would always say in speeches about EU or NATO ambassadors that they were in Belgium as an accident of geography, which they were, because NATO headquarters that had been in France, and EU just happened to be in Belgium. They worked in buildings with institutions. They were not involved at all, obviously with the Belgian government. That wasn't their playbook, and even to a lesser extent, with the Belgian social community. But, they were good friends. With some of us, there have been strains among some ambassadors in the past, mostly between career ambassadors. We were three political appointees. They had a lot of work to do. We got along fine, and of course, since they were friends, I could always needle them and remind them that when the president came, or anybody else came, who we were meeting at the airport, I stood

first, and my car was the only one that flew flags on it. But, they took it with good humor. We worked on quite a few things together.

If you want an example of something, which somebody might find amusing, historically, there was a time when Warren Christopher was coming to Belgium. He had been negotiating down in the Sinai, and he was going to spend a day and a half in Belgium, and then fly to Moscow to talk with Primakov. We heard about this, a month or a month and a half before the arrival. Bob Hunter sent cables saying he really must meet with all the new partnership for peace countries, and it's the most important thing that the United States can do. So, he'll give them a cocktail party, and a dinner, and he should leave with all these people. It's more important than anything else in the world. Stu Eisenstadt said the most important thing in the world is EU and EU's relationship with the United States and he must meet directors general of one through twenty-three, and he will have a cocktail party and a dinner for him. This is the most important thing the United States is doing. Our embassy asked me what I was going to do. I said, "I don't need any face time with the secretary. We know each other, and he knows the government here, and we have no issues at this moment. So, meanwhile, Hunter and Eisenstadt are upping the ante, they are starting to make calls to their friends at the State Department. They are going, as they call back channels. They are each trying to cut the other's throat. Finally, with a week to go, my DCM gets me, and this is, as I mentioned before, the only order I ever gave in the five years that I was there. She said, "These two guys are fighting it out, and the secretary, and your embassy is the big one here anyway. People want to know that you are going to see the secretary, and you have to ask for face-time." So, I'm sitting there, and I thought about it, and said, "Lange, it's not necessary, but if you really want, send the following telegram: Have regular Saturday tennis game. Would you like to join? Blinken." She said, "I can't send that to the Secretary of State." I said, "That is an order." That is the only order I gave. I said, "So, you show on the cable that the ambassador drafted it, that he approved it, that he sent it, and that he signed it, and you're off the hook." You can tell anybody you want at State that it was me, and you want nothing to do with it, and off goes the telegram. Now, with two days to go, Eisenstadt and Hunter are about to declare war on each other. There is practically blood in their eyes. They are trying to get Christopher, and nobody has heard anything from Christopher. Suddenly, a cable comes to the embassy, which simply reads, "Size 10 shoes and a racquet. Christopher." We played tennis, and he didn't see the others. Know your customer. Can we have a time out for a minute?

Q: *Yes.*

This is tape two, side one, with Alan Blinken. I'm wondering if you can describe again, for the period you were there, the role of the King in the Belgian government?

BLINKEN: Really, no different from other parliamentary monarchies. Like the UK, the king has a moral suasion, is well respected, technically agrees to major pieces of legislation, technically approves the results of elections, and picks the prime minister, though it is done by ballot, but is in effect, a figurehead with much beloved in the

country, and respected, but with no actual powers.

Q: Well, it's a relatively small country, as compared to Great Britain, where it's the larger country, and it has this whole court, and all that, which sort of acts between the queen and the body politic. But, I was wondering whether by being more, sort of, intimate, that the King would play a more advisory role, or not?

BLINKEN: Not really. For instance, the King only speaks publicly, either once or twice a year. He speaks at the occasion, July 21st, of Independence Day, and I think also gives a Christmas message. Otherwise, the King never speaks publicly about any issues.

Q: So, is he briefed by his prime minister?

BLINKEN: Well, the King has a full staff of political, economic advisors and others. The King and the Crown Prince, Philippe, do travel on behalf of the Kingdom, particularly on issues of trade and investment, so they do make many, many trips a year.

Q: As far as some of the issues, I was wondering whether Belgium still has a role, or are we interested in dealing with the Congolese, or Zaire, or whatever it is?

BLINKEN: Either, fortunately or unfortunately, very much so. During my tenure at post, what was then Zaire was in effect looked over, and looked after in the international community by France, Belgium and the United States. The United States, as the super power, or Belgium, as a previous colonial power, and still a country with a number of residents and businesses there, and France, because it's French speaking. The same is true of Burundi and Rwanda. Both are part of the same Great Lakes region under Belgian colonial control. We had the terrible massacres and Rwanda and Burundi in the late 1990s, civil war in what is the Congo today, which brings into play, four or five other countries in the region, because arguably the Congo is the richest, untapped source of resources in all of Africa; gold, diamonds, many other resources. Fortunately, since independence, the governments have been able to strip the commercial part of the country and the politic of many of its assets, but not the assets that are in the ground. So, that has been going on today. You have a country of diverse languages, country of diverse cultures, I believe there are 26 provinces, all with governors, with different tribal heritages. Belgium probably knows it, or does know it, better than any other country on earth. The United States, during my tenure, was a little slow to listen to the Belgians, about what was or could take place in Burundi, Rwanda, and Zaire. I think we have learned that there still is no real, in my opinion, foreign policy, or people to push the needs and basically rescue that Great Lakes region from the conflict that has been going on for years and years and years.

Q: Well, during the massacres... I can't remember whether its Rwanda or Burundi, we were getting ready to send in assistance, with the Canadians taking the lead. Did you get involved in that?

BLINKEN: Yes, we were involved enough. The Canadians were there with the Belgians, as UN peacekeepers. The Belgians saw problems coming, and then with the assassination of the Rwandan president – the plane was shot down – and really civil unrest had started. Ten Belgian troops, UN peacekeepers, which there has been no incident in Belgian history, in recent years, as troublesome as this, were cut into little pieces. Belgium had left the UN contingent warnings that civil strife would turn out. The rest of the world, including the United States, really didn't listen. That resulted in half a million people dying, and very short people there were massacred. The French tried to intervene by taking the airport in Rwanda, and tried to bring some stability, but it was far too late, and far too little. The United States' position was that, before the French took the airport, we were studying the situation, and decided it wouldn't do any good to send the troops. So, it looked like the United States might be willing to help with airlift. It was doing a study when the Belgian prime minister called me one Saturday, and tipped me off, to tell the United States that the French were going to take the airport the next morning, in Rwanda. I called the State Department and Department of Defense, on that Saturday. They said that that was impossible that it would take four or five days, logistically, and that the United States was working on it, but it would be a week or more. At 7:30 the next morning, the French had taken the airport. The United States' intervention then was not likely. I would guess under the President's administration that it was less likely, because I'm not sure they know where Rwanda, Burundi, or the Congo are.

Q: Also, did you have the feeling that while you were there, the Somalia killing of 18 American troops and all, very early on, and actually a Bush initiative, sort of soured the Clinton administration into messing around in Africa?

BLINKEN: Well, it's a question of priorities. We did have our involvement, and still do, for better or for worse, in Iraq, we still had an involvement, for better or for worse, in the Balkans. As far as the Somali internal conflict went, having had some experience with African Medical Research Foundation, during that period, yes, we lost 18 Americans out of that helicopter, and some were dragged to death in the streets of Mogadishu. However, the fact is that we saved from starvation and deprivation and internal strife, one million people in Somalia. So, where a lot of Americans look at that as a terrible event, I don't. I look at that as the United States helped save one million people. The general in charge of our... I have to remember his name, because I just saw him on a list, efforts in Somalia then became the military advisor to Bob Hunter at NATO. I always thought he did a great job. The fact that you lose troops in any conflict is unfortunate, but there is a risk in serving in any of the armed services.

Q: I think this is one of the concerns, that our military has become too fragile.

BLINKEN: There are certainly risks, and even Colin Powell was against our involvement in Iraq in 1991.

Q: Yes. What about Bosnia? We were, maybe the word is unfair, but "dithered" on Bosnia for quite a while, while the UN was trying to do something in Bosnia while,

particularly, the Serbs were massacring Muslims. How did that play in Belgium, and were you involved?

BLINKEN: Well, we were involved. Obviously, any ambassador of Western Europe at that point was involved with his host government, in trying to engender support for overall policy. It's not clear that the U.S., during the Bush time or after, had a vigorous policy, but there did come a time, after Congress had allocated money, for our efforts in Bosnia, that the same problem existed in Croatia. There was no question of Congress supporting our troops in Croatia. They weren't going to do it. Western European embassies looked around for a country to spearhead the peacekeeping activities in Croatia. Fortunately, we were able to have a dialogue with the Belgians and they agreed to lead the peacekeeping efforts in Croatia, not dissimilar to Bosnia. In fact, Jacques Klein, a State Department person, was sent in as UN chief representative in Croatia. But, the Belgians were the lead military force. Jacques is now number two, and basically running things in Bosnia. But, the Belgians did a wonderful job. Croatia was also interesting, because numbers two and three, there were, I think, Russia and Jordan, and I think the Russians were more interested in selling gasoline, and other black market things, than they were patrolling the streets. But, the Croatian thing worked out very well. The Belgians did lose one corporal to a crazy person. It wasn't politically oriented. Fortunately, I had to go... and this speaks to our military, to the airport, when his body came back with the chief of staff and the military of the Belgians, and the head of the army. The head of chief of staff was Naval Admiral Herteleer, I believe. Of course, the family was there, and this was a terrible thing. It was the only life loss there. The parents said, "Why did this have to happen?" There was no answer because he had been shot by a madman. It had nothing to do with the war. He shot three people, and one happened to be this Belgian corporal. I said to the admiral after, "I'm sorry you had to go through that." He said, "Ambassador, it's no different from your army of people having to remember that serving in the Army, or the Navy, the Air Force, or the Marines, they serve at some risk. It's not a job without risk, but people tend to forget it. They forget it here, and they certainly have forgotten it in your country."

Q: Did you get involved in the negotiations that brought Belgium into the Croatian peacekeeping effort?

BLINKEN: Definitely. We, the western European ambassadors were visiting with their host nations to see if we could enlist (1) support; and (2) somebody to run the thing. The Belgians were, again, very forthcoming. The Prime Minister agreed that the Belgians felt they had, as I said before, a real European responsibility. I felt this was a European responsibility. Even though they had some troops committed to Bosnia, they were, I wouldn't say happy to do it, but they were more than cooperative in footing troops. The military agreed, the council of ministers and the prime minister agreed, and it was done. There were certain guarantees. They wanted certain NATO guarantees about support, both in terms of air power support and support in terms of extrication in case the thing went haywire. But, it never did, and they did a superb job.

Q: Well, did the fact that finally the United States committed itself to air power, which leads to the Dayton Accords; did that give reassurance to the Belgians?

BLINKEN: The Belgians would not have participated and run the Croatian exercise without the support, knowing there was a guarantee of very immediate, rapid response in terms of air power, and in terms of ground support if they had to extricate themselves in certain circumstances. So, that, it was in effect. NATO guarantee, it was just as much effect American guarantee.

Q: Well, was there a certain period of unease on the part of the Belgians, about the fact that the United States was sort of saying, "This is a European problem, let the Europeans handle this?"

BLINKEN: I think the Belgians are a little more realistic about the role of the western European countries in Europe than some of the other countries are. I think they understand responsibility better than they others do. That is why they have been pushing for an expanded EU, or a more powerful EU, which is basically a confederation of regions, not of national countries, but of regions. I think there is no stronger supporter of a stronger EU than the Belgians themselves.

Q: Did you find that the Belgians were looking a bit wearily at the role of France and the EU? Again, this is an American point of view, but the French seem...

BLINKEN: The Belgians have two major neighbors, and their two major trading partners, next to the United States are France and Germany. They border both countries. They do get, at times, caught in a political pincer. They get caught in a cultural pincer, because Belgium itself reflects both in the south, French culture, and in the north, Flemish, more of a German culture. During World War II, it is no secret that in the north, with the Flanders, there were many sympathizers with Nazi Germany. These were people who felt that only Germany could bring stability and control to a desperate group of nations. Where in the south, even today, they harbor enormous resentment, still the mayor of Bastogne, whose father was executed by Germans, during the Battle of the Bulge still to this day is both a minister and the mayor of Bastogne, and still refuses to shake hands with any German, even the prime minister, or foreign minister.

Q: Did you find yourself having to pussy foot through this relationship?

BLINKEN: No, because Germany and France were not my business. So, I had to let it play out. I remember there was a point in time when Renault, who had a large manufacturing plant, assembly plant in Belgium...

Q: This is automobile?

BLINKEN: Automobile. I should add that Belgium produces more cars per capita than any country in the world. More Volvos are made in Belgium than they are in Sweden.

Renault finally decided to close the Belgian plant. It was unprofitable. They had been losing money for years. The Belgians went crazy. The same week, U.S. investment had doubled in Belgium. For when I arrived there, we held a press conference saying America was in Belgium forever, as an investor. The French ambassador was crazed, and called me and said, "I couldn't get an interview, and they interview you on this." I said, "That's part of the game." The British ambassador called me and said, "What's your position on Renault closing the plant?" I said, "As an American, I have no position, but as a businessman, you know you can close anything you want in the United States, whenever you want. There are no penalties or anything else." Therefore, the press had never asked me because they know the American position, which is much different than, you can't fire anybody, or close a plant anywhere in western Europe, without all kinds of penalties and remedies, and this and that. This is bit of a hindrance, by the way, to foreign investments.

Q: Off the link, you had been talking about involvement with the United Nations and international cooperation on anti-personnel mines, and all that. Could you talk about those experiences? Explain what this was.

BLINKEN: Sure. Much of the world community, because much of the press and some of the work of Princess Diana, decided, and I think wisely, for the most part, that land mines were a terrible thing. After they are laid, there are no maps, and millions and millions of innocent citizens all over the world have been maimed, killed and crippled by these things. The Belgian foreign minister, at that point... Erik Derycke was a former socialist, was in the forefront of banning the use of anti-personnel land mines. The United States, of course, was not in agreement with signing an accord to ban these things, nor was Russia or China. The United States, it should be remembered, does not manufacture them, does not sell them. On the contrary, the United States has spent more money than all the other nations in the world to de-mine places in Africa, in Asia, in Europe, the Middle East, but it wouldn't sign it. The big international conference was held in Belgium. I forget, but one hundred something were willing to sign the treaty, but not the United States, but sort of makes it a non-event. The Belgium foreign minister was a little annoyed, but anyway, called up our office and asked me to come over. He wanted to discuss the United States' distempered position as he felt that not signing the anti-land mine accord. I went over to his office with a military attaché and deputy chief of mission. He was there with... I can't remember, but I believe we met also with the defense minister and some other players. There was a discussion. I reminded him that Belgium was in violation of land mine treaty anyway, because as part of NATO, anti-personnel land mines are placed around anti-tank mines, which NATO uses. He didn't think that was very important, but what he thought was important was that the United States wouldn't sign the treaty. It was only the right thing to do. In a sense, it was the right thing to do. I said to the minister and the defense minister that I would be happy to sign the anti-land mine treaty on behalf of the United States right then in his office, if he would take care of one detail. Of course, there was a smile on his face. Of course, he thought that maybe I knew something coming from Washington, because he had run the conference, and maybe I was giving them a signal and they were all excited. He said, "What's the one thing?" I said, "Simply, replace our 37,000 troops on the north/south Korean border with

37,000 Belgian troops.” That was the end of the discussion. The meeting was over.

Q: Because, for the record, we have had for years, a defensive line, heavily dependent on land mines.

BLINKEN: That’s the defense.

Q: And nowhere else.

BLINKEN: That is our main defense. The United States also had other problems with the landmine treaty, because there was no form of verification. The United States doesn’t make them and sell them. So, the United States really is sort of a neutral party, but of course, any international treaty needs the United States’ as a signature to that, to be a factor.

Q: Was the anti-globalization movement getting strong within Belgium, by the time you had left. This is against multinationals. This is the sort of thing you have been encouraging.

BLINKEN: No, the Belgians, on the contrary, were all for it, because they are part of it now, and they exist not on internal business, but they exist on trade and globalization. So, they certainly have no sympathy for this “anti-globalization.” The fact is it is ridiculous. Globalization, whatever that means, has been around forever, whether it’s securities. I always remind people that they traded spices from the far east to the west, before they even had countries or government, so globalization has always existed. The communication is so much better today, but to say you can’t have globalization, is like saying you can’t turn on television and get the news at some point.

Q: Well, what about, the government might have a stand, but how about at the universities, and sort of the floating group, that seems to be in every European place, puts on costumes and gets on it...

BLINKEN: They didn’t demonstrate in Belgium because there wouldn’t be any sympathy for it. It’s a country that understands trade. I have always likened Belgium to the old countries of the Middle East, on the Tigris and the Euphrates, to Lebanon, 30 or 40 years ago. It is a country that survives on globalization. So, there would be practically no sympathy. But, many other countries who do sign, one by one Belgium has lost its great multi-national corporations, the French, and German, and even American interest, without complaint, because they know that is the way of trade and business in the world today. You don’t see the kinds of protest, you wouldn’t see the protest on globalization in Belgium, which you would in France, or in Germany. As a matter of fact, when I was in Belgium, with the exception of some teachers strikes, and I think, some transportation workers strikes, you had fewer strikes in Belgium, even though it is more highly unionized, than Germany, or certainly France. They had very few strikes because people understood that necessity for business to continue. There was a point in time, when

Caterpillar, which had a major facility in the south of Belgium, was having a problem with unions, and they were on slow-down, and they wanted this, and they wanted that, and wanted everything. Caterpillar were having no success in negotiating. I called up the head of the steelworkers union, which was the main union in Wallonia, for Caterpillar, and asked to have dinner with him and some of the other union heads. We did have dinner, and I explained to them that even though the Caterpillar investment in Belgium was something on the order of 500 million dollars, it really meant nothing to a big multinational company like that. They had closed two plants in Scotland, I think, just the year before, because they were having union problems. They didn't even bother with it, because they could put the plant someplace else. I suggested that if the union didn't negotiate in good faith, and behave itself, that there was nothing I could do, and they would be very surprised, one morning, to wake up and see that the plants were being closed, and people paid, and that's it, goodbye. It represented one of the biggest employers in Belgium. They didn't have to believe me. Just look at the history of American companies. We don't believe the way they believe in things, in the unions in Europe. The net result was after arguing for three years, they settled the whole thing in the next 10 days. They are realists when they have to be realists, even the unions.

Q: How did you find the universities? So many of the European universities have a hard core, or sort of Marxist, or quasi-Marxist professors, getting the students out in the streets.

BLINKEN: I never saw any of that, ever. Universities are interesting there. Of course, the Belgian educational business system, like the medical system, is basically free. The universities are free, and graduate school. Some are quite excellent. Most of the schools have what they call "incubator companies" in different industries. It could be a supply tech thing, it could be virtual realty things, it could be biotech, it could be anything. So, they all tied in, to a certain extent, with the forms of the business community. Students are generally pretty good and interested. Once again, a very pragmatic country. You will find that most of the leaders and the Belgian business community, all went to school in the United States, either college or business school. Most of the government officials have visited on a State Department IVP (immigrant visa program) or on other programs, have visited the United States. The Fulbright program in Belgium combined with the Hoover program, which is like it, but only for Belgians, sends an enormous number of people who end up in the top ranks of business, academia, and government to the United States every year. Much more so, percentage wise, than any country in the world.

Q: While you were there, were there any major presidential visits?

BLINKEN: I'll go backwards with the president, but we had the Secretary of State twice a year, and the Secretary of Defense, obviously for NATO, for EU, for Commerce. We averaged, during my tenure, and I'm sure it's no different now, 61 official government visitors a day coming to Brussels. Obviously, a lot were for NATO and EU, well most were. It also brought with it a lot of congressional delegations (CODELs) as they were called. Most of them came on a Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and for some odd

reason, always ended up in Paris or London or Rome, on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. But 61 official government visitors a day kept the embassy busy and still does.

I didn't answer your question. I arrived there, I think, in early November. In January 1994, President Clinton came. It was his first official visit to Europe as president. He obviously went to school there, and traveled Europe extensively. He came to make a speech to NATO about proposing the expansion of NATO. It was an historic speech, but there were interesting things to do with that trip. The presidency was coming, and only two days before, his mother had passed away. So, the funeral was held in Little Rock, and then he got on the plane and flew to Belgium. He was going to be greeted at the airport by the King, and the Prime Minister. It was then hoped (his schedule wasn't chiseled in stone yet) he would leave the airport and drive to the palace and pay his respects back to the King, and then have a short meeting with the Prime Minister. The prime minister's meeting was arranged, but the palace meeting, after the King greeted him at the airport, was not. The White House said he didn't have time to go and see the King. The night before his arrival at our residence (I had a dinner) with Madeleine Albright and other members of the government of Belgium. Just before sitting down, the chief of staff of the foreign ministry got hold of me and said, "Can we talk for a minute?" I said, "Of course." Molly Raiser, who was our ambassador...

Q: Chief of Protocol.

BLINKEN: ...Chief of Protocol was with me, and I said, "Is there a problem?" He said, "A small problem," so we went in a side office. He said, "Mr. Ambassador, we have a problem. If the President isn't going to visit the King, the King is not going to be at the airport to greet the President." I said, "That is totally understandable. I wouldn't dream of it if I was your King either. But, let me check with the White House." Then, we were sitting down for dinner. I said to Molly the White House has said "No, because they want all the press to be about his speech the next day. They don't want to get off message, but Molly now the message is going to be, 'King snubs President, and President snubs King.'" He said, "Well, let's call the White House," so we called the White House. We got scheduling on the phone and let them know that they had a problem, since they wanted to stay on message. We let them know that all the papers in Europe tomorrow aren't going to talk about Clinton's speech, the expansion of NATO, it's going to be about the King being snubbed by the President and the President snubbing the King. So you figure it out." We hung up the phone. In two minutes, the phone rang, and in their wisdom, the White House decided that the President would go from the airport to the palace. Molly and I went into dinner and announced that "We hope it's all right with Your Majesty, but the President would like to visit His Majesty, on the way from the airport to the hotel." It was a wonderful trip. Bill Clinton was given yet one more saxophone, and the speech was a success. We nearly stayed on message, except the saxophone gift, which was done in front of the entire American community at the Conrad Hotel... The White House, once again said "Do not give him the saxophone in public. This was to be the governor, because Adolf Sax was Belgian." This is why the saxophone gift. They wanted it done in private, and they wanted to embargo the pictures for 48 hours so the press would play up

nothing but the president's speech on the expansion of NATO. When the President got to the hotel that night and said, "Okay, Alan, what's the drill," and there were 2,000 people waiting for him, and everything. I said, Well, you're going to say a few words, they will cheer you, and the band will play. Then, you have to go in a room inside where the governor of whatever province and the mayor of the town of Dingo, where Adolf Sax lived and died, will present you with this fabulous saxophone. The president said, "Well, you know, Mom died, and I've been going and going, and I'm tired, can we put it all together? Can we do it right here in front of everybody? I said, "It's fine with me, and the governors would like it, but your staff isn't going to like it." He said, "Alan, I'm the President." I said, "Mr. President, you got it." So, he greeted everybody, they cheered and the band played. I grabbed the mayor, and I didn't know which was the governor and which was the mayor, I was relatively new. I said, "Get the thing out of the box, and get up there and give it to him on stage in front of 2,000 people." They give it to him, and the place goes crazy and he thanks everybody, and goes upstairs and goes to bed. The next morning, the lead story and picture in all the newspapers was Bill Clinton getting the saxophone. We got off message. He was terrific. I was doing some work with Madeleine on some stuff to do with Bosnia.

Q: This is when she was ambassador to the United Nations.

BLINKEN: She was the UN ambassador and the President is there. It's 11:00 and we are working on something, the phone rings, and it said, "Mr. Ambassador, would you like to go for a walk with the President down to the Grande Plaza?" It's one of your great squares in Europe; the buildings are gold painted. It's terrific. I said, "Well, is he going?" They said, "Well, yes, he's taking a bunch of his staff." I said, "Look, I've got work to do. Tell him to have a nice walk." He went for a walk, and Madeleine and I continued to work. But, Bill Clinton is terrific. He doesn't care how late he stays up. When he was going from his speech on the expansion of NATO to the hotel, to address the American community, I got out first, as instructed, got to the hotel and I'm doing the warm up act with Warren Christopher for the President of the United States, who will arrive in exactly four minutes. The secret service is there, and they are counting down, "Okay, Mr. Ambassador, four minutes, three minutes," and I don't hear anything. I see them all talking into their sleeves as they are want to do. I said, "What's going on?" They said, "The motorcade is stopped." "Is everything okay?" They were all of five blocks away. "Yes, yes." I said, "Well, what is going on? We have 2,500 people here, and Warren Christopher looks like he wants to go to sleep." They said, "He stopped at a brasserie he knew from when he was in college. He has gone in for a cup of coffee and a croissant." The four minutes became forty minutes. On the other hand, the president had the good sense of humor when I asked him what he was doing to say, "Well, I knew it from when I was over here in school, and I went back in there. It was unannounced, and it drove everybody slightly crazy, including the Belgian police, and our secret service." I said, "What did you have?" He said, "I had a coffee and a croissant." I said, "Mr. President, Hillary isn't with you, I'll bet anything, you had beer and a pretzel," and he didn't deny it. He was terrific. When the plane, however, did leave, the next day, in the afternoon, we waved goodbye. We had what's called a "wheels up" party at the embassy for the 200

people who had worked on the president's visit. When the wheels went up and the plane flew away, everybody cheered. I think most of it was relief.

Q: *Did he come again?*

BLINKEN: No, it was the only time we had him through. We had interesting ones. We had ex-presidents. We had Jimmy Carter twice, and we had George Bush. Of course, as I said, we have the Secretary of State twice a year. We had Commerce at least once or twice a year, Defense once or twice a year. Everybody came through. It's a place where there's NATO and EU. You can meet anybody there.

Q: *How did the Clinton impeachment and the long, long, drawn out revelations of sexual escapades with the intern, particularly the impeachment, play in Belgium?*

BLINKEN: They thought we were the most naive, ridiculous people that had ever heard of. When the French ex-prime minister passed away...

Q: *Mitterrand?*

BLINKEN: Yes, it was, Mitterrand.

Q: *The president.*

BLINKEN: When President Mitterrand passed away, his funeral was attended not only by his wife, but by his mistress, and his daughter with the mistress. Everybody thought that was just fine. Nobody pays attention. There was one occasion with the Belgian prime minister, whose weight, I'm guessing at, at least 350 pounds, and his wife, a little bit less. She was born in America. They were wonderful people. I once said to them at a farewell dinner that I figured out in Belgium, not in the United States, how Jean-Luc Dehaene to be guaranteed to be reelected every year. His wife, Celie, said, "How?" He was sitting there also. I said, "By having a mistress. In the United States, it's a bit different." They thought it was a shame. They thought we were a bit bizarre in the United States and our press was totally outrageous in handling the affair, and they thought it was basically politically motivated. I'm not sure they weren't right on all accounts. As a matter of fact, there was a piece in The New York Times just two days ago, I think it was Friedman's column.

Q: *This is Thomas Friedman.*

BLINKEN: I may be wrong. It may not have been his column. I think he said, "I would rather have a president that cheats on his wife, than a president who cheats the children of America."

Q: *Yes.*

BLINKEN: The Europeans feel that way. It's how you deport yourself in your job. This might be read 10 or 20 years from now, if at all, isn't it better to have somebody who really cares about America than somebody who opens his morning session in his cabinet office with a prayer meeting every morning?

Q: *Yes, yes.*

BLINKEN: Which I find singularly frightening. Even Catholic European countries wouldn't dream of having a minister start the day off with a prayer meeting in his office.

Q: *As sort of a nuts and bolts question, you were ambassador during the time when the Internet, e-mail, this rapid communication business, first really blossomed during your time there. How did you find this work as ambassador, messages zipping back and forth, and all that?*

BLINKEN: I never used it once while I was there. The State Department was still having trouble getting a good e-mail system going. Some of us, at my age, didn't have a clue what the Internet was in any case. Relatively few people in the embassy used it. When they did use it, it was basically for social, in a social context. The official stuff all came through the cable system, so to speak.

Q: *I was wondering where there was a certain amount of cables going out either way, reports or something, some sort of vetting beforehand, with a precooked...*

BLINKEN: I remember before we sent out budgeting things, there were conversations over the e-mail between the department in Washington and the administrative officer, "The budget is going to look like this," or "The recommendation is going to look like that. Can you get it off the record?" I'm sure, today, only three years later, it's used much more. Even while I was there, the entire communication system was being redone. The computers were still old Wangs and didn't have the capability of what my grandchildren have in grade school.

Q: *What was your impression of the support system, and sort of the infrastructure that you had to deal with at the Department of State, while you were there?*

BLINKEN: I'm not clear what you mean.

Q: *Well, sort of the support system. If you needed something, the communications. Did you find you were sort of fighting the system to get things?*

BLINKEN: Well, there were times when State was a little slow in coming back to a request, but on the other hand, knowing that a request would go, and then have to get channeled through heaven knows how many people, before somebody had either the courage or the knowledge to make a decision, but it was understandable. We had no great problems with that. I had one time when I was asked to make a demarche to the Belgian

government, where some U.S. companies were unhappy that the new law in Belgium called for recycling of specific things like razor blades, more in particular, beer bottles. Belgium has 400 beers. I believe it was Corona, or whoever it was, was importing beer on behalf of U.S. companies to Belgium, but had no way of recycling and taking the beer bottles out. So, they thought they were at an unfair disadvantage trade wise. We were asked to make it to *démarche*, protesting these recycling requirements for all companies, not just U.S., but all companies, that they were unfair. I looked at the *démarche* and I was going to go over to the ministry, and then I said, "Wait a minute; this doesn't make sense because we are for smart, environmental policies and laws. These recycling ones are smart. Why should we make a *démarche* against them? So, I called State and I think it was Tim Wirth's office. I said, "Listen, I'm supposed to make this *démarche*, but it goes against what we believe in, and what we are saying in the United States about recycling, so I don't want to make this *démarche* I'm supposed to make." It took quite a number of days, but it came back, and they said, "Skip it." It would have been nice if the answer came back that day, but if you understand the system, even a little bit, you work with the system. It's not too bad. I think State, for as big as it is, was pretty responsive. I was also there, of course, at a time when the State Department budget was being severely cut back. Now, it's sort of being increased, but the embassy in Belgium itself had to cut down by, I was told, between just before I got there, and then apparently after I got there, by nearly 40 percent of the people. Do I think that is terrible? I don't know whether it's good or bad. We managed to do with what we had and if that's what has to be, that's what has to be. So, what you have to do is prioritize.

Q: We went through a period of time when Congress essentially shut down the government twice. How did that work for you? This was a Republican Congress.

BLINKEN: I absolutely remember that because we were instructed to pick a certain number of people who would be laid off during that period of time; a small group of people, whatever it was. Call it 50, call it 75. They would be laid off until the government could pay the bills again, and then they would be rehired or put back on the payroll. I said, "No, we aren't going to do that." They said, "What do you mean you aren't going to do that; you haven't got the money." I said, "That's fine. What we are going to do is, we are going to put everybody on a four-day week, including the ambassador, because he ain't going to get paid anymore than anybody else, because I don't want to be without any group or any department. I would rather have shorter hours in the embassy, and pay people for less, if it comes to that, but I'm not singling out, which would cause a problem in the embassy. Then, you are saying that 10 percent or 15 percent of the people aren't worth as much as the other 80 or 85 percent of the people. I won't do that." That bounced around State for a long time. In effect, I told them I wasn't going to lay anybody off full time, I'm closing people down for a couple hours a day, or a day a week, everybody the same way. I called the other western European embassies and got them to say the same thing. At the end of the day, it was fine. We didn't have to do anything, but it looked like it was going to be a problem for a while. If you were going to cut, one of the people screaming at the Republicans was consular services. That's the one you can't really cut.

Q: I was consul general in Naples at a time, it didn't happen, when they were talking about shutting down this. It's like stopping a ship in the middle of the ocean. How do you tell an American you can't replace their passport? Everybody was talking very tough and hard, but you just don't do that.

BLINKEN: I think the Republicans learned a lesson from that. At least they kept printing social security checks and other things, but services for Americans are very important. That is the primary thing the government is there for. It could have been difficult. I remember having some arguments with State about it, but at the end of the day, it worked out fine.

Q: Were there any other issues we haven't covered that particularly come to mind?

BLINKEN: Well, any issue here was an issue there. I think one of the issues, well not an issue. But, I recall the good and bad moments at the embassy. Well, there were no bad moments, but there were difficult moments. I remember getting a call when Sierra Leone was in civil strife. They were going to try to get people out of there, less they all be killed. So, there were a bunch of planes chartered. They were going to fly people out, and fly them through Belgium. They were going to land all the people there. They were going to process them, and find countries that would take them in. Our job in the embassy was to get those other countries, and to process the people, because the Belgian government didn't want responsibility for it. We, in the United States, in the best of American traditions, said these are refugees. We had the biggest single group of refugees come through that we had to process. In 48 hours, we had nearly 800, which was an interesting number. They were all landing in Zaventem Airport in Brussels. The Belgian government put aside a whole section of the airport. We got the Sheraton Hotel at the airport to give us a ballroom, and some other rooms to process. We let these people sleep over night. Then, we were looking for countries that would take them in, where they could fly through to go to other places. Some other countries were wonderful, and some were a little more difficult. But, at the same time, while this was taking place, our consulate general was in charge of it... I can't remember Ted's last name.

Q: You can put it in later.

BLINKEN: I'll figure it out. We were having the once every three or four-year inspection of the embassy by the Department of State, who had sent over five or six people for two weeks, who go through everybody and everything at the embassy. They end up with a report about the embassy, and the ambassador and everybody else, which at the end of the day, was not only good, but was great. It was so great, I sent Vice President Gore a copy, because it said that I should be a model for all ambassadors, not that anybody would ever care about that, but it was during this period that they were going through the embassy. They were all in the cafeteria having lunch, and so was I, having just come back from Zaventem Airport, and watching this processing thing. Some of our people had been up for 48 hours, literally straight, which ain't easy. We had most of the consular section out there, and volunteers from other sections in the embassy and I called my office and

NATO and EU gave us people. So, we had a lot of people out there working very, very hard. The inspectors are sitting in the cafeteria having lunch. I sat down at their table and they all said hello, and I said, "Listen, question. When you are in country like you are now, isn't it true that the ambassador is the last word?" They said, "Absolutely." I said, "So, if I tell you something, you have to do it, right?" They looked and said, "Yes, you have to do it." I said, "Great, you are not inspecting from this moment on. You are going out to the airport, and you are helping my consular section and the other volunteers process these 700, 800 people, who are dying, who are starving, who came out with just the clothes on their backs. So, you are going to go out and help them, aren't you?" They looked at me and realized I was only half kidding. They said, "Yes," And they went out, and they felt very good about it.

Our consular office, we had marvelous stories to do with that. There was one little child, three or four years of age, brought in by some man who said he brought them out for the parents, and they were looking for visas for the United States. We were supplying those. Some were going to the United States, the UK or other countries. We were in charge of the checking on all these people. So, in the case of this gentleman, it turned out he was no relation to this three or four-year-old child, he grabbed the child off the street. He was a major drug runner, trying to get out. So, we turned him over to the Belgian authorities. We had a number of other cases like that. But, now we have this three or four-year-old child who does have a relative in the United States, who doesn't know the child is no longer in the streets of Sierra Leone, but in our safekeeping at the airport hotel in Brussels. So, the consul general volunteered, got on the plane the next morning, took the plane to Washington, where we had alerted somebody who found the relative in the United States, who met him there. He took the child, got right back on the plane, and came back to Brussels. I put him in for an award, which he got. That was special. Not just because he did 700 or 800 people, but after all this, he was dead tired, but willing to do this. He was a superb officer and a superb human being.

Q: To finish this up, one of the thoughts that floats around, lately has been, are embassies, are ambassadors really necessary? Can you give me your thoughts on that?

BLINKEN: I think there is no question... and I have to be careful how I say this. A good ambassador can never be replaced. You can't replace an ambassador with an e-mail. You can't replace an ambassador with a cable. You can't replace an ambassador with a telephone call. It needs face-to-face. It needs people understanding the situation, the culture, the business climate, the political climate, understand what can be done, but I also stress a good ambassador has to be willing to work two jobs. As I say, this is a day time job and a night time job. If you do it right, it is very tiring. It is more tiring than anything I ever did, but also more rewarding than anything I ever did, or ever will do, again. You can't ask a country lightly over the telephone, unless there is a really strong relationship between equal numbers in Washington, and whatever the host country is, to go to war with you, to have this treaty with you. That is the role of the ambassador. The role is leading a group of people, whether it is supporting US business, whether it's supporting cultural institutions, whether it is helping Americans in distress, whether it's

visiting somebody in jail, or whether it is consoling an American who has lost a spouse or somebody at post. You can't do without an ambassador. Lots of people think they can, but those who have really had the experience in government know that there comes a time, and it may not be every month, it may not even be every year, but there comes a time when that person on the spot who is the direct representative of the president of the United States, is the most necessary person in that country.

Q: Well, thank you. One last thing. You left in 1998. After a five-year term, which is very unusual, because normally three years is it, what did you do?

BLINKEN: After three years, three and a half, or whatever it was, President Clinton extended two ambassadors for a second term, of which I was one. I don't think my brother was overjoyed with that, but that is a fact of life. After basically two years of that second term, I came back here to help in Al Gore's campaign for president. I did get slightly sidetracked by the White House, which asked me to run the NATO conference nine months after. I said, "What does that mean, Sandy Berger?" Sandy looked at me and smiled. I knew what it meant. As many Americans don't know and if somebody reads this and isn't familiar with this... Our government doesn't pay for G-7s, or IMF conferences, or World Bank conferences, or NATO conferences. It is paid for by the people of the United States, not by government. So, somebody had to go out, organize the entire conference, with 21 of us, 43 heads of state, and raise 28 million dollars quickly. I got elected.

Q: [Laughter]. I never realized that.

BLINKEN: You didn't know that?

Q: No.

BLINKEN: The government doesn't pay for any of those conferences. Nothing. The White House dinner, with 43 heads of state, the White House didn't have the money for it. We had 21 events. Some of those carts are full of books that are full of pictures, which were nice for me, because I had started at the U.S. Trade and Investment Center, after a conference that I put together for the President in Cleveland. I had met a lot of heads, especially central European heads of state; Shevardnadze, all those folks. It was nice to put it on. It was an honor, and it was great fun. You talked before about anti-globalism. After the NATO summit, which we held here, and consisted of the biggest foreign dignitaries in the United States at one time, except what happens at the UN. We had 21 events over two and a half days. We basically scared everybody out of Washington. It was an enormous success. We did it with 27 paid people, whereas Miami ran whatever it was for the Latin American nations, with 310 paid people, and a deficit of 10 million. We ran a surplus, which I wrote the last check three weeks ago, in 2001, to Department of State. They thought we did a great job, a creative job, and I was called a month later and asked whether I would be willing to do the WTO conference in Seattle. I said, "No thank you. I really have to do something for myself now." "Better to be lucky than smart," as my

father said, because look what happened in Seattle.

Q: *Yes, tear gas, violent demonstrations.*

BLINKEN: That's why Washington's great deal.

Q: *Okay, well I want to thank you.*

End of interview