

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

J. MICHAEL O'BRIEN

Interviewed by: April 2, 2007
Initial interview date: Charles Stuart Kennedy
Copyright ADST 2016

[Note: This interview was not completed or edited by Mr. O'Brien.]

Q: Michael, let's start at the beginning: when and where were you born?

O'BRIEN: Well, I was born in Washington, DC.

Q: What year?

O'BRIEN: In 1942. My father went to Georgetown Law School and had a job with the government and he met my mother here in Washington, who also worked for the government. After he finished law school he got a job at a law firm in New York.

As I say, I was born here, but when I was one year old or so we moved to New York and my father worked in a law firm there for five years and then moved to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where he was hired by the Bethlehem Steel Corporation as a lawyer.

Q: Okay, let's go back. On the O'Brien side, what do you know about where the O'Briens came from?

O'BRIEN: He was born in Minneapolis, but his father worked for the Great Northern Railroad and they moved to Montana, so my father grew up Montana and he came back east to go to college.

Q: The O'Briens, sounds like they probably came out of Ireland?

O'BRIEN: Yeah, in the 1850's or '60s, on my grandfather's side. On my grandmother's side, they came here earlier.

Q: Okay, where did your father go to college?

O'BRIEN: He went to Gonzaga University, which is in Washington state.

Q: All right and now, your mother; how'd your father meet your mother?

O'BRIEN: Well my father and mother met here in Washington. They were both working in the same government agency.

Q: What government agency is this?

O'BRIEN: I don't remember.

Q: What do you know, on your mother's side

O'BRIEN: My grandparents came from Minnesota. My great grandparents on my mother's side came from Scotland, both of them. They moved to Canada and they were farmers and they had a large farm in Minnesota, which they sold, because of the climate. They moved to Upper Marlboro, Maryland, and they bought a large tobacco farm and that's where my mother lived.

Q: Well, now, you were born in 1942. Where do you first sort of remember growing up?

O'BRIEN: I don't remember much before moving to Pennsylvania, but that's where I grew up, about fifty miles north of Philadelphia.

Q: Your father was

O'BRIEN: He was a lawyer. He specialized in shipbuilding. At that time the Bethlehem Steel Company was the largest shipbuilding company in the United States, built lots of ships for the navy, some of the biggest aircraft carriers and also passenger ships. Anyway, that was his specialty.

When we first moved to Bethlehem, we lived outside of the city, in a small community where there were mostly Pennsylvania Dutch people. They all spoke Pennsylvania Dutch. We were the only "foreigners" there. About five miles from Bethlehem and he drove to work every day. And we lived in an old Pennsylvania Dutch house.

Q: Who were your friends?

O'BRIEN: My friends were mostly people who went to school with me. I went to a Catholic school in town, so my parents took me to school every day, drove me in, to a middle class type of parochial school and those were my friends.

Q: Who ran the school?

O'BRIEN: They were nuns, Sisters of Saint Joseph. We had about thirty children in a class and I went to that school from the first grade to the eighth grade.

Q: There are all sorts of stories about nuns and teaching, both good and bad. How did you find the Sisters of Saint Joseph?

O'BRIEN: They were tough. They were very tough. But they were wonderful teachers. They were able to instill very good moral values and my overall evaluation in the final

analysis would be to say that although they were tough and strict disciplinarians, they were a very good influence on my life.

Q: In grade school, what courses did you come to like and what ones didn't you like?

O'BRIEN: I don't remember too much about that, I must say. I think that it was just school and I did my homework and I passed the tests and I did what I was supposed to do.

Q: Were you much of a reader?

O'BRIEN: In grade school, no, not particularly. I think I was in high school, but not in grade school, no.

Q: As you grew up, you went to Catholic school, but how Catholic was your family?

O'BRIEN: Oh, very. My father was from a very strict Catholic family. My uncle was a priest, a Jesuit, as a matter of fact. My father went to Catholic college.

My mother was a convert. She grew up in a Presbyterian family, but she converted to become a Catholic and she was quite strict and still is.

Q: Brothers, sisters?

O'BRIEN: I have two brothers, they're both younger. They also went to the same grade school that I did.

Q: Again, speaking sort of grade school level, say, your friends, what sort of a neighborhood, if you lived five miles away

O'BRIEN: There was no neighborhood. We were in the country. We had maybe one or two people who lived near us. They were Pennsylvania Dutch people; they didn't speak very good English.

When I was eight years old, we moved to another house about three or four miles away, which was just as rural and we still have that house, near sixty years later. Again, it's an old Pennsylvania Dutch house. It was a farm, although we didn't farm it. We rented the land out to people. But that's pretty much where I grew up, in that house.

Q: As a kid growing up, as a Catholic kid, going to school in town, were the Amish

O'BRIEN: They were not Amish, they were Lutherans and Mennonites.

Q: Was there much mixture between you and them

O'BRIEN: No, not socially. We were quite different. We were friends, of course, but they were in a different class, not college people, they were mostly farmers or they worked for the steel company as laborers, etc, whereas we were a little different.

Q: Again, sticking to the early years, at home, was there much of a conversation about what was going on in the world?

O'BRIEN: Well, I would say yes. Politically and culturally and artistically, we were very much introduced to all that. My mother and father made sure that we took music lessons, piano lessons. We took French lessons. We went to museums and we went to New York regularly to go to the theater, to go to the ballet, etc. Yes, there was quite an effort on the part of my parents to introduce us to that.

Q: Where did your family fall politically?

O'BRIEN: Oh, very conservative.

Q: Your father was a lawyer for Bethlehem Steel. I would have thought this sort of said, okay, you're solid Republican.

O'BRIEN: Absolutely, absolutely and my grandparents, too, oh, the whole family, yes, all the way back.

Q: Did you get any whiff of how the family felt about Roosevelt?

O'BRIEN: I certainly did. Oh, he was terrible. Oh, yeah, he was awful. He was the one who introduced everything bad in the United States and Harry Truman was even worse. Sound familiar?

Q: Oh, absolutely. It is interesting, I'm not sure you get the same thing today, but people coming from your generation whom I've interviewed, fall really on one side or the other: either Roosevelt was god, or he was "that man in the White House," the source of all evil.

O'BRIEN: We fall into the latter category, although I've changed my views somewhat over the years, but that's the way it was when I was growing up.

Q: Where'd you go to high school?

O'BRIEN: Well, I went away to a prep school. I went to Lawrenceville School, which is in New Jersey, near Princeton. It was very good school. It had quite an influence on my life and I went there for four years.

Q: How'd you find Lawrenceville? This is from when to when?

O' BRIEN: 1956 to 1960. I graduated in 1960.

Q: My familiarity with Lawrenceville is from Lawrenceville Stories.

O'BRIEN: Of course I was there a good deal after that.

Q: The turn of the century. But talk about Lawrenceville. How did Lawrenceville

O'BRIEN: Well, in the days when I went, it's completely different, now, but it was not coed, it was all boys, there were about 600 or 700 boys and everybody was pretty much from the same background. We had no minorities, maybe one Chinese boy, or two, but that's all.

We lived in very nice houses, dormitories, but they were more or less houses. Each house had a housemaster and his family and we had all our meals in the house. Each house had its own dining room.

We had help in the house. They lived in the basement. They were mostly black. They mostly came from Trenton or surrounding areas.

We had classes in very nice buildings, with round tables. We had traditional courses of foreign languages, Latin, Greek, history, art, music and science, of course.

There was a very active sports program. We went to church every day, except Saturday. It was not a Catholic school, it was a Presbyterian school. Chapel every morning and then every Sunday.

And we all wore coats and ties to class every day. The faculty was pretty much the same as we were and I loved that school, still do.

Q: Were there any issues that you can think of that were going around then? This is really before the civil rights movement got going.

O'BRIEN: No issues, we were all secure in our upbringing and we had no problems.

Q: Except for the people living down below you.

O'BRIEN: That was a fact of life. They were down there. We saw them. They worked in the kitchen, they cleaned the rooms, they cut the grass and that's it, that's the way it was.

Q: How about the Cold War? Was this much of a factor?

O'BRIEN: Oh, I remember Sputnik. I remember that, when it happened. I also remember

Q: Sputnik being

O'BRIEN: The Soviet

Q: First satellite.

O'BRIEN: Yes, I remember that. It was in 1957, it seems to me. I also remember a discussion in one of my history classes about the fact that China was the largest country in the world, in terms of population and we had no relations with it and that was a big mistake, according to the teacher.

We read the New York *Times* every Sunday. Each student had to subscribe to that, that was required, but the Cold War was not terribly important or relevant to me, at least at that time.

Q: How about Jewish students?

O'BRIEN: We had some Jewish students in our school. One of my friends was Jewish. His name was Rosenblatt, I still remember that. I never knew any Jews. He was just like anybody else, as far as I was concerned. I just felt his name was a little bit unusual. Everybody had to go to chapel. There was no distinction made about that.

Q: What subjects did you find you were excelling at and any that you were maybe lagging at?

O'BRIEN: I always did better in French. I liked French. I liked English and history, wasn't very good in science or math, but of course we had to take those courses. But pretty much English, history, languages, that's what I liked and that's what I was best at.

Q: While you were at Lawrenceville, were you pointed towards anything?

O'BRIEN: No. I was brought up with the idea that I would go to a liberal arts college, and that I did not have to decide on any kind of career until I finished my education, and that education was not necessarily to prepare you for a career, but it was to prepare you for life.

Q: So where'd you go to college?

O'BRIEN: I went to Hamilton College, which is in upstate New York, in Clinton. I went there because it was a small liberal arts school, that's what I wanted. It was in the north, which I also wanted and also they wanted me, so I went there.

Q: And you were there from

O'BRIEN: 1960 to 1964.

Q: Just before you went there, did you get involved in the Kennedy-Nixon campaign?

O'BRIEN: Not at all. I remember that in my freshman year Kennedy won and I was kind of disappointed, but that's about the only feeling I had. At the time, I was not a political person.

Q: A good number of people were particularly engaged in this election.

O'BRIEN: I was not, no.

Q: Let's talk about Hamilton. 1960 at Hamilton, what was Hamilton like?

O'BRIEN: Hamilton was pretty much like Lawrenceville. It was small. It was not coed. And the curriculum was pretty much like Lawrenceville's.

It was very difficult. I was surprised. I didn't expect that it would be as difficult as it was, comparing it to Lawrenceville. My classes were very challenging, homework all the time. We never went anywhere.

Hamilton is not even in a town. Have you ever been there?

Q: No.

O'BRIEN: They say it's in Clinton, New York, but it's about three miles from Clinton, New York, and in those days we didn't have cars.

Q: And Clinton is not exactly

O'BRIEN: And Clinton is, if you blink, it's gone. But, anyway, there was no social life and we studied and we did our homework and we went to class. That was life.

Q: I was at Williams in the Fifties. I got around with my thumb. In other words, I hitchhiked.

O' BRIEN: I used to hitchhike into Clinton once in a while to do my laundry. I think Williams is not as isolated as Hamilton.

Q: There is a Williamstown.

O'BRIEN: And then you aren't far from some of those other schools, like Mount Holyoke.

Q: Sixty miles to Smith and Mount Holyoke. You can get there.

O'BRIEN: But Skidmore is a lot farther from Hamilton, it's more than sixty miles away. But I didn't expect anything more. We never went anywhere at Lawrenceville. We weren't even allowed to go out on weekends.

We had tea dances, what we called tea dances. You might invite somebody to come to the tea dance on Saturday afternoon, but that was it. That was at Lawrenceville, not Hamilton.

Q: How about fraternities?

O'BRIEN: There were fraternities at Hamilton, but we couldn't join those until we were sophomores. They were very nice fraternities and they had social events several times a year.

But, again, the main focus was on studying.

Q: Did you belong to a fraternity?

O'BRIEN: Yes.

Q: What one was that?

O'BRIEN: It was called Emerson Hall.

There are no more fraternities at Hamilton.

Q: Not at Williams, either thank God. It was not a good idea.

Did you find yourself at all engaged politically?

O'BRIEN: No, none of that. I wasn't involved in that. I had some friends who were kind of involved in that civil rights activity. I even had one friend who went on a march down South. But we all thought those people were kind of strange, at least that's the way I recall it.

I went to France for my junior year in college, too, so I wasn't at Hamilton for four years. I was there for three years.

Q: Where did you go in France?

O'BRIEN: Hamilton had one of the first junior year abroad programs. So the program was pretty new and there were about forty people in our group, from different colleges throughout the United States, not just from Hamilton.

For the first six weeks we went to Biarritz, on the Atlantic coast, for intensive French lessons and then after that we went to Paris for the rest of the year.

Q: Well, how did that work? Did you live in a dorm, or with French families?

O'BRIEN: No, with families. In Biarritz, I had two roommates and we lived with a family. And then in Paris I had one roommate and we again lived with a family.

And we had classes every day. Hamilton had some oversight. There were a couple of teachers hired by Hamilton and in fact a director who came from Hamilton. We had our own school building and all our classes that we took at the Sorbonne were supplemented by individual sessions run by Hamilton, so there was more oversight than you would normally see in a French university.

We had extra tests, we had extra sessions, extra papers, homework, etc. So that's how it worked. And then we got grades and those grades were applied to our transcript.

Q: How much were you exposed to France?

O'BRIEN: Very much. To political events? Not too much, although I was aware that there was a beginning of turmoil in the French universities in the Sixties.

But really, no, not much. Again, we weren't involved too much. Things were pretty peaceful. We had the Cuban Missile Crisis while I was there. But, again, I really wasn't terribly involved or concerned about it, that I remember.

Q: What about the very rich cultural life in France?

O'BRIEN: Well, part of the program was we had to take art history courses, we went to museums, we went to the theater, to the opera. Of course we were taking French language courses, literature, history. So yes, that was an essential part of the whole process.

Q: How good was your French, by the time you

O'BRIEN: My French was quite good. As a matter of fact, I just came back last week from Paris, because Hamilton had a reunion there celebrating the establishment of the program and all of the past participants were invited to attend and so I went. We had about ten people from our group who were there. It was a very good experience.

Q: While you were doing all this, particularly the French year, did this give you a thirst for the world abroad, or not?

O'BRIEN: Ah, yes, it did. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I traveled a fair amount. My brother was going to school in Ireland at the time, so I went there. And I traveled in Germany and Italy and Greece and Spain, traveled a lot. And I decided I might want to be in the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you have any exposure to the Foreign Service, either in the States or in Paris?

O'BRIEN: The only exposure I had, you probably did this yourself, the American embassy in Paris was open every Saturday morning to American citizens who wanted to

go and have a hamburger and so I used to go there and have hamburgers and that was my exposure.

Q: How about meeting French students and all that?

O'BRIEN: I had some French friends, not a lot. Most of our experience was interaction with the other Americans in our group, which was an extremely good experience for me. But I did meet some French students, too.

Q: Did you find them more in a way politically engaged than

O'BRIEN: No, not in those days, not the ones I knew.

Q: It wasn't until about '68, I guess, was it, all hell broke loose?

O'BRIEN: I think that's when the trouble started. This was 1962.

Q: Okay, you came back and you were going to graduate in '64? Were you pointed towards anything?

O'BRIEN: Well, I was worried, the way all seniors are in college about what they're going to do. I was majoring in French and I had a pretty good advisor at Hamilton and I thought, "Well, maybe I'll go to business school."

I didn't want to go to law school. My father was a lawyer. I wasn't interested in that. I went to a couple of open houses at law schools like Cornell, etc and I was not interested.

So I thought, "Well, I'll try business school." So I applied to Amos Tuck School, which is at Dartmouth. I went there for two years and I got an MBA.

Q: Let's talk about Amos Tuck. What's the origin of it and where is it and what were you learning?

O'BRIEN: Well, it's in Hanover, New Hampshire, part of Dartmouth College. It was founded in about 1900 by a very wealthy American who actually contributed lots of money to museums in Paris.

It was general business type courses in accounting and economics and marketing and other business subjects. Everybody took the same series of courses their first year, that was required, there were no electives. And it was not coed. And it was extremely difficult. I studied all the time and so did everybody else.

Q: Well, it sounds to me like you set yourself off on a career with lots of homework, lots of work and no girls.

O'BRIEN: That's pretty much it, except in Paris.

Q: You could have been a priest!

O'BRIEN: That was life in those days.

Q: But Amos Tuck, was there an outlook?

O'BRIEN: I think that the outlook was to create a tremendous sense of competition among the students. "You're out there, fight, fight, fight, compete, compete and win!" And I didn't like it.

Q: Nobody was asking the question in your time, probably, but now, there's a lot of concern about ethics. Were ethics

O'BRIEN: Ethics were discussed, yes, quite a bit. Corporation ethics, it was a new subject, it was certainly discussed and emphasized. So despite the fact that competition was emphasized as a reality of life, also the importance of corporation ethics was emphasized, too, yes.

Q: Your second year

O'BRIEN: It was easy. It was simple. You see, the first year, they had this policy that one third of the class, they would be let go. So every test one third of the class failed and in every subject. And after every test the class standing was posted on a bulletin board and so you knew where you stood.

There was this terrific competition and pressure, as you went through the year, to watch your status go up and down, whatever and so that's what happened, after the first test in the first year one third of the class was gone.

But the second year was simple.

Q: Tell me about that first year. It sounds like, particularly looking at it from today's

O'BRIEN: Oh, they could never get away with that nowadays. Maybe it was one fourth, maybe it was twenty per cent, I don't remember, but it was a significant number and the people simply weren't there, the second year they didn't come back. They didn't get any refund, either.

Q: What about the second year? Did you specialize in any particular form of business?

O'BRIEN: Finance. I took economics and banking, a couple of courses in each area. International economics and banking.

Q: Did that appeal to you?

O'BRIEN: No. I didn't really like business school.

Q: Well, unless you really have a feel for it, it doesn't sound like a very exciting type of

O'BRIEN: But I contend that graduate school is not intended to be fun. It's not like college, where you experiment and you learn about new things. Graduate school, even if you're majoring in English literature, you've got to read all of Chaucer, you don't just read a little bit. Or can you imagine reading all of *Paradise Lost*?

If you take the survey course in college, you just read a little bit and it's interesting. You have to read the whole thing, well, anyway, that's graduate school, that's what I've always thought and law school is no fun, either.

Q: Well, then, you're graduating. Where did you go? This would have been

O'BRIEN: 1966 and you can predict exactly where I went. I went into the navy!

Q: Had you been in ROTC?

O'BRIEN: No, nobody in my family had ever been in the military, but we had to go, because it was the Vietnam War and I didn't want to be in the army. So I signed up for the navy, because I had already been reclassified 1A. They told me I was going as soon as I graduated, so I thought, "Well, I better do something about it" and so I did. In September, then, I went to Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island, for the navy.

Q: How'd you find Officer Candidate School?

O'BRIEN: I wasn't the kind of person who would rebel, but I didn't particularly like it and I contend that anybody who does like it, there's something wrong with them.

Getting up at five 'clock in the morning, running around and jogging and getting all your hair cut off and going to classes all day long and having people yell at you, no, it's not fun.

But I learned about things like navigation and seamanship and how to deal with enlisted people, leadership, that sort of thing, 'cause that's the kind of thing they taught us in the classes.

Q: So, when did you get your commission?

O'BRIEN: That must have been in February of 1967.

Q: Then what happened?

O'BRIEN: Immediately after I got my commission I was sent to antisubmarine warfare school in Key West, Florida. So I bought a car, a Volkswagen, and I drove down to Florida and I went to that school for about three or four months. They taught us how to handle sonar and how to detect submarines on the sonar screen and they also taught us how to fire torpedoes.

And then after that I went to Norfolk and was assigned to a ship called the *Wallace L. Lind*. It was an old ship that was built in the Second World War and it was a destroyer.

Q: How long were you with the ship?

O'BRIEN: The ship went to Vietnam right away, so I was on that ship for around 18 months I think. We went to Vietnam and I was there for eight months or nine and then we came back.

Q: What were you up to, you and your ship, in Vietnam?

O'BRIEN: Well, we did two things, essentially. We did shore bombardment, which meant we would be offshore about three or four miles and there would be a spotter on shore who would tell us where our targets were and then we would position the guns so that we could hit the targets and they would give us markings on charts and maps and things. That's one thing we did.

And the other thing we did was aircraft carrier plane guard, so that when airplanes would take off and land from aircraft carriers we were following in order to pick up a pilot if the plane went into water or didn't land properly on the ship.

So those were the things we did.

Q: What was your position?

O'BRIEN: I was the antisubmarine warfare officer, so I was in charge of the sonar and the torpedoes.

Q: Were the Soviets doing anything around

O'BRIEN: No, we didn't have any submarine activity in the Gulf of Tonkin, so we really didn't do too much work on that.

Q: When you say shore bombardment, was it North Vietnam or South Vietnam?

O'BRIEN: It was North Vietnam.

Q: Was there much counter fire?

O'BRIEN: No, they didn't shoot back, but we certainly did a lot of shooting.

Q: What were you shooting at?

O'BRIEN: Well, the spotter would come in on the radio and tell us what the target was and usually the target was, unfortunately, people. There would be troops and facilities and they would tell us what the coordinates were on our maps and charts.

Q: Well the spotter I assume was in an airplane.

O'BRIEN: No, the spotter was on shore.

Q: In North Vietnam?

O'BRIEN: Yes. There was fighting there, around the spotter, because we could hear the shooting and all that. No, he was not in an airplane.

Q: Did you go into Cam Ranh Bay or anything like that while you were there?

O'BRIEN: Well, we never did go ashore in South Vietnam. We were up in the north.

Q: Was there any particular feeling about the Vietnam War

O'BRIEN: Well, in my opinion, I was not convinced that we were doing the right thing. As a matter of fact, I thought we were doing the wrong thing. But, in those days, I didn't object. I knew that I had to be in the military, so I went and when I had to deal with my enlisted people, because I had enlisted people I was responsible for. I felt that it was my responsibility to spread the official policy and that's what I did.

Q: Did you get into the Philippines much?

O'BRIEN: Ah, yes, we went to the Philippines several times to resupply the ship there and we also had short breaks, short vacations there and we had to refuel. Yes, we went there periodically.

Q: What was your impression of the Philippines?

O'BRIEN: Well, my recollection is that it was hot, very hot and rainy and we were in a port with other U.S. Navy ships. It wasn't very nice. We were near a city called Olongapo, which is near Manila. It wasn't a nice city at all, dumpy and muggy and rainy.

But going through the Leyte Gulf and through the straits, the scenery was absolutely beautiful, magnificent, impressive. So I didn't have a negative opinion of the Philippines, but I had a varied opinion.

Q: When you were on carrier watch, did any planes go down?

O'BRIEN: One time a plane went down, if I remember correctly it was while it was taking off. We did help pick up the pilot, but of course the plane sank.

Q: So, when you came back, was that the end of your [active] duty?

O'BRIEN: No, we came back through the Panama Canal and we went back to Norfolk. I was transferred to another ship and that ship was in Bath, Maine. It was a frigate, a much bigger ship and it was being [re]fitted at the Bath Iron Works.

I went up there in the winter and we had certain duties on the ship, even though it was in dry dock. After that the ship was home ported in Boston. We stayed in Boston for a while, and then after that the ship was transferred to Newport, Rhode Island. So I went back to Newport and I lived on the ship for another year or so.

We went out on trips into Chesapeake Bay or into the Atlantic, but we didn't go to the Mediterranean or the Caribbean.

Q: Was submarine activity heavy at that point?

O'BRIEN: No, the only submarine activity that we picked up when I was in the navy was on drills. You would go out with a submarine and the submarine would submerge and then it was your job to detect the submarine. Then we would shoot these torpedoes that didn't have any explosives in them and they would not detonate, but they would come to the surface about twenty feet from the submarine. That was all planned and so that's what we did. But, no, I never detected any Soviet submarines.

Q: How did navy life appeal?

O'BRIEN: Oh, well, I thought it was wonderful. I really liked it and I didn't expect that I would, but I certainly did. And then after I got out of the navy, in 1970, I stayed in the reserves, because I liked it.

Q: During this time, was there a significant other or not?

O'BRIEN: Oh, no. I was like a monk. Everybody was. We were on a ship.

Q: Okay, well, then you were discharged in 1970. What did you do in 1970?

O'BRIEN: Well, on the way back from Vietnam I took the Foreign Service exam in Mexico City, because I was interested in the Foreign Service. I applied and I told them I would be in Mexico City on a certain date and so they sent me the exam and I took it at the embassy in Mexico City.

And then, you know how it is with the Foreign Service, it takes forever before they grade your exam and communicate with you and all that. So I was discharged from the navy

and I went to New York. I went back to my job at Marine Midland Bank and I had gotten an apartment in New York and I was in the management training program at the bank.

Then, after about ten months in New York, I got a telephone call from the State Department. They told me that they were going to offer me a position in a certain class. I accepted and then I gave notice to Marine Midland Bank and then I came down here to Washington for my training.

Q: Do you recall, when you took the oral exam, where did you take it?

O'BRIEN: I took that in New York, because after I took the written exam in Mexico, of course it takes a long time before you're notified whether you passed and so I was notified after I had that job in New York.

A couple of people came from Washington and that's where I had my interview, in New York.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions, or how the oral exam went?

O'BRIEN: Yes, I do. I remember one of the questions in the oral exam was, "Why would you like to be in the administrative cone?" and I said, "Well, I would like to because, first of all, I have an MBA and secondly I'd like to promote American businesses abroad" and the examiner said, "You don't do that in the administrative cone." I didn't know that.

I was also taking a couple of courses at Columbia, because I was interested in English literature and they asked me about those courses, but I don't remember much about the questions.

Q: Well, then, you came in in, what, '71?

O'BRIEN: No, '70.

Q: 1970, to the A-100 course. Could you give me a feel for what your A-100 class was like?

O'BRIEN: Well, it was a very diverse group. I remember that we all got along very well. I think the Foreign Service Institute fostered the cultivation of friendships and we certainly did make friends and we did things socially. It was a group of people who were very motivated and who were very interested in the Foreign Service, interested in foreign affairs and interested in area studies and languages.

Q: How about gender and ethnic diversity?

O'BRIEN: Well, I would say maybe up to one half of our class were women. We had one Asian American from Hawaii and we had one black woman, from Atlanta. So there was

some diversity and there was also geographic diversity. This was not a class of people from the Ivy League, no.

Q: Were you at that time identified as an administrative officer?

O'BRIEN: Yes, we had to select our cone when we took the written exam.

Q: What did you aspire to do, when you were in the A-100 course?

O'BRIEN: Well, my first thought was that I did not want to go overseas right away. I had just come out of the navy after almost three and a half years. I had moved around from Norfolk to Newport to Bath, Maine to New York and then to Washington and I didn't want to move again.

And so I said I would like to stay in Washington on my first tour and I would like to have a job in administration. Personnel said, "Well, that will be fine and we'll find you a job in Washington."

Q: So what happened?

O'BRIEN: They found me a job in the budget office of the State Department, doing analysis and budget planning and that kind of thing.

Q: Okay, you did that for how long?

O'BRIEN: Two years.

Q: Okay, how did you fit in?

O'BRIEN: Well, the office director was a Senior Foreign Service Officer. In those days there was a deputy assistant secretary in charge of budgetary affairs and so our office director reported to him.

And we had around seven or eight people in the office and we all did financial analysis and planning. And I was given certain projects and I worked on those and they were submitted to the boss and then some of them were approved, some of them were implemented. Budgetary systems kind of work, it was.

Q: Do you recall any of the projects you were working on?

O'BRIEN: Well, one of the projects was the regional financial center in Paris, they used to call it the RFC. I don't know if it's still there. I think it is, but it probably has a different name.

And that is the center that paid all the salaries of employees, American embassy and Foreign Service National employees, in Europe and Africa in those days and also I think in some of the Middle Eastern posts.

And so we analyzed their systems, how did they pay the people, what kinds of paperwork, because it was all done by paper in those days, what kind of paperwork needed to be submitted to RFC from the various posts, how could it be made to work more quickly, was it efficient, was it accurate, that sort of thing.

Q: Did your business training at Dartmouth and all, did you find that this was useful when you were in this job?

O'BRIEN: Well, that's a whole other question. I have never been completely convinced that business school training is what it's cracked up to be. Yes, it was useful because it taught me to work under pressure, it taught me how to deal with deadlines, it taught me how to ask certain critical questions about systems. So I would say yes, it was useful. But in terms of economics and accounting, that's questionable.

Q: How did you feel about, in this, your first assignment, how did you look at sort of Foreign Service work as it pertained to you and all?

O'BRIEN: Well, I think at that point I would say that I was more interested in the place that I was going to go to than I was necessarily in the work.

Q: Well then, after two years, we're talking about 1972, where?

O'BRIEN: Well, then, my first assignment overseas was Nicosia, in Cyprus. I was assigned to a job which was unusual at that point, because it was the budget and fiscal officer in Nicosia as well as the general services officer. Some people thought those two jobs should be separated, because there could be conflicts of interest. But, anyway, that's what my job was: budget and fiscal officer and general services officer.

Q: You were there from when to when?

O'BRIEN: 1973 to '75.

Q: A very interesting time to be in Cyprus. Can you talk about, when you arrived, what was the situation?

O'BRIEN: Well, when I arrived in Cyprus, it was a wonderful, calm, beautiful island, with a very nice climate, beautiful beaches and hotels, wonderful history and the embassy was on the Greek side, so we were more involved in Greek things than in Turkish things.

So my first introduction to Cyprus was into the Greek culture and the Greek side. Almost all our employees at the embassy were Greek. We did have one woman in the B&F section who was Turkish and she crossed the Green Line every day from the Turkish

side. She was a very, very good employee and she spoke very good English, no Greek, though. But she was the only one. We had one driver, I think, who was Turkish. But the main focus of the whole unit was Greek.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

O'BRIEN: The first ambassador, his last name was Popper and he became the assistant secretary

Q: David Popper?

O'BRIEN: Yes, David Popper and he became the assistant secretary for International Affairs. And then the second ambassador, Robert McCloskey, was a newspaperman who was the spokesman for Henry Kissinger. And then the third ambassador was Rodger Davies and he was the one who was killed

Q: What was the situation like?

O'BRIEN: There was no warning. I never heard a thing about any potential problem and I don't think anybody in Athens did, either. The coup was a complete surprise and shock to everybody, including the CIA.

Q: Was there an awareness that there was a significant number of Greek officers on the island?

O'BRIEN: Yes, there was an awareness. There were many, many Greek military people on the island, but they were accepted as part of the situation. There were also Turkish military people on the Turkish side.

Q: Not trying to get over-analytical about this, but was the embassy picking up the tensions between the Greeks and the Turks, from your staff, or others?

O'BRIEN: No, I never thought there was any particular tension. I guess I concluded that the Turks and the Greeks on Cyprus could get along perfectly well, if they were left alone -- if the Greeks from Greece and Turks from Turkey would just leave them alone, they could along perfectly aware.

Cyprus was like a stewpot: Turks lived on the Greek side and Greeks lived on the Turkish side, it was all mixed up and they all got along and there was no fighting, there was no killing, nothing.

But there might have been some prejudice and in the government service most of the people were Greek. There was no university in Cyprus. Greeks who wanted to go to college went to England, or to Greece and Turks who wanted to go to college, they went

to Turkey. But as far as tension is concerned, no, I never saw it, I never saw any prejudice, nothing.

Q: Okay, how did the events of July 14th (1974) hit you?

O'BRIEN: There was a coup and some terrorists ousted President Makarios. These terrorists of course were Greeks and they had a history of terrorism and killing Turks.

Q: Nikos Sampson

O'BRIEN: Yeah, Sampson, that's right and there was this coup. We heard shooting and that sort of thing. And Makarios escaped. He got out of his palace and ran down a hill and got into a Volkswagen or something and got out to the southern part of Cyprus and went to Greece and Sampson took over.

And the Turks said, "We're not going to accept this, we're not going to accept a *fait accompli*." Then there was all this back and forth between Turkey and Greece and the United States and Henry Kissinger and Nixon. This Watergate Affair was happening, so Nixon couldn't really focus on the problem and I don't think Kissinger could, either.

But, anyway, the Turks waited a week or so. There was some negotiations in Istanbul or someplace, but Sampson was still there. So the Turks said, "This is it, we're not going to accept it" and they started to bomb the northern part of Cyprus and they landed their troops on the northern side.

Q: How was the embassy responding, let's say, the day of the coup?

O'BRIEN: Well, I think everybody was shocked and disturbed and very worried, but I don't think that anybody, as far as I remember, had any thought that we were in any danger. And since I was in the administrative section and not the political section, I really wasn't involved in any kind of reporting on the political situation, so I don't know much about that.

Q: What about in your section, what about the Turkish woman, did she stop coming?

O'BRIEN: Oh, that's right, definitely, she stopped. She wouldn't dare cross over. And when the Turks started to bomb of course then there was great tension and fear, but that was about a week after the coup.

At that point, then, all the Greeks who lived in the northern part of Cyprus, they came down to the south and there was an intentional plan by the Turks to terrorize the Greeks in the north.

They didn't bomb schools or houses, they just bombed fields and roads and things like that, so the people would leave and people did leave, the Greeks, and they came down to

the south. All the embassy employees who lived in the northern part, they just came to the south and they came to the embassy.

Q: So what were you all doing?

O'BRIEN: Well, there was a curfew, of course. We had to move into the embassy and we'd sleep in our offices and we had to turn the lights out at night. We made our meals in the ambassador's residence, which was in the top floor of the embassy and we all ate there. That's what we did. We stayed there.

Q: After the Turks moved in, did things change for you all, particularly?

O'BRIEN: Well, the Turks didn't come to the Greek side of the island, they only stayed in the north. Things changed in the sense that we had many, many Greek-Americans who were really more Greek than American, they had dual citizenship or whatever, who came to the embassy with all their problems and we started to evacuate all the American dependents and all the Americans who wanted to leave. So we had to be in contact with them, on the telephone, which was a very strange situation, with the bombing and all that, a war going on, the telephone system was still working perfectly.

So we arranged a convoy of cars. I think we had 300 cars, for all the Americans to go down to the British base in the southern part of Cyprus to be evacuated out of Cyprus, including all the embassy dependents.

And so we took them down there in this motorcade and then we stayed overnight at the base and helicopters came in from Beirut, ironically, and took all these Americans from the base to ships and took them to Beirut.

But I wasn't evacuated. I then went back to the embassy after that and did my normal job. The consular section was evacuated, so I did the consular work and I never had one moment of training. And so I just signed everything that the Cypriot employee told me to sign.

Q: What about, as the general services officer, that side, you must have had a lot of property to look after?

O'BRIEN: Well, most of the houses were rented, but we certainly did have a lot of property. We had looting, we had robberies, we had people who lost all their possessions, because when they left their houses and they came to the embassy there wasn't anybody to protect the houses. I remember going into one employee's house and everything was stolen, even the wall outlets were stolen, all their effects were completely gone. So, yes, we couldn't protect them.

Q: Where were you when Rodger Davies was killed?

O'BRIEN: About a week, maybe ten days, after the Turks took over the northern one third of the island, after that happened, the Greeks reacted with such shock, they were absolutely stunned that they had lost one third of their island.

So they, of course, blamed the Americans. They said that we didn't do everything we should have to prevent the Turkish invasion. So there was a very big demonstration in front of the embassy, at least a thousand people. They started to burn all the cars in the parking lot, they burned them all and then they started to throw rocks into the embassy, into all the windows.

So we all got out of our offices and we went into a central corridor where there were no windows. And then the marines went up on the roof and they started to throw tear gas, because the police didn't come.

Then the demonstrators broke down the fence around the embassy and they set fire to the first floor, the consular section. We all had gas masks on, because there was so much tear gas you couldn't see, you couldn't breathe.

So, anyway, at a certain point we heard gunfire. At first it was just rocks and stones, but gunfire started and then we noticed that the ambassador, he fell and one secretary fell, too and we realized that bullets were coming into this central hallway. I didn't know where they came from, because there were no windows in there.

So everybody fell to the floor and then the security officer went out in front and at that point the police did come and then they dispersed the crowd and we realized that the ambassador was killed, because he was shot in the heart and the secretary was dead, she was shot in the head.

Then I guess we just quietly recovered. The ambassador was taken to the morgue. There wasn't anybody else in the admin section, so I had to go identify his body, as well as the secretary's body. And, then, well, after that, the next day, we just went back to work.

At that point Henry Kissinger said if there's any more trouble in Nicosia we're going to break relations and things calmed down.

Q: You were saying that the Greeks blamed the United States. I spent four years in Greece, when the colonels were there and people would say, "It must have been wonderful being in Greece."

Well, in many ways, the country was nice, there were nice people individually, but as a group, I did not come away with warm feelings about the Greeks, because the Greeks tended to blame the United States for everything that happened, when the Greeks did it to themselves.

Talking to Greeks afterwards, they somehow thought that we brought the Turks in, when it was the Greek colonels who put Sampson, who had a horrible reputation as an assassin and a particularly nasty terrorist, they did it.

But they were always blaming somebody else. I think in the old days they used to blame the British, now us. It's not an endearing trait and I've never felt very warmly about this. But this is stating my prejudice.

O'BRIEN: I know exactly what you mean. On the other hand, I do sympathize somewhat with the Greeks from Cyprus, because I think if the Cypriots, both Turks and Greeks, had been left alone, they could live perfectly well together.

Q: Oh, yeah, this was something perpetrated by the colonels in Athens, as part of this longstanding enosis obsession, wanting to grab all of the island and add it to Greece.

O'BRIEN: And they wanted Constantinople back.

Q: Yeah, one forgets this type of thing, but I served five years in Yugoslavia and four years in Greece. If you want to know about hatreds, that's a breeding ground for some of these, a few people that can stir everybody else up.

O'BRIEN: Well, anyway, I understand exactly what you mean.

Q: You say you went back to business. What

O'BRIEN: What was the business, after those terrible events? Well, the first thing we had to do was pack up all the ambassador's personal effects, the children, he had two young children, all their effects and send them to Beirut. Then we had to send the ambassador's body back.

They asked me to go to the secretary's funeral. She was a Maronite Christian and the funeral was in the northern part of Cyprus, the part that the Turks had taken. So we had to arrange a convoy to go up there, into the mountains, to this small Maronite community. We had to do that with the Turks. We had to get permission to across into that section. So that took a while.

I was the only American there. We had a convoy with I don't know how many cars, 10 or 15 cars, took hours to get there and then the funeral, which was a terribly emotional thing. You know how people are in the Middle East, they all scream and pull out their hair and scratch on the coffin and throw themselves on the floor. And then, of course, after that was over, we went to bury the secretary and then I went back to the embassy.

And then there were numerous problems of Cypriot-Americans who wanted their property back. Their cars were up in the northern part. The cars were all taken to big lots and all their houses were occupied who came from the south.

You see, the Turks came up from the south during the fighting and the Greeks came down from the north. So the Turks occupied the houses that were vacated by the Greeks and the American-Cypriots whose houses were in the north. They wanted the embassy to get their personal effects out.

So we tried to go back to the north to get the personal effects and we had to get permission from the Turks for every trip and it was terribly time consuming and the houses were pretty much devastated. There was no electricity. It was very hot; this was in the summer, the refrigerators, everything was rotting in them and smelly. The Turkish soldiers had gone into the houses and just vandalized and broke things and took out picture albums and cut faces off of photographs and things like that.

We had Marine Corps up there in the northern part. The Marine Corps guarded a Foreign Broadcast Information Service facility. It was our property, we rented it, or we owned it, I don't remember.

So, anyway, I was completely occupied with all of these activities.

Q: Did you get any feel, after things settled down, after the Turks came in, was the Turkish military trying to establish order?

O'BRIEN: No, I didn't have any feel for that, because of course we were on the Greek side and they did not come across the Green Line in Nicosia.

Q: But you got into that Turkish side, didn't you?

O'BRIEN: Yes, I did and there were Turkish military people all around. But I didn't get a sense of their administrative activities, although I know that there were no more Greeks there. All the hotels were empty, all the restaurants were empty, all the tourists were gone. Harbors with all the yachts and everything were all deserted, there were police everywhere. You really couldn't drive anywhere unless you went through checkpoints and that sort of thing. So I don't think it was terribly orderly.

Q: How about the Turkish and the Greek/Cypriot militaries, was there animosity towards Americans from the military side or not?

O'BRIEN: I think that they were so devastated that they just sort of faded into the background. I didn't have any relationship with them.

Q: Did Makarios come back?

O'BRIEN: Yes, he did. He came to Washington first and met with Secretary Kissinger, then he went back later to Cyprus. I can't remember exactly what happened to Sampson, but Makarios did come back.

Q: How long were you there after the coup?

O'BRIEN: That was in 1974. I was there for about another year.

Q: Were you particularly occupied with trying to settle the aftermath of what had happened?

O'BRIEN: Well, after the ambassador was killed, we had two more ambassadors come. We more or less settled down to normal business and then, about six months after the coup, there was another demonstration, and this time the demonstrators got into the embassy and they burned the entire first floor.

And again, the fire department didn't come, the police didn't come, so we all had to go up to the top floor of the embassy and the fire was burning. We didn't know what was going to happen and the DCM was on the telephone to Washington, as if they could do anything.

He told me, "You call, get the State Department on the telephone and tell them that the embassy is burning." And I got on the telephone, I got all the way through to Washington. I got all the way to the State Department and then I got one of those operators who says, "I'm sorry, the party you want is not available."

Anyway, finally the fire department did come, they did put out the fire, but the embassy was destroyed. Of course we had to get all the windows boarded up to make sure the place would be secure. Anyway, you can imagine the amount of work that involved. We were quite busy. And that happened six months after the first attack.

Q: I would imagine at a certain point, particularly the Cypriot government not responding, at least at the embassy sentiment would be, "Screw them! Let's get out of here and let them stew in their own juice," in other words, cut relations and all. Wasn't there any consideration of that?

O'BRIEN: Well, you know, you have to remember, this was my first post. I didn't really know about those details. I was just reacting to the situation, that's all.

Q: What were you hearing from your Greek employees?

O'BRIEN: Well, they were terrified. They were really, really terrified. In fact, two of the employees, their houses were taken over by the Turks and so they came to live with me. They had two children and I was single. They had no place to go. Oh, a lot of the Greek employees just didn't come to work.

Q: In your various duties, did you have much dealings with the Greek Cypriot government, for renovations, protection, transport, supplies, what have you?

O'BRIEN: I didn't do that, but I think maybe the security officer did, especially on protection. But no, we didn't have lots of security guards in those days and we didn't

have guards at our residences. What we did was, we moved to the embassy and we stayed inside the embassy. It's not the same as nowadays, where you have guards at everybody's house and all that.

Q: Obviously, you had couple families living with you, but other than that during the whole time, did you have much contact with particularly Greek Cypriots, social relations?

O'BRIEN: Yes, I did. I had some young friends, who were well educated people, mostly who went to school in England. And of course they were all traumatized by all this and some of them left and went back to England, because they had dual citizenship and they could do that. There wasn't a lot of hatred expressed, or any of that. It was just traumatization, I would say.

Q: Did the embassy get much relief from the State Department, officers sent on TDY or anything like that?

O'BRIEN: Yes, they were extremely supportive. It was just like one day after Ambassador Davies was killed, maybe two days, that this chargé came out and he had a whole staff that came with him and they had their own plane. And we had a pregnant woman in our embassy, an American, who was then flown out on the same plane that brought them in and Ambassador Davies' body was taken out on that same plane. So, yes, they were extremely supportive, yeah, immediately.

Q: Well, then, you left there in '75, I guess. Where'd you go?

O'BRIEN: Well, I didn't want another overseas assignment, after that experience. I wanted to go back home. So, I did. I went back to Washington and I was assigned to the Bureau of Public Affairs and I was the special assistant to the assistant secretary.

Q: It's John Reinhardt who was head of Public Affairs. So you were special assistant to Reinhardt?

O'BRIEN: Yes. We had one special assistant and that was myself, although it was not a senior position. I forwarded mail, I made sure that things were properly prepared, I reviewed all the incoming cables in the morning, I selected things for him to read. I went to the staff meeting that he had every day. And I served as a liaison between him and his office directors, if they wanted a particular message passed to him that wasn't terribly important, they would pass it through me. That's the kind of thing I did.

Q: What was your impression of Reinhardt?

O'BRIEN: Well, I thought he was extremely intelligent. He was a good leader. I don't think he was terribly influential with Henry Kissinger, who was Secretary of State at the time.

I don't think he was particularly assertive, but he was in charge of all of Kissinger's public affairs events in the United States, not overseas, in the United States and so that was very important. We had to make sure we selected the right sites, the right venues, the right audiences, etc, prepare all the hotel and airline arrangements, working with the Secret Service, we did all those things and he was in charge of it.

Q: What was your impression, sort of from the fly on the wall's view of Henry Kissinger and all?

O'BRIEN: Well, I think he's a terrific guy, I just think he was a wonderful leader and still is. He's a very articulate, brilliant man. I thought so at the time and I still do.

Q: Do you have any stories, dealing with Henry Kissinger, or not?

O'BRIEN: Well, I went on the trips, with the advance teams, to get the hotels set up, get the speeches arranged and all that, but I didn't really have too much to do with him, mainly just like shaking hands. He didn't deal with us. We just did the gofer work.

Q: How did you find the Bureau of Public Affairs? Did you feel it was an important player, or a minor player, or what?

O'BRIEN: I would say that it was minor. In those days, the press office was not part of the Bureau of Public Affairs. And so we didn't have daily contact with the Secretary on press matters, because there was a separate spokesman. So he was much more important than Ambassador Reinhardt.

But these public affairs events were also quite important. They had to go smoothly and it was this bureau that did that, not just implementing, getting hotel reservations or anything, but actually planning them and choosing the venues and then proposing them and convincing the Secretary that these would be the appropriate opportunities for him to present foreign policy and all that.

Q: Okay, well, let's say, for some reason, somebody comes up and says, "We gotta have a Midwest appearance." Who's going to know the right people in Chicago?

O'BRIEN: Good question. There is an office in the Public Affairs Bureau which has separate sections and each one of those sections, which has maybe two employees in each section, is responsible for all the contacts between the State Department and those places. So those people are fairly senior and impressive and articulate and knowledgeable and they have contacts in these various areas.

And so if the Secretary would say, "Look, I want to go to Kansas" for some reason, "Where should I go? Who should I speak to? What should I do?" We would call that regional specialist in this office and say, "Okay, what do you think?" and then they would call their contacts and we would make a proposal.

Or, sometimes, we would say, “Hey, look, it’s time for you to visit Louisiana and make some speeches down there, or one speech,” or whatever. Then you would propose something.

Or, let’s say, even more often, we would get all these invitations. We’d get thousands of invitations, from every high school and college, or international organization; they’d all invite the Secretary. So you have to go through them, you have to look at them. You can’t turn them all down and certain ones of them you certainly can’t turn down. So that’s the kind of thing that we did.

Q: You were there from, what, Seventy

O’BRIEN: ’75 to ’77.

Q: So you were in there during the Watergate crisis?

O’BRIEN: No, that happened in ’74. That happened before I got back. That happened when I was in Nicosia.

Q: So basically it was the Ford Administration. After you’d gotten out of one frying pan, this had to be a pretty hot and heavy place, wasn’t it, Public Affairs, at that time.

O’BRIEN: Well, yeah, we were very busy and I think that it was a very interesting experience. I don’t think I would have enjoyed staying there more than two years. But the people I worked with were very good people. We didn’t have any kind of tension among the staff. It was a good team.

We all worked very well together and you had to, especially when you’re going out to Seattle or San Francisco or wherever to put together a program. If the Secretary would go out, he wouldn’t just go to one event, he would have three, four, five events and dinners and meetings with various people, speeches, whatever.

And that all had to be coordinated and if you didn’t do it right, Henry Kissinger was not a patient man and if the elevator didn’t work, he told you.

Q: Did you have any particular personal disasters on any of these trips you can think of?

O’BRIEN: You know, you always seem to forget bad things. I can’t think of any personal disasters. Everything always went pretty well. We went out ahead of time and got things set up in advance.

Q: Check the elevators out?

O’BRIEN: Check the elevator, make sure the phone works, that the lights work in the bedroom and whatever.

Q: In '77, where did you go?

O'BRIEN: In '77 I got married, in August.

Q: Can you tell me a little about your wife and where you met and her background?

O'BRIEN: My wife worked in the Bureau of Public Affairs and that's where I met her.

Q: Where did she come from? What was her background?

O'BRIEN: Oh, she was in the civil service and she grew up in Herkimer, New York, which is between Albany and Syracuse and she came down here to work in the State Department and that's where I met her.

I was assigned to Bucharest in 1977, after the Bureau of Public Affairs. They sent me here to FSI to learn Romanian and while I was in FSI there was an earthquake in Bucharest. It was a really bad earthquake; 2,000 people were killed in Bucharest alone.

Our apartments and houses that we had on lease were damaged, so they had to reduce the staff at the embassy in Bucharest. So what they were trying to do was find tandem couples, so that they wouldn't need as many housing units.

So while I was taking Romanian, Personnel called me and said, "We understand you're getting married. Do you think your wife would like to join the Foreign Service and work in Bucharest?"

And I said, "Well, we didn't even think about that. We thought that she was going to have to resign."

And they said, "No, she can join the Foreign Service if she wants and you both can go to Bucharest and you'll just live together."

And I said, "Well, that's an interesting idea." So I asked my fiancé, at the time and she said, "Oh, yeah, I'd like to do that." So that's what she did.

And she joined the Foreign Service. She's one of the few people who did not have to agree to worldwide service. She was hired to go to Bucharest and that's what happened. And ever since she's been in the Foreign Service and she still is.

Q: So you went to Bucharest in 1977?

O'BRIEN: Yes.

Q: And you were there how long?

O'BRIEN: Three years.

Q: So until 1980. What was your job in Bucharest?

O'BRIEN: I was the admin counselor.

Q: Who was the ambassador at the time?

O'BRIEN: Ambassador Aggrey, Rudolf Aggrey. He was a USIA officer. He was the ambassador the entire time I was there. As a matter of fact, he arrived about two days after I did.

Q: When you got to Bucharest in 1977, what was the situation there?

O'BRIEN: Nicolae Ceausescu was president and for Romanians it was pretty grim, but for us it wasn't. They had a wonderful house for me, built in the Twenties, German house, it even had an elevator in it. Well, it was just a wonderful house.

There was a flight that came in every six weeks from Frankfurt to bring in food, which we would order in advance. So we had all our frozen food and meat and even milk came in.

The embassy was in an old palace, a pleasant place to work. My wife and I traveled pretty much every weekend. I spoke Romanian, because I had gone to FSI, so I could get around. So it was a delightful experience.

Q: What was your wife doing?

O'BRIEN: She was a secretary in the political section.

Q: You mentioned, here's Romania, which, from all accounts, has very fertile soil, should be the breadbasket of Europe and yet you're having to bring in frozen food. What was the supply situation on the local market?

O'BRIEN: Well, that was not good. The Romanians really did suffer from that. We had a maid, of course, because if you wanted bread you had to go at seven o'clock in the morning and stand in line. If you wanted to get some fresh vegetables, they would be available at ten o'clock in the morning. And you didn't really ever know exactly when they were going to be available, so you had to send your maid.

The things that we would order from Frankfurt would be milk, because we didn't really trust the milk there and it would be frozen; we had freezers. So we would get the milk and then we got cleaning supplies, soap, Coca Cola, potato chips, all those kinds of things that you can't get in a communist country. So that's what we got. It worked.

We rented trucks, maybe three or four or five trucks, every six weeks and we would all be assigned, take turns to ride the trucks. We would go to the airport, unload the airplane,

put all the things on the trucks and they were all sorted out by the commissary. Then we would drive from one house to another in the city and then deliver. And this was no fun, but everybody had to take a turn to do it. You didn't have to do it every time.

So it was fairly comfortable and we were young, it didn't matter.

Q: How about the Romanian Foreign Service National staff?

O'BRIEN: Well, they were very nice people. You couldn't trust them at all, because they were under great pressure from the government to report on us.

Q: Did they have this, so many of the Soviet satellites had a central hiring place that would provide local staff for foreign embassies?

O'BRIEN: They certainly did and any time we wanted a new employee, we had to go to that office and then they would send maybe one or two applicants over, we'd interview them and that was it. We didn't really have a choice. If we didn't take them, we didn't get anybody. And we never really knew if they were threatened or not beforehand. I think they probably were.

Q: I served five years in Belgrade and there the pressure was not that heavy, but we just had to assume that they were called in from time to time to report.

O'BRIEN: That's right, and in my job I didn't have any secrets, so I didn't worry about it much.

Q: In many ways, being the administrative officer in an embassy, you're responsible for getting things done, repairs, budget and all this, it needs technical competence.

O'BRIEN: Well, I'll tell you, I think that was the most difficult job I ever had in the Foreign Service, because it was so difficult to get things done. You're absolutely right and also another thing that was quite an important job of my job was that people relied on me.

The American staff and their wives, especially, they had nobody else to call. If the plumbing didn't work, they didn't speak Romanian. If the roof leaked or if there was no gas or whatever, they didn't have anybody else to call, except me and if they were unhappy, then the husbands were unhappy, then the husbands didn't do a good job, the children were unhappy.

So that all put a great deal of pressure on me and I didn't have anybody to rely on, because the DCM and the ambassador, they weren't admin officers, they didn't know how to handle things.

And so I had to fight with the Romanian establishment to get things done and that's not easy. So it was probably my most difficult job. The ambassador's wife was extremely

demanding and she wanted everything to be perfect and when she wanted us to devote our resources to her, we would have to take them away from somebody else whose plumbing was backing up. Anyway, it was a difficult job.

Q: Did you get any feel for the attitude towards the Ceausescu regime?

O'BRIEN: Well, we all thought it was very hostile to us and depending on your position, I suppose, and your outlook, certain people thought they were more dangerous than others.

I never really felt any problem. I didn't really care if anybody followed me, but other people did.

Q: Well, you had the security side under you, didn't you?

O'BRIEN: Yes, I did.

Q: In so many of the Eastern European countries the security officer spends an awful lot of time telling the Americans not to get compromised and all that.

O'BRIEN: Yes, that was one of our tasks and we had to make sure that we never discussed anything that was classified, other than in the

Q: Bubble.

O'BRIEN: Yeah and then of course there was all kind of reporting requirements. We had a security officer. He worked for me, but he did that. I didn't have to do that.

Q: Well, then, were you feeling the pressure of attempts by the Romanian, what's it called

O'BRIEN: *Securitate.*

Q: Securitate to compromise our people, or not?

O'BRIEN: No, I never did. I always thought that that was a little exaggerated, but that was just my reaction.

Q: It depends on, sometimes, the secret police can set things up or not set things up.

O'BRIEN: Some people were very suspicious. I never was. When I first got to Bucharest, my wife didn't come until several weeks after I did. An Orthodox priest came to my house and he knocked on the door and he said, "I want to come in, bless your house, because you're new."

And I thought, "That's very nice," so of course he came in and he blessed all the rooms with his holy water and all that and I mentioned it at the embassy the next day and somebody was horrified: "You don't really think he was a priest, so you?"

And I said, "Yes, I do" and I still do.

Q: Even so, you have a maid

O'BRIEN: Sure, they're called in, they're asked certain questions, but, in my job, I didn't have anything to hide and I didn't know anything that I could reveal anyway.

Q: How'd you find the American staff responded to that?

O'BRIEN: Everybody was quite adaptable. We made some very good friends. We had a very tight knit staff. We just had a reunion last fall of all the people who served in Bucharest since the mission was opened in the 1960's and we had a really good turnout. A very good group of people, very resilient and adaptable kind of people.

Q: That's great. You mentioned the ambassador's wife. For most administrative officers, this can really be a heavy cross to carry. How were your relations with her?

O'BRIEN: I always had very good relations with her. She is French, very demanding and with very special tastes. She insisted on having certain kinds of food for her representational events. She insisted upon having certain kinds of furniture and decorations in the house. The maids all had to have certain kinds of uniforms.

But, she was a very nice person. She was trying to adjust to this very difficult society, trying to do her job as the ambassador's wife. I saw her again a few years ago. A very good person, but difficult.

And if she didn't get what she needed, she would be unhappy. She would insist that I transfer, let's say, the maintenance staff to her house to do the work, because she needed it and she was more important than somebody else whose electrical system wasn't working, etc. So I did.

That was another thing, picking the staff and hiring them. They didn't speak French. Mrs. Aggrey didn't speak Romanian. Anyway, "Mr. O'Brien, come over here and explain to the maid what she has to do!"

I earned my salary in Bucharest, let's put it that way.

Q: Today is August 14, 2007. Mike, how did you get to Berlin and what were you doing?

O'BRIEN: Well, after I left Bucharest my wife and I went back to Washington for German language training. We went to FSI for about four months learning German and

then we went to Berlin in the summer of 1980. Again, I was the admin counselor and my wife worked in the economic section.

Q: You were there from when to when?

O'BRIEN: 1980 to '83. Berlin was a mission at the time, it was not an embassy. The city was occupied. The Berlin Wall was still up. The ambassador was resident in Bonn and he had a residence in Berlin and he came to Berlin about once a month.

The deputy chief of mission was a two star general, an army general, which was unusual, and the senior resident State Department officer was called the U.S. minister.

So the army and the State Department were very closely related in Berlin, occupied the same office building. That was done intentionally after the Second World War to ensure that diplomatic decisions were not made independent of military decisions and *vice versa*.

So we worked very closely with the army and we derived a lot of our support, administrative support, from the army. They had a large administrative contingent there.

Nevertheless, we still had our own administrative staff and I was the administrative counselor.

We had housing which had been requisitioned after the Second World War from the Germans. It was very nice, mainly taken from senior Nazis and the army provided the support for that housing, as well as our offices.

And we had a large budget, which was provided by the German government, they paid all our expenses in Berlin. So we submitted our budgets to the Germans annually and told them what we needed and they were required to provide the funds.

So it was very comfortable for us. We didn't have to plead with the State Department for our budget each year, the way we have to do at most posts. So it was a rather nice arrangement, as far as I was concerned.

And it was also something that the Germans liked. They wanted their city, West Berlin, to be a model and to be quite a contrast to East Berlin. So they wanted to put as much money as they could into West Berlin and we helped them do that. It was very nice.

Q: Who was the minister when you were there?

O'BRIEN: The first person was David Anderson, he's now died. And then after that it was Nelson Ledsky.

The ambassador was Arthur Burns, who had been the Chairman of the Federal Reserve before that. He was quite old at the time, in his early Eighties and somewhat feeble, but

still very alert and a very engaging person. I liked him a lot, he had a nice sense of humor. And he came to Berlin about once a month.

And I went to Bonn fairly frequently, because I had to deal with the administrative section there. But in Berlin we had a traditional admin section, with personnel, budget, communications and security, etc.

We had a couple of other units which were unique to Berlin and one of them was called the Berlin Document Center. This was a repository of the Nazi personnel records, which we captured after the Second World War. They were found in a railroad car in Munich and they were brought to Berlin and put in a building which was part of my section.

There were thousands and thousands of personnel records there and they were the typical kind of personnel records that you would expect to find in any organization. They had copies of travel orders and promotion documents and other kinds of documents which you always see in a personnel file and there were thousands of them.

But the most interesting part of the Document Center was the section which contained the personnel records of SS officers and they had photographs of the SS officers and their wives.

And on one side of the file was the picture of the man, his photograph from the front and in profile and the other side was the photograph of the wife and her profile and on each side was a genealogy which went back to the 18th century and at each branch of the genealogy there were stamps authenticating the record.

So baptisms were on there and marriages and each one had an authenticating stamp, going back to the 18th century, to prove that each SS officer didn't have any Jewish blood.

Of course those files also had promotion documents, travel orders, records of training and all the kinds of things that you see in a personnel file. We had a staff who worked there and scholars were allowed to come in to the Document Center if they had permission and look through the files and do their research.

They weren't allowed to take the files out of the building, but they could do their research in their library. The German government was happy that we did this, because there were many German officials whose files were in the Document Center and they didn't necessarily want that to be public. We didn't allow anyone to do a fishing expedition. So, anyway, that was interesting.

Another section that I was in charge of was part of the Spandau Prison and there was only one prisoner, Rudolf Hess. That prison was administered by the Soviets and the British and the French and the Americans and the administration of the prison changed.

So every month there was a luncheon, a very formal event, at the prison, in which a representative was present and it was more or less a social event. I didn't go every month, but I went from time to time. We always had somebody who would appear. But it was an interesting event.

Q: Were there any developments, while you were there, regarding Spandau?

O'BRIEN: No, I wouldn't say there were, except that Rudolf Hess as a very difficult man. He was very unpleasant. He didn't have any visitors. He had a small cell. But he was still alive. He did not die when I was there. I can't remember exactly when he did die. But, no there were no other developments. It was very much routine, the administration of that prison.

Q: I was just wondering whether for some Cold War reason the Soviets and the Americans and British and French had disputes over things, or not?

O'BRIEN: Well, there were disputes. There were no disputes over Spandau while I was there that I remember. There were disputes mainly about access to East Berlin and maybe some disputes about smuggling people out of East Berlin into West Berlin. While I was there I think there were a couple of incidents in which some military people, or some Americans, did try and succeeded in taking out some East Berliners to West Berlin. Of course, the Soviets and East Germans protested that. That was not our policy, we did not want any official Americans to be involved in any of that, but it did happen, once or twice.

Q: How was David Anderson as a boss?

O'BRIEN: Oh, he was a wonderful person, a very good guy, really very intelligent, very experienced, he certainly did have a lot of experience in Central European affairs and he spoke excellent German. So, professionally, he was top notch, the very best.

And then, as far as a supervisor is concerned, he [was] extremely good with people. He had a wonderful personality, nice sense of humor. He recognized good performance. He was a superb senior officer and after he left Berlin he became the ambassador to Yugoslavia. Very, very top notch Foreign Service Officer.

Q: How did you find relations with the army there?

O'BRIEN: As far as I was concerned, they were quite good, on the administrative side. I made quite an effort and they did, too, to get along.

At the top, I think there was a little friction. Not with David Anderson, he was so good. But after he left, the next minister did have a little trouble with the army, with the general and I think the general had a little trouble with him.

Q: Who was that?

O'BRIEN: That was Nelson Ledsky. I can't remember the general's name, but he was also a kind of difficult person. Rank and age and tenure and status, that was really quite important to this general, and with the State Department that's not so important.

Q: During the three years you were there, how were relations in Berlin. This is right after the Soviets went into Afghanistan, they went in in December of '79 and I was wondering whether there was any concern that they might try to do the same thing in Berlin?

O'BRIEN: I don't remember that. There was quite a bit of difficulty in Poland, if you'll remember, at that time. There was always the threat that the Soviets would go into Warsaw and we were always concerned that there would be a Soviet invasion.

And as a matter of fact I never did go to Poland, even though it was only forty miles from Berlin, because of this trouble. My wife was worried about a Soviet invasion and so we were never able to go.

Q: Did you go into East Berlin much?

O'BRIEN: Oh, yes, we went there all the time. I liked going to East Berlin, because it was very interesting. It was like stepping back into the past. There had not been a lot of development.

And there were very interesting things to buy. We had a very good exchange rate. We changed our money in West Berlin, so we took East marks into East Berlin. We were able to buy things like records and souvenirs and even clothes for a very, very low price, because we got the free market exchange rate.

Now, if we had changed our money in East Berlin, we would not have gotten that. We would have gotten the same exchange rate as with the Deutschemark, but we didn't do that.

Our policy was that East Berlin was not another country, it was just another sector of the occupied city. Therefore our policy was our people could change money in West Berlin, which of course we did.

So, we went to East Berlin, oh, maybe once every couple of weeks, or even more often than that. We went to the opera, we went to the theater, got tickets right in the front rows for three dollars, four dollars.

We had an embassy in East Berlin, too. We got our tickets through them and they got a diplomatic price, so it was a very, very nice arrangement.

Q: Could you go into East Germany per se?

O'BRIEN: Yes, we went to East Germany quite often, every few weeks, for touring and sightseeing. There was a special procedure. We had to go along a certain street, couldn't go through East Berlin. We had to exit West Berlin directly into East Germany and we had to change our license plates on our car and we had to notify the East Germans that we were going.

But once we got across the border into East Germany we were able to drive around very freely and we did. My wife and I went to Leipzig and Dresden and Rostock and other places and it was really quite interesting and we enjoyed it.

Q: Were there any disturbances in Berlin while you were there?

O'BRIEN: No, there were not.

Q: Did you feel that you were spy-ridden?

O'BRIEN: Never, never. That did not bother me. In West Berlin, no, there was none of that. And in East Berlin and in East Germany I never felt that anyone was following us or anyone was looking at us or causing any trouble at all.

The only thing is that when we had to go through the checkpoint from West Berlin to East Berlin of course there were police there and officials and they checked your passport. They checked your ID card and the same thing when you went from West Berlin to West Germany, we had to go on a special road and there were checkpoints along that and you weren't allowed to leave that road. You had to go directly to West Germany from West Berlin on that highway and there were police at the various exits, but we never tried to get off that road.

Q: Did you have anything like a major visit, somebody from the States?

O'BRIEN: Well, we had President Reagan come and that's when he said, "Mr. Gorbachev, take down this Wall!" So that was a major visit, with all the retinue and airplanes and all that, but we had a lot of help on that. The embassy in Bonn sent people, the State Department sent people, all the support staff. But, yes, that was a major visit.

Q: At that time, '80 to '83, did we have an embassy in East Germany?

O'BRIEN: Yes. The embassy was in East Berlin.

Q: How were relations between you and the

O'BRIEN: Oh, well, they were really very good. The embassy in East Berlin relied on us quite heavily for administrative support. I knew the admin officer there quite well and the ambassador. So we considered it part of our responsibility to help them.

They did all their shopping, their grocery shopping and they got their supplies from us, from the commissary. There was a big army commissary and we helped them on a daily basis.

Their job was very difficult, because they had to deal with the East German authorities. It was sort of like my job in Bucharest and I understood that, I understood how difficult it was for them to get things done.

They had to deal with that host government organization which provides services. It was the same kind of setup that we had in Bucharest and I think it was the case in all the communist countries. You didn't just go out on the local economy and do things. You had to deal with this local government organization. So it was difficult for them.

And they had their morale problems, because they couldn't just drive to West Berlin. You had to go through that checkpoint and it took a long time. And their children had to come over to the West in school buses and that was a hassle.

And they didn't have very nice places to live. They lived in those sterile communist-era apartment buildings that were not very pleasant and we all lived in beautiful houses and so there were problems and we understood that.

But I would say the relationship between the embassy in East Berlin and the mission in West Berlin, that relationship was very good.

Q: What was the attitude of the Berliners at that time?

O'BRIEN: Well, I had expected that they would be cold and unfriendly, but the Berliners were wonderful people. They were friendly and patient with us when we had trouble with German and our neighbors were just as welcoming as they could possibly be.

The staff in the mission was very good. Many of the mission employees had worked for the mission since the Second World War. They were old, it was an aging staff, but they were very good, top notch, competent and dedicated.

Now, as far as the people in East Berlin were concerned, the East Germans and the East Berliners were not friendly. They were hostile and rude, but I found the same thing to be true in Romania, people were rude, in stores, in restaurants and impatient.

I don't know exactly why. I have my theories. But they weren't as friendly and warm as the people in West Berlin.

Q: This is to each, other, too? It wasn't just towards Americans?

O'BRIEN: Yes, they were rude.

Q: Well, then, in '83, after this, sounds likes an idyllic time, in a way

O'BRIEN: It was. Berlin was a model posting, it had the best of everything, West Berlin. It was subsidized heavily by the Federal Republic and it had the best parks, the best subways, the best museums, the best street cleaning facilities, the best of everything. So then it was a wonderful place to live.

Q: Well, then, where'd you go, in '83?

O'BRIEN: After that, I was transferred to the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island.

And our daughter was born in Berlin, so she was a baby and my wife took a leave of absence for a year, for two reasons: first, there was no job for her at the Naval War College and secondly she wanted to take care of our daughter for the first year of her life.

So we went to Newport and we rented a house right on the waterfront, a very old colonial house. There were about 15 civilians in my class at the Naval War College and there were military officers from the navy, army, air force and marine corps. All the military people lived on a base right near the Naval War College and they had military housing, but civilians were not given any housing, so we had to find our own house and we did.

And it was a very good experience. The Naval War College was extremely professional. There was no Mickey Mouse kind of stuff. We had very good professors and very interesting courses. We were busy all day long. We had papers to write and lots and lots of reading, more reading than we could ever do and that was intentional. I never took a single weekend off in the whole year, except at Christmas.

I never went to Boston, I never went to Block Island or any other place, because I was always working. It was a very, very good experience and it was a wonderful opportunity, at that age, when I was about forty, to take a year off and just read and think and interact with other people. I'm very appreciative to the State Department for giving me that opportunity.

Q: What sort of courses were you taking there?

O'BRIEN: Mainly, the courses were on history, military history, mainly, throughout the ages, from Greece to Napoleon to the Second World War. For me, that was really quite interesting, because I'm interested in history but I had never really studied military history. That was a major, major course.

And then there were courses on economics, courses on politics and then military strategy. I can't remember all the courses, but it was quite a busy schedule. International relations, anyway, it was quite a rich experience.

Q: Well, then, were you used as a resource, for particularly the military officers?

O'BRIEN: I was never told that I was expected to represent a State Department perspective on various things, but that happened and it was sometimes a little bit intimidating, but that's what happened. I was the only State Department person there.

Q: Okay, well, then, this would bring us up to '84?

O'BRIEN: I was transferred back to Washington and I became the senior post management officer for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. My major responsibility, in addition to overseeing the other post management officers, was China and Japan.

Q: You were doing that from when to when?

O'BRIEN: '84 to '86.

Q: I would imagine China, we were opening up places

O'BRIEN: Yes, that was my major activity. We were planning, at that point, to open five posts in China: we had a post in Beijing, of course, but we were going to open a post in Guangzhou and Shenyang and Chengdu and Wuhan. We had a post in Shanghai, but we were going to build a new consulate there.

So that was really quite an important activity and I made several trips to China. We had a team from the State Department, from FBO to go out there and look at various sites and to negotiate with the Chinese, in a couple of cases, to build new office buildings, housing for our staff and in a couple of cases just renovate what we already had.

And that was a major, major activity and we made some progress. It was very slow, but we negotiated with the Chinese for a place in Chengdu and we already had a consulate in Shenyang.

We checked out various sites in Shanghai, although we didn't make much progress there, because real estate was very expensive in Shanghai and we already had a consulate there, which was kind of a ramshackle old French villa.

But in Guangzhou we did find a nice site, in a hotel, which we began to renovate. So that was a major activity.

And of course we had Hong Kong, which was a very well managed and well run place, although we were building a new apartment complex downtown for ten million dollars or so and the consul general's residence was being rebuilt.

So there was quite a bit of activity during those years in China.

Q: And sticking to China, considering our experience in the Soviet Union, were we concerned about bugging and all the espionage things? We were really having an awful time in the Soviet Union.

O'BRIEN: Well, yes, we were concerned about that, especially in Beijing, because that was an ongoing operation. But, in the other cities, we're getting a little bit ahead of ourselves.

We weren't to the point yet where we were even building anything. We were out there looking for sites where we might build. And so I didn't get involved in any of the planning or any of the security matters, which I'm sure they did, eventually, but not during my tour.

Q: Any problems in Japan?

O'BRIEN: No, there were no problems. It was just a well-greased operation. I went there a couple of times, just for orientation. My job concerning Japan was mainly for personnel: assignments, making sure that the right people got into the right places, that the embassy and the consulate got the people that they wanted and that the people who wanted to go there went there, that people got their language training. But no, there were no problems.

Q: How about Korea, South Korea?

O'BRIEN: No, I didn't have any problems with South Korea, either. We had a very good post management officer who did that. We had a very good staff in EAP and most of the other posts went quite well. I can't remember any particular problems. I was there 'til 86. The last part of my time in Washington, I went to French language training, before going to Dakar, Senegal.

In the beginning of '86, it must have been, I went to French language training, because I had been assigned to Dakar, because it was time for us to go for our hardship assignment, because we hadn't been to one

Q: Romania was

O'BRIEN: My wife and I decided we better take our hardship post and choose one that came up when we had the opportunity, rather than being assigned to one. And so I had the choice of going to Dakar or to I think it was Santiago and I don't remember why Santiago was a hardship post, but it must have been and we decided to go to Dakar.

Q: So your wife was going back

O'BRIEN: Well, when we were in Washington she worked in the Bureau of European Affairs, on Eastern European matters.

Q: So, you're off to Dakar and you were in Dakar from when to when?

O'BRIEN: 1986 to 1989.

Q: What was the situation in the country?

O'BRIEN: Well, when we got there, everything was very calm. We had never been to Africa before. It was quite a shock to get there. Even when we arrived at the airport, it was a shock, because it was so hot and very dirty and there were beggars everywhere. Anyway, it was a shock.

But we had a very nice house and we were taken to our house when we arrived and the electricity went out and the air conditioning went off, but, anyway, we managed for the first couple of days. The embassy was a modern, new facility.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

O'BRIEN: His name was Lannon Walker. I was the admin counselor. We had a very good DCM, Jennifer Ward.

We had guards on our house 24 hours a day and we had bars on all the windows. It wasn't terrorism we were worried about there, it was petty theft. We had alarms on all the doors and windows.

We had a maid and a cook, we had a nanny for our daughter, because of course we both worked. We couldn't really do the grocery shopping, because that was difficult and the cook was very good, she knew how to read French, so she could read recipes.

So it was a very comfortable life. We didn't like to go in town too much, because of the beggars. They were very aggressive beggars, come up and pull on your clothes and your sleeve and touch you. The ones with leprosy, with no fingers and all that, was very upsetting. So we tried to stay away from town, except when we went to the embassy and we just drove there.

My wife worked for the DCM. In my section, we had a traditional admin section and had a pretty good American staff. The African staff was also pretty good.

Towards the end of our tour, there were some political problems with Mauritania. In fact, it was a rather serious problem and there was a simultaneous, unexplained, irruption between the Mauritians who lived in Senegal and the Senegalese who lived in Mauritania and there were riots. We had to stay in our houses because it really became quite dangerous.

The Senegalese attacked Mauritanian shop owners. Most of the little shops, they really weren't shops, they were like little shacks where they sold paper towels and canned food and things like that, little wooden shacks. They attacked them and burned them and

thousands of the Mauritians were herded into the airport, with very little protection from the police. The same thing happened in Mauritania, in Nouakchott, thousands of Senegalese shop owners were attacked by the Mauritians. It was a racial kind of thing, because the Mauritians were sort of light skinned, Arabic type people and of course the Senegalese are all black Africans.

So, anyway, that was really rather dangerous and upsetting. Thousands and thousands, I don't know how many thousands, of Mauritians were transferred back to Mauritania by I think it was the Egyptian government, or maybe it was the Algerians.

There were many, many flights back and forth and so thousands of Mauritians were transported from Senegal to Mauritania and thousands of Senegalese were transported back to Senegal from Mauritania.

It was certainly unexpected. No one told us that this was coming. Anyway, I would say that was the only disturbing problem that happened while I was in Senegal.

Q: How did you find the Senegalese staff?

O'BRIEN: Well, that was very interesting. This was my first experience in Africa and I found that I didn't understand them at all. I thought, "My goodness, they're just incomprehensible."

I didn't know what motivated them. I didn't know how to react to them and I found that the rest of the American staff didn't really understand them, either. When they didn't perform, you'd get angry and they didn't respond, or they responded with fear, not with performance.

So we hired a consulting firm to come in and give us a training course, the Americans, to teach us how to deal with the Senegalese employees. It was a course which lasted perhaps a week or two and all the Americans had to go to it.

This firm took video cameras and they interviewed any member of the Senegalese staff that would agree to be interviewed and they taped what they said. And they asked them, "How do you like the Americans? How do you relate to them? What do you think about them? How do they treat you? How could you work better? What would you do to perform better, if you could tell the Americans?"

And so all this was taped and then the firm showed us these tapes and it was really quite revealing. I learned a tremendous amount from it and some of the other Americans were receptive. Now, of course, there were some Americans who said, "Look, we're the boss and they're the workers. They have to do what we say." Now they weren't receptive.

But the people who were receptive to the contracting people, they really learned and I learned a tremendous amount. I found that we had to adapt our practices to the

Senegalese if we wanted to get the most out of them and it was a very interesting experience.

Q: Can you give some examples of what you had to adapt? Where was the disconnect?

O'BRIEN: One of things that almost all the Senegalese said when they were being taped, they said, "Oh, we really like the Americans, they're so nice, but they're rude."

And then the interviewer would say, "Well, now, why are they rude?"

And they said, "Well, because they never ask us about our families, they never ask us about wives or our husbands or our children. And they never say, 'Good morning.' When they come to work, they just go right to their desks and they start to work and they never come and say, 'Good morning' to us."

And then they said, "We have to talk to our families all day long and so we're always on the telephone and the Americans get so impatient with us, but we need to talk to our families. We have to find out, how are the children doing and what are we supposed to know and what are we going to have for dinner and that sort of thing."

And that was very important and the consulting firm said to us, "If you don't say, 'Good morning' to your employees and ask them, each one, 'How are your children today?'" And you have to go to each employee in the office, you can't just say it to one and you have to go from desk to desk. You don't have to, but if you don't do it, they're going to think you're rude and they're not going to give you their best performance."

Seems strange, but that was one of the most important things and we started to do that.

Q: Well, I can see, that one can do, but to have a staff that spends a significant amount of time on the telephone to their homes would cause problems, because, no matter how you slice it, it's time out of when they should be doing some work.

O'BRIEN: I know. My secretary was a Senegalese and she had two teenage children and at first it drove me crazy, because she would hold the phone on her shoulder and she'd be talking as fast as she could on that telephone while she was typing and if I wanted to ask her something I would have to interrupt her.

And my attitude changed slightly after that study and I figured, "Well, I guess I'd better accept the fact that their jobs were not the most important things in their lives. The most important things were their families."

With Americans, the first thing you say to somebody is, "What do you do?" In Senegal, the first thing you say to somebody is, "Who's your brother? Who's your father?" Your job is something secondary.

It took us, it took me, some time to accept the difference, but I think we got more out of the staff by accepting it.

Q: Particularly in western Africa, I've heard people talk about, "Well, the staff is mostly, the clerks come from Nigeria" or something of that nature. Obviously, this was a French-speaking place, but where did the Senegalese fit into you might say the work pattern of western Africa?

O'BRIEN: Well, now, there were several classes there. The secretaries, the women, mainly, who worked in the consular section and the admin section, personnel, etc, even GSO [General Services Office], were educated people.

They spoke very good French, perfect French. They were fairly well off economically. There was quite an emphasis on clothes and style, jewelry and hairdos and all that. That was really quite important to them.

So they were from a higher class. Some of the workers in the general services section and the drivers, etc, they were not educated people. They needed to be fairly closely supervised by Americans.

And we had a few very well educated employees who did political analysis. They were mostly educated in France, although some were educated at the university in Dakar.

But I would say that the general population in Dakar, at least the visible population that I saw outside the government, were very poor people. Many of them came from the rural areas, had come into the city after independence and that's why the city grew so much.

Government officials, though, the high level ones that we worked with, were really quite impressive.

Q: Was there any French influence there?

O'BRIEN: Oh, yes. The Senegalese are very proud of French culture and the way that it shaped their society and there's no hostility that I ever noticed between the Senegalese and the French. As a matter of fact, it's the very opposite. They're very proud of their ability to speak French and their knowledge of French culture and history. After all, Dakar was the capital of French West Africa.

Q: Who ran the shops?

O'BRIEN: The shops in the city?

Q: Yeah.

O'BRIEN: I would say mainly they were Lebanese and that's a different section of society. They were on their own. They had their own cultural group and they had lived there for generations. In fact, many of the Lebanese had never been to Lebanon.

Q: Was Dakar sort of center for support for our western African missions?

O'BRIEN: Yes, it was. As a matter of fact, that was part of our role in the admin section, to support other posts in West Africa that were not nearly as well off as Dakar. So we supported the posts in the Gambia and Niger, Niamey. Not Abidjan.

Q: In a different category. Were there any flare-ups in other African countries, you had to take in people who'd been evacuated from

O'BRIEN: No, we didn't have that problem, not while I was there.

Q: Today is August 31, 2007. In 1989, you're off to Hong Kong. Mike, how did your assignment to Hong Kong come about?

O'BRIEN: Well, I had worked in the Bureau of Eastern Asian Affairs prior to my assignment to Dakar. I knew people there in that bureau and so when the assignment to Dakar was ready to end, I asked to be assigned to Hong Kong. I knew about Hong Kong, I had been the post management officer for China and Japan and there was a job for my wife there, since we're a tandem couple. And so we got the assignment.

Q: You were there from '89 to when?

O'BRIEN: '92.

Q: What was your job?

O'BRIEN: I was the administrative counselor.

Q: And your wife's job?

O'BRIEN: She was secretary to the deputy chief of mission.

Q: Who was consul general when you were there?

O'BRIEN: It was Richard Williams and the deputy was David Brown. They were both outstanding officers. Of course David Brown was the one who had to coordinate all the activities of the mission. He did a wonderful job with all the numerous agencies that were represented there, with all their chief officers, with their egos and who know whom they reported to, not necessarily him, but in Washington. But he did a wonderful job of managing that very complicated situation.

We had of course the military, we had the Department of Agriculture, we had the INS, we had Commerce. Anyway, it was a big mission.

Q: Well, at the time you were there, '89, was there the feeling that the consulate general there was going to diminish in short order and move to Beijing, or not?

O'BRIEN: Yes, there was a lot of uncertainty at that point, because the post reported to the Bureau of East Asian Affairs, not to EUR, and so we didn't know how the situation would evolve.

The principle office reported back to the bureau, not to London and we didn't know what was going to happen. Would the post continue to be independent, or would it become subordinate to Beijing?

What would happen to the FSNs? Would they have to be replaced? Would they have to work through some kind of central personnel bureau in the Chinese bureaucracy?

What would happen to the currency? Would they still be using Hong Kong dollars, or would they use the renminbi?

There were all kinds of questions and some fears, serious fears, among the FSNs.

Q: Well, then, how did you operate?

O'BRIEN: Well, I got there in 1989, just a few months after the Tiananmen Square massacres, so there was a lot of turmoil and worry in Hong Kong. My section was a traditional admin section and I had a very good staff. The Hong Kong Chinese employees were excellent and I just picked up from my predecessor.

Q: Now, when was the turnover?

O'BRIEN: That was in 1997.

Q: So this was in the offing, but

O'BRIEN: Yes, but there was a great deal of worry, even in 1989 and of course I was there from '89 to '92 and as the turnover approached, then the concern increased.

Q: Well, now, were there any particular administrative problems that you had while you were there?

O'BRIEN: Well, we concerned about the future of our property. We had a lease on the consulate building, a 99-year lease. It was the only one that existed in Hong Kong, except for the cathedral, and the 99-year lease of course was issued by the UK, not the Chinese. We didn't know what was going to happen to our building.

We also owned some other property, we owned the buildings, not the land. We didn't know what was going to happen to those properties, our residences, they were.

And then of course the personnel problems, the concerns of the FSNs. That was rather serious.

Q: Was there anything you could do about that?

O'BRIEN: There wasn't much. We just didn't know. I don't think the world knew what was going to happen to Hong Kong, after the transfer of sovereignty. I don't think the British knew. We certainly didn't know. Of course we had the guarantee of the Chinese that everything would remain the same for fifty years, but people doubted that.

Q: Were you working on contingency plans: what if they do this, what if they do that?

O'BRIEN: Well, one thing we did do, we tried to regularize the situation of our real estate properties there and we tried to figure out how to buy them and to finalize that process before the transfer of authority.

And so we worked very closely with FBO, OBO now, and various law firms and real estate agencies in Hong Kong to try to figure out how could we purchase these properties and resolve the questions of ownership. So that was a very important thing.

Then, as far as the FSNs were concerned, we did try to ensure that they would be treated properly, that their salaries would not be reduced, that all their benefits would remain, like annual leave and health insurance and things like that.

But, again, I left about five years before the transfer, so we didn't really progress very far on any of these things.

Q: Was there speculation on the part of our more senior FSNs over whether or not to get American visas?

O'BRIEN: Yes, there was quite a bit of that. The ones that had worked for us for a long time applied for their visas. Other FSNs who had not worked long enough applied for visas to other countries, strange places like the Maldives or Abu Dhabi or someplace like that where you could buy them.

Also, some of the FSNs got visas and citizenship in Canada, because that could be bought at the time. I don't remember how much it was, but it was expensive. It must have been at least \$100,000.

But, yes, there was quite a bit of activity in that area.

Q: Did you have any contact with the mainland Chinese?

O'BRIEN: Well, we provided a lot of support to the other posts in China: to Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Chengdu and so I had contact with the Americans in those posts.

I didn't have too much contact the Chinese in those places. In order to understand the Hong Kong Chinese, because they're quite different from the other Chinese, I wanted to have some kind of training program, so that we Americans could understand what their motivation was and what their objectives were and what concerned them in the work environment and what was important to them in their lives.

So, yeah, I had a good deal of contact with the Chinese, but not so much with the mainland Chinese.

Q: Did you do anything sort of similar to what you'd done before in Dakar?

O'BRIEN: Dakar, yes, we did exactly the same thing. We hired a consulting firm run by a very ambitious and aggressive Chinese woman. They presented a course to us on what motivates Hong Kong Chinese and what their impressions are of Americans and what Americans could do to improve relations between the Chinese employees and Americans. We also invited spouses, so it wasn't just for the employees.

Q: What were some of the issues that this course addressed?

O'BRIEN: One of the things which I remembered which really struck me was that one of the employees, or some employees, said, "Americans are so insensitive."

And then the interviewer asked, "Well, what do you mean? Why do you say that?"

And the employee, it was a woman, she said, "Well, they're always telling us that we're doing such a good job. They're always congratulating us, they're always telling us how good we are. And that is so insincere. Why should they tell us that? We're just doing our job."

And my reaction to that, as well as the interviewer's, was that the Hong Kong Chinese were absolutely driven to success. They insisted upon the highest standards and so it wasn't necessary to tell them all the time that they were doing well.

So, anyway, that's one of the things that struck me, that this employee felt rather strongly about it: "The Americans are insincere. Why are they telling us this?"

Q: Of course, so many of us are used to not very skilled work at other posts and all that, so I'm sure, coming to Hong Kong, it's such a delight.

O'BRIEN: It was wonderful. And Americans need constant reinforcement. If you don't tell your employees, your American employees, "Hey, you're doing well" and "That was

a good job,” they’ll start asking, “Is there something wrong with me?” But the Chinese people, the Hong Kong Chinese, weren’t like that.

Q: Well, did you have a reverse course?

O’BRIEN: I don’t remember if we did a reverse course. Maybe we felt we didn’t need it, because we were so pleased with the performance of the Chinese. But I don’t remember if we had a reverse course.

Q: Was there a concern about fraud and corruption, because obviously the administrative side is dealing with money, contract and various things?

O’BRIEN: In my career I was always concerned about that, didn’t matter what post I was at, I was constantly worried about fraud and theft and internal controls. I devoted a great deal of my time, at every post, to ensuring that I did everything I could to make sure that there wasn’t any fraud and I pretty much followed the guidelines that the State Department gave us on how to do that. But I can’t say that I was more concerned in Hong Kong than I was in any other place.

Q: Was there any spillover from the consular section, where getting an American visa is like winning the jackpot, in many cases and often this permeates other parts of the post?

O’BRIEN: Well, the consular section in Hong Kong was extremely busy, and the lines waiting in the morning would extend all the way around the block, up the hill. Hundreds of people would be waiting in line to get visas or get whatever they needed from the consular section and they went in the main entrance. It was not chaotic, but certainly congested.

And the consular section had numerous junior officers who were working the visa line and busy all day long processing these applications and that created some stress. We had to make sure that they were taken care of, in terms of their housing and, if they had children, in the school, busing for the schoolchildren, allowances, all those things that people worry about in their family lives.

Yes, there was a spillover from the consular section to the administrative section, ‘cause we had to support those people, they needed it.

Q: I would think that Hong Kong, being a shipping and air hub and all, that you probably didn’t have a long wait for needed supplies?

O’BRIEN: No, you could buy anything that you wanted in Hong Kong and if you couldn’t find it, then somebody would make it for you. So, no, there was no problem at all with that and if we needed things from the State Department like office supplies or computers or whatever, the bureau was very responsive to that.

Q: How much were you plugged into the computer age by this point?

O'BRIEN: I was never particularly adept at computers. When I got to Hong Kong I just told my secretary, "Look, I want a typewriter and a yellow pad and a pen." She was horrified, so she insisted that I get a word processor. This was in 1989, a long time ago. I got the word processor and I found that it was really helpful and so slowly and gradually I learned how to use it and that was my experience.

With regard to the rest of the admin section, for example, travel, we did a lot of support on travel and reservations, etc, with the airlines and hotels. We had thousands of official visitors in Hong Kong, as you could imagine, every year. Everybody wants to go to Hong Kong. We had a computer set up and we did our business with the hotels and the airlines and congressmen and VIPs and everybody else who came to Hong Kong. We had that computerized, so that was good.

And we started to put our inventories and our housing records on the computer, so that was a development which was helpful. As far as the consular section was concerned, they had already made a certain amount of progress on using computers for their applications and all that.

Remember, now, this was 1989 to '92, so you were sort of in the beginning stages.

Q: What about the British administration? Was it pretty much run by the Hong Kong Chinese?

O'BRIEN: Well, the most senior officials were usually British, but there was also a hierarchy among the Chinese. They were quite accomplished and dedicated. In fact, in many ways they were more strict about regulations and procedures than the British.

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

O'BRIEN: Well, I would say that we did have some petty theft in some of our apartment buildings. We also had the constant concern about consular issues. But, no, I would say not, there were no particular security concerns when I was there.

Q: Did we have an American school there?

O'BRIEN: Well, it was an international school. It was a wonderful school. It was run by the Lutheran Church. This was an elementary school. They had about 1200 students, of course mostly from the international community, but also a good number of Chinese and most of the teachers there were Americans or British and it was really quite a good school.

Then there was an American high school also, which was located on another campus and that was not affiliated with the church, but that was also a very good school, our employees who sent their children there were quite happy with it. Their standards were very high. They didn't accept every student. As a matter of fact, we had some students in

the mission who were not accepted, which was difficult, because then they had to have tutors and we had to make special arrangements for them.

But, in general, the schools were excellent.

Q: You mentioned your family had some medical problems. How did you find the medical situation?

O'BRIEN: Well, my daughter developed diabetes. She was only six years ago. We had no history of diabetes in our families, so we didn't know anything about it. When she became ill and felt bad we didn't know what the trouble was. We took her to a hospital and they tested her blood and they said she had diabetes. We had to go to the emergency room in a big hospital on the other side of the island. It was a Chinese hospital and we had to wait a long time and it was quite upsetting and then she was admitted and she stayed there for weeks.

But we had a very good Chinese doctor, educated in the UK, spoke excellent English. He gave me and my wife a training course of a week or ten days on how to deal with this, and then he took care of my daughter for the next two years.

And we didn't want to go back to the United States, because air travel when you have diabetes is very difficult. You have to adjust the insulin dosage according to the time zones, so we stayed there and the Chinese doctors were just outstanding, couldn't be better.

Q: Were there any significant problems while you were in Hong Kong?

O'BRIEN: Well, I would say that the major concern when I was there was the future: what would happen, who would we be dealing with, would we be dealing with Chinese authorities from Beijing, would the administration that existed in Hong Kong remain, would we deal with that? That was the main problem.

Of course, there was also the question of Macau, what was going to happen to Macau? The Portuguese had a lease which lasted I guess maybe two or three years longer than the British lease in Hong Kong.

That was another problem, because we were accredited to Macau also.

But, no, I would say in general life and work in Hong Kong was pretty comfortable and successful.

Q: What was your impression of the China hands who were concentrated there?

O'BRIEN: Of course there was a lot of reporting on China from Hong Kong. The Hong Kong press, Hong Kong politicians, they look on events in China from a different

perspective and so that was what our political and economic sections did. They were quite good.

I would say half the sections, the Americans, spoke Cantonese, as opposed to Mandarin and so they were able to read the local press. However, that wasn't terribly necessary, because everybody in Hong Kong who's in any position of authority speaks English or who's educated at all. So that wasn't terribly important, although they did have a good command of Cantonese.

Q: You left there in '92. Where'd you go?

O'BRIEN: I came back here.

Q: Today is September 6, 2007. I'm continuing my interview with Michael O'Brien. You came back to Washington to do what?

O'BRIEN: I was an executive assistant to the assistant secretary for administration. He was a retired admiral who had been in charge of the Seabees and he was a political appointee. He was brought in mainly I think to oversee FBO. In those days it was FBO, now it's OBO.

We had five assistants and one executive assistant in the front office, plus a couple of secretaries. My job was to supervise the assistants, each of whom had a particular area in which he or she was responsible.

And I spent most of my time with the assistant secretary, facilitating his activities, his assignments, his travels, his appointments. It was quite a busy and diverse kind of job.

The bureau was and still is the largest in the State Department. It oversees travel and transportation, which means the travel of all employees overseas, back to Washington, the transportation of their effects, the transportation of all the equipment that we send overseas.

It oversees the procurement operations of the Department, all the contracting for all the bureaus, both in the Department and overseas. It oversaw, at that point, the Foreign Building operation, which was in charge of all our buildings overseas, the construction of new facilities, the maintenance of all the facilities that we have overseas, the funding of all that maintenance and the training of the building and maintenance officers who go overseas.

At that point also the bureau was in charge of all communications and all information technology, the procurement of computers, the training of employees to use computers. It was in charge of security, domestic security as well as overseas security, and all the implications that had. The bureau was also in charge of the operation of the State Department building and all of the facilities in Washington and all the annexes.

And also finally we were involved with the assignment of administrative counselors to posts overseas. We were also responsible for liaison with the White House and the Secret Service on all travel for the president and for the vice president overseas.

And so the job the job was really quite diverse and had lots of different functions.

I was there for about a year-and-a-half and Admiral Fort was the assistant secretary. After about a year the administration changed and since Admiral Fort was a Republican and Bill Clinton was elected, a new assistant secretary came in. That was Pat Kennedy. He is now, I think, I've heard that he's been nominated at least to be the new Under Secretary for Management.

Q: While you were doing this, obviously there's a huge set of issues that you're dealing with, but can you sort out a couple that you think might be, for somebody looking at the running of the Department, particularly from your perspective, that you think might be particularly interesting to talk about?

O'BRIEN: Well, I would say the most interesting and the most difficult and complex would be foreign building operations, because of the whole range of activities, from architecture to construction to security of the buildings to decoration of the buildings, the interior design, the funding and that was probably the most visible kind of thing that we did.

Many of the other activities are taken for granted by people, when they work properly. It's only when they don't work that people notice them. So I would say that something like travel and transportation is taken for granted, although you need a whole staff to manage it. But if it works well, nobody notices it or even understands or recognizes it. It's only when it doesn't work that it comes to peoples' attention.

But, anyway, with the foreign buildings operation, everybody notices that. You've got new construction, you've got plans, you've got liaison with the post, you have to consult with the ambassador: how does he want to have his building, does he agree with what you proposed. You've got space planners, you have to assess the future of the post, is it going to grow, is it going to be downsized.

When you plan, you don't want to build something that's too big, you don't want to build something that's too small. You've got to stay within a budget. You've got to work with Congress on all of that.

You've got the very large FBO staff, which was located and still is in Rosslyn. So that was really quite an important aspect of the job and I would say that anybody who wants to look at that period would probably want to examine that activity.

Q: Going back some time, things have changed, I know, but FBO at one time was in the pocket of Congressman Wayne Hays.

O'BRIEN: Yes, but that was before my time.

Q: But I'm saying it had the reputation of putting buildings up without consultation with the people who were going to be using it and all. By the time you were involved with it, things had really changed, hadn't they?

O'BRIEN: I would say yes. In those days when I was there, we had to deal quite closely with not just the post and the ambassador, but also with the bureau, whichever bureau it was, to make sure that we were planning properly.

We didn't want to build something that was too big and of course we had to project what size the staff would be and also not just the American staff of course but the FSN staff, what was going to be the consular workload and then also at that point we had this important consideration of security.

There was a requirement that we have a 100 foot setback on all new buildings. You couldn't build them next to the street and we had to find property that would allow us to have the 100 foot setback for security purposes. Then, of course, we had the whole problem of existing buildings that were not secure, that we had had for many, many years and we had to do the best we could to secure them.

And most of those buildings were located right on the sidewalk. Ambassador's residences had the same problem: how do you secure them?

Anyway, that was a major consideration and still is, and it required a great deal of money to make these buildings secure. When we were not able to make them secure we had to relocate the ambassador residences or the office buildings. And finding locations in cities consistent with this setback requirement was really quite difficult. So that was a major activity that we had when I was there.

Q: Did you find there were areas of power or influence or interests that were out there that you hadn't really dreamed about, either political or commercial or what have you?

O'BRIEN: Well, that's an interesting question. Yes, there were. The first thing that occurs to me was our embassy in Ottawa. The Canadian embassy in Washington is located in a very prominent place, right off Pennsylvania Avenue, overlooking the Capitol. We wanted to make sure that our embassy in Ottawa was also located in a very prominent place. So there was that consideration. We had to make sure we found the right location. So, yes, that was a political consideration.

Then I would say that the consulate in Istanbul was located in a very ancient and historically important building, but was completely insecure, so we had to deal with that situation.

Q: How did you deal with that?

O'BRIEN: While I was there, we simply tried to tie up the situation with bailing wire and string. We couldn't really secure the building and I don't know what's happened since then.

Another example would be the residence in Buenos Aires, which is a former palace, actually. The Department wanted to sell it, because it was so extravagant, but the ambassador did not. And so we had to deal with that situation.

Q: How'd you deal with it?

O'BRIEN: The ambassador won and we kept it and I'm glad.

Q: I take it it was a political ambassador at the time?

O'BRIEN: No, it was Terence Todman.

And also the embassy in Prague. The ambassador's residence is in a wonderful palace which was built in the Twenties, also very extravagant and which we got after the Second World War. We bought it and some people in the Department wanted to sell it.

We had to negotiate that and we did not sell it. I think it would be very difficult to sell it, because who would be able to use it? Anyway, we kept it and we still have it and I was very pleased about that, too.

So those were the kinds of things that happened, the kinds of negotiations, the considerations, which most people wouldn't know about.

Q: I'm just curious, on the travel side, every time I had to fill out my travel voucher, I kept thinking back when I was in Saudi Arabia, I was in Dhahran and we were cheek by jowl with Aramco, which had American staff and Aramco just figured out how much it would cost to send an American first class to New York or to their home town in the States, handed them the money and said, "You're on your own, fella."

And sometimes they could save a lot of money, or they could go around the world, they could do whatever they wanted, as long as they came and went on schedule.

Did we ever consider some such arrangement? I could think it would just cut out so much paperwork and expense.

O'BRIEN: We certainly did. We spent hours and hours agonizing over that issue and it's very political; it was then. I don't know what the regulations are now, but there was extreme pressure from the Congress and from the public and from the media to avoid the appearance of extravagance in travel.

At that point we were forced, because of this pressure, to write regulations requiring employees to travel by economy class on all trips, except for some which lasted more than 12 hours, or something like that.

Even when people were traveling overseas on transfer to Africa, with five children, or three children and the cat and the dog, they still had to travel economy class, packed in the back of the airplane. Anyway, it was really bad and even if you were 6'5" tall, like Admiral Fort, you had to travel economy class.

So we wrote regulations to that effect, but it didn't happen quickly and we weren't particularly happy about that, but we had to do it.

And, as far as the cost is concerned, we even got to the point where if you were able to upgrade, for one reason or another, you still couldn't do it, because of appearances. It would look bad, so you still had to travel economy class. So that's what happened while I was there and it was rather disappointing.

Q: Was there any sympathy for the situation in Congress?

O'BRIEN: I didn't really work on that too much. I got the message back from people who did work on it and we were told, at least I was, that there was no sympathy.

Q: Are there any other issues where you found yourself particularly involved?

O'BRIEN: No. It was a busy job, but it was kind of routine. We had no major crises while I was there. It was very interesting for me to work for a navy admiral, because I had been in the navy myself and he was quite a personality, a very strong personality, who was adjusting to life in the State Department, which was quite an adjustment for him. Rank and importance and status and all that are very important in the military, but in the State Department, everybody's important, even if you're a junior officer. Just ask anyone, and Admiral Fort had difficulty dealing with that situation. But it was quite an experience for me to work for him.

Q: So when the Clinton Administration came in, did your job change?

O'BRIEN: No. What happened was, Admiral Fort left and then there was a period in which there was only an acting assistant secretary, Jerry Tolson. He had been the head of FBO, he came over for several months and then Pat Kennedy was appointed. He was the admin counselor in Cairo and then I was offered the job as executive secretary of the Bureau of International Affairs. And so a couple of months after Pat Kennedy came, I went to that new job.

Q: While you were in that previous job, did you get involved with our embassy in Moscow?

O'BRIEN: Oh, yes, that was quite an issue. It was such a sensitive issue that I must say I was not terribly involved in that. That was something between Admiral Fort and Jerry Tolson, the head of FBO, and their meetings were closed and I was not involved much. I knew that there was quite a bit of tension and there was quite a lot of worry. But anyway, no, I was not involved in that.

Q: Go back to the Canadian issue. First place, how did the Canadians get that hunk of property? It's right across from the National Gallery of Art.

O'BRIEN: That's where it is. That's a good question. I don't know, because these things take years to develop and I don't know when they acquired that property, that was before my time. There was a whole history there, I'm sure, but I don't have it.

Q: Okay, there's a fait accompli. The Canadians have got this nice property. So we're saying, "Okay, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander." Were you involved in getting sauce for the gander?

O'BRIEN: Only peripherally, but the thing is that the rules change all the time, our rules. So here we get a property in Ottawa that is great and then the Congress says you have to have a 100-foot setback and the property doesn't have a 100-foot setback. So the rules have changed.

Then we have to go out and look for something else and it takes forever. So these things just go on and on and on. And you can't just make the decisions yourself. You have to check them out with committees in the Congress and all that and so it's very, very complicated.

So that's what happened and I know that we do have a new property in Ottawa, but I haven't seen it and I don't know much about it, now.

Q: Today is October 16, 2007, Mike, how long did you have this job in the Bureau of International Affairs?

O'BRIEN: '93 to '95.

Q: Can you explain what IO was responsible for at that time? These things keep changing.

O'BRIEN: Well, the bureau was responsible essentially for liaison between the United States government and the UN and so we worked with the UN in New York and with the UN in Geneva and other UN offices. There's a UN office in Rome and one in Paris, one in the Hague, Nairobi, and Montreal. And that was essentially the job of the bureau, many agencies in these places and my job was the administrative side of it.

Q: Okay, at the time you went there, who was the head of IO at that time?

O'BRIEN: His name was Douglas Bennet. He went on to be the president of Wesleyan University in Connecticut. He was a political appointee, but a good guy, very intelligent, very good manager and very good with people.

One of the most important things that I was responsible for was the payments to the UN organizations which the United States made. We were responsible for almost two billion dollars a year in payments and they had to be made on time, because if you missed a payment of two hundred million dollars by one day that would cost lots of money in terms of interest, etc.

And it was very difficult because the payments couldn't be made unless certain certifications were obtained. Congress required certain assurances that certain conditions were met.

The payments were often made through the Federal Reserve Bank. Sometimes they were made directly in the United States, sometimes they were made to banks in other countries. Sometimes they were made in dollars, sometimes they were made in other currencies.

And so it was very, very complicated and it had to be absolutely accurate. So that was a very important aspect of the job that I had.

Also, we had to support the posts that we had in each place, USUN in New York, with the office building and with the ambassador's residence at the Waldorf. We had to support the mission in Geneva, with all of those employees and there were about, I suppose, 200 employees there. Then we had the mission in Rome, where the FAO, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization, is located and the United Nations Environmental Program, which was located in Nairobi, and the Civil Aviation Organization, which was located in Montreal.

While I was in the bureau, we opened an office in The Hague for the International Criminal Court, which was established at about that time. We had to recruit lawyers from numerous agencies in the United States government and house them and we had to set up offices.

All these activities had to be staffed and so we had to locate the proper employees who had the proper skills and of course it all had to be funded, so that was part of the budget.

In my office, we didn't have to budget for the payments to the UN organizations, we didn't budget the two billion dollars. That was done by the substantive offices in the bureau, who would work out the details about how much you need, for example, aid in this country or medical support in that country or funding for this organization or that. We didn't do that.

But after that was done and presented to the Congress, the money was then given to us and then we would have to pay it out.

So those were essentially the main aspects of my job. Of course supporting the bureau in the Department was very important. We had about 150 employees in the Department and funding that and supporting them, many of the employees there were civil service employees who'd been there for many, many years and who had the expertise. They were the continuity in the bureau and extremely important.

Q: Oh, absolutely. Well, let's take a couple of these things. First place, coming in in '94 was not the greatest time to be involved with International Organizations, election wise. Newt Gingrich and Jesse Helms and all came in, a whole new group of congress people came in, many of whom were boasting that they'd never had a passport and the UN was sort of number one on their hit list, practically. You must have felt this quite strongly, didn't you?

O'BRIEN: Yes, we did, in the bureau, but a lot of the criticism was on the peacekeeping efforts that we were not terribly successful with, or the UN wasn't. But the UN does a lot of things that are very important in the world -- things like telecommunications and intellectual property rights and environmental issues, health care, AIDS prevention and care and other medical problems. And those things never really appear in the press and the politicians don't really focus on those things publicly.

So I would say that, yes, there were problems, but not across the board, no.

Q: Did you find yourself running up against the staff of, particularly Jesse Helms and the Foreign Relations Committee and all?

O'BRIEN: Not in my office, although I think that did happen in the bureau. But I was focused mainly on administrative matters and I was presented with the resources. Of course, I had to ask for them, but I was fairly successful in getting what I needed. I didn't get involved too much in the political side of things.

Q: But on the political side, the UN, particularly its missions abroad, often is a place used for political payoffs, sending political appointees to various missions dealing with UN organizations and some of these people could be prima donnas. Did you have some problems with the care and feeding of such people?

O'BRIEN: Well, the minister in Geneva was a political appointee. He was a lawyer and his specialty was intellectual property rights. He had to be handled and taken care of.

The ambassador in Montreal was a political appointee, the one at the Civil Aviation Organization, but she was no problem at all. The chief of the mission in Nairobi was a Foreign Service Officer, so he fit in.

And in The Hague we didn't have a chief of mission to the Criminal Court. We had the ambassador in the embassy, but we had assigned these lawyers to the Criminal Court, so we didn't have a problem with any minister or ambassador there.

And in the United Nations, in USUN, we had Mrs. Albright and what she wanted, she got.

Q: From your perspective, were you getting the money on time to pay the UN, for example?

O'BRIEN: No, that was a big problem and so there was continuous controversy about that, but if we didn't get the money, then I didn't get it, so I didn't really have to worry about it.

So that wasn't my area. The discussions about money withheld because of UN reform, the Congress was insisting that certain things be done, certain money was being withheld for political reasons and other reasons, but, again, that wasn't my area. I only took care of it after we got it.

Q: Well did you get yourself involved, as you took over this job, did you find some sort of tricky places where money was not being allocated or spent wisely, or legally, or that sort of thing?

O'BRIEN: Well, no, I think we had to worry about paying bills twice. If you paid a hundred million dollars twice, you had to get the money back right away, but that never happened when I was in the job, although I understand that it did happen with my successor. Whoever the money was paid to gave it back, but you had to worry about that sort of thing.

You had to make sure that the amounts were right. Sometimes a payment for fifty million dollars, maybe ten million dollars was being withheld for some reason, you had to make sure that that was accurate.

But as far as honesty or theft or any kind of embezzlement was concerned, no. I didn't certify the vouchers that went out, I simply approved them administratively. Then they went to the Bureau of Financial Management, where they were certified and then they went to the Treasury Department, where then they were either paid or sent on to a bank.

So there were lots of people involved and there were lots of people looking and watching out to make sure that things were accurate and proper. I worried about it, but I was satisfied that the system was working properly; although in our bureau, it wasn't computerized at that time, it was all pretty much manual and that was a little scary.

Now, as far as the budget was concerned for the posts, which was a different budget and for the bureau, the operation of things, yes, you always had to be concerned about that. You had to make sure that the posts are doing what they're supposed to do, that their internal controls are in order and that their staff is well trained, including the FSNs and that was a concern.

But, thank goodness, while I was in that job we did not have any problems.

Q: Well then, after two years, '96, was it?

O'BRIEN: '95.

Q: Where did you go?

O'BRIEN: Then, after that, I went to Geneva as the administrative counselor there.

Q: And you were there from

O'BRIEN: '95 to '98, three years. That was a very complicated job, too and there were very many agencies in Geneva.

End of interview