The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Foreign Assistance Series

PAIGE ALEXANDER

Interviewed by: Ann Van Dusen
Initial interview date: August 23, 2022

This oral history transcription was made possible through support provided by U.S. Agency for International Development, under terms of Fixed Amount Award No. 7200AA21FA00043. The opinions expressed herein are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training.

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is August 23. And we are beginning an oral history with Paige Alexander. Paige, let's start at the beginning. Can you talk a little bit about your childhood—where you were born? Something about your parents and your siblings?

GROWING UP IN ATLANTA

ALEXANDER: Sure, sure. So, I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. My father was an Army brat and moved around his whole life. And as soon as he did three years of undergraduate at Emory University, that was as long as he had spent anywhere, he decided Atlanta was

home. He went to law school in Boston at Harvard, met my mother, and told her Atlanta is home. And he had some JAG [Judge Advocate General] responsibilities. They got married, went to New Mexico first and then ended up in Atlanta. They got here in 1958. And then had four children, I have three older brothers, and I am the youngest of the four, so the only girl and ended up being the only one who moved away from Atlanta for quite some time. I grew up with parents who are very politically active, interested in the world, yet at the same time, interested in turning Atlanta, Georgia into something that they had seen where they had lived elsewhere. And so that was a very important part of them, to be active in the Civil Rights Movement here in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. And as Jewish Americans, they two were very active in the Jewish community. My mom started the Black Jewish sisterhood coalition. My parents were head of ADL [Anti-Defamation League] and were on the board of ADL, American Jewish Committee. They were into all progressive causes, and my father was a world-renowned trademark lawyer. And they had their jobs cut out for them as they raised four of us. And again, I'm the youngest and only girl. I got special and different treatment, I think.

Q: Special and different, I imagine. But it was in the air you breathe at home, the activism, the community spirit. Can you talk a little bit about what it was like being in Atlanta in the early 70s or in the late 60s?

ALEXANDER: Yeah, I like to think, growing up here, I was born in the mid-60s. And my oldest brother was born in 1958, so there was an age difference with two [brothers] in between. We lived in a bubble —we all started in public school, and we all ended in private schools. My parents had all good intentions for us to be part of the community, via public school or volunteer work. And we tried, whether it was the Jewish community or whether it was giving back through telethons and things that they were active in, it was just part of who we are and what we did as a family. We all ended up at private schools because the time came that my parents realized their intentions also included providing us a stronger education than the public schools in the ‘70s in Atlanta were offering. And then as I grew older, being the youngest Alexander and always the ‘sister of Kent, David and Michael Alexander’ or ‘Elaine and Miles's daughter’, it imparted in me a sort of responsibility as an Alexander here in Atlanta, to carry on those deeds. So, I started the community service program at my high school and was very active in all those things. But then I went away to college in 1984, and was excited to get away, but carried with me those very close family bonds with my brothers and my parents and knowing how we were raised.

Q: Right. Your father was in the JAG and then basically became a trademark lawyer, and your mother was very active in the community. Did she also have a career?

ALEXANDER: She did. Well, she started as a teacher, but back in the day in the ‘50s and ‘60s, if you're pregnant, you weren't allowed to teach. And given that there were four of us, at any given time, she seemed to be pregnant. And she really took to raising her family as her primary job, but she was also incredibly busy with volunteer work and sitting on boards. So again, as the youngest, I still had two brothers still at home, but they were getting close to graduating, and I remember a seventh grade incident as if it were

last year. My mother picked me up at school one day and said, “I want to get back to work.” Actually, she said, “let's go to McDonald's for a milkshake,” and I thought I must be in trouble because that suggestion was not like her. She usually had to get everyone in line in time for dinner so we could all have dinner together. So, I was convinced that taking me to McDonald's for a milkshake meant something was wrong. And she said, “I really want to get back to work, I feel like all of you are launched.” And my thought was, well, “I don't really care what you do all day, I'm at school,” but it was clearly a major issue for her to return to work outside the house.

So, she ended up being one of the first co-directors of a nonprofit called Leadership Atlanta. And these exist all over the U.S. now for cities, for community leaders in the corporate and nonprofit sectors, and academia, who go through a one-to-two-year program to learn about the city. My mom had gone through the program because she was a leader in her volunteer work and her board work, and thought it was so impressive. But in true Alexander fashion, she thought she could organize it better, so she wanted to run it. And she also knew she didn’t have enough time to give a forty-hour week job. So, she created a job co-share, which again, in the ‘70s not really a very popular thing to do. And she created this job co-share with a friend from the Black Jewish sisterhood coalition, Myrtle Davis, and they ran Leadership Atlanta for, I think, sixteen years. Which meant, of course, with two women, you're probably going to end up getting more than twenty hours out of each of them. You're going to get probably just shy of forty hours out of each of them! And she became much more involved and was leaving the house to go into an office everyday which gave her the purpose she was looking for while we were in school. But before that, she had worked on Maynard Jackson's campaign and inauguration, she sat on John Lewis' Campaign Committee, and a host of other Atlanta politicians wanted her skill set on their campaigns. My parents had something to do with the campaigns of every mayor, governor, and member of Congress from Atlanta since the day I was born.

Q: Wow. So that is obviously a great role model growing up and maybe a little intimidating as well. Was there any kind of international focus that might have predisposed you to head in that direction?

ALEXANDER**:** Not really, I mean, Israel was always sort of front and center being an American Jewish family. But we went on only two international family trips that I recall. One was to Mexico when I was quite young to stay with a law colleague of my fathers. The other was to Israel and Italy when I was 14 and it was our summer break. It was supposed to be a two-month trip, and then the dollar started sinking and traveling with 5 of us was cost prohibitive. And then it was going to be a four-week trip, but the dollar was still in decline. I think it ended up being about two and a half or three weeks together as a family, which was sort of the first real international overseas experience that really sunk in for me. But my father had spent a year in Japan in 1942 as a child, right after the war, when his stepfather was in the Army and his mother decided she didn’t want to be apart for another year, so she petitioned to take my father to Japan. That was my father’s primary overseas experience that was not related to a quick business trip. My mother had her graduation trip to Europe with her parents and they both thought back to those extended periods of time fondly, but otherwise had a little bit of international experience.

So on the whole, my parents were very domestically focused and very Atlanta city focused.

Q: We'll talk about you coming full circle to now being so involved in a leadership position there, but was it a big decision for you to go away for college? You had your brothers at home.

ALEXANDER: We all went away. My parents were very encouraging of all of us going away. However, they did say they wanted us to go to a school that had double digit percentage Jewish population, because we were fairly limited in our high schools' being with other Jewish kids; I was one of four Jews in my graduating class, for example. And they thought it was important. So, my oldest brother went to Tufts because he was looking in the Barron's College guide and saw Tulane on one side of the page and Tufts on the other, and he had never heard of Tufts. And he thought, "well, I want to go to Boston." So he went to Tufts. My middle brother went to University of Texas, the third brother to Syracuse, and I went to Tulane. And for us that was getting away. They all came home after college and graduate school, but I did not. So that was the differentiator; at the end as I was just getting a taste of what it was like to be outside Atlanta and not be the littlest Alexander and Elaine Miles' daughter and my brothers' sister, and I was kind of enjoying that.

Q: You brothers came back to careers in Atlanta?

ALEXANDER: My oldest brother is a lawyer, so following in my father's footsteps. And he came back and was a partner at a firm here and then became Assistant U.S. Attorney and then became a U.S. Attorney. So, he has deep roots in the legal field here. And then my middle brother is a psychotherapist. And he ended up graduating from University of Georgia in Athens, married a woman from Athens, and Atlanta was about as far as they were going to move. And the third brother also married a friend of mine from growing up, who's also from Atlanta, and he lived in New York for about ten years as she pursued a career on Broadway. But they always wanted to come back to Atlanta and surround themselves with family, which they did as soon as they started having children.

Q: It just took you longer to get there, right.

ALEXANDER: It took me thirty-five years to ricochet home.

COLLEGE AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Q: It sounds like one of those inevitabilities at some point. But talk a little bit about Tulane, what was it like in the 80s?

ALEXANDER: It was a fun place to be. It was one of the few places in 1984 that still had the drinking age of eighteen. So a lot of people cut loose. And for me, it was an opportunity to live with female suitemates and roommates after growing up with all boys, so that was a new experience for me. I was involved in a sorority and that was new,

although in many ways a continuation of social groups from high school but better organized. And Tulane is much more difficult now than it was then. I got a great education; I worked about as hard as I wanted to work and played as hard as I wanted to play. But I was not thinking professionally. I love psychology, and I love communication. So those were my two majors. And I thought that's a good base for anything I'll do in life. And I moved towards a graduation that was just a liberal arts background and classes I wanted to take, but I wasn't necessarily considering what type of profession that leads one to.

The turning point came after my junior year in college, and I went to work in DC [District of Columbia] for the summer of 1987. I was supposed to intern for John Lewis, who was my congressman and a family friend. And it just so happened that their office had messed up, and they had me slated for the Atlanta office for the summer. So there I was, I moved to DC, and I had a great plan to do the first part of the summer with John Lewis and the second part with Wyche Fowler who was our senator at the time. And when John's office fell through, I did what any privileged 19-year-old would do, I called my parents crying. And, as usual, my mother knew what to do. She was from Boston and had gone to high school with Mike Dukakis who was running for president. He had just opened a southern office in Atlanta and his son, John Dukakis, and daughter-in-law, Lisa, were living at my parents' house because it was large and all of us had moved away. My parents got very involved in the campaign. So, when I called him in tears that my internship wasn't going to work, and I was in this strange city and I didn't know what I was going to do for the next month while I waited for my second internship to start. John Dukakis was nice enough to call John Kerry's office. He was the new senator from Massachusetts and John had been working for him in his DC office the year before. John asked if they would do him a favor and take an intern for four weeks and they agreed.

I ended up in John Kerry's office and the interns thought I was a staff member, and the staff people thought I was an intern because I had come in through a "favor structure," as opposed to an application for a staff position or with the intern class. So, I was caught in the middle and benefitted from things like not having to go reserve the softball fields like the interns did. And then the staff would think, "Oh that's so nice, the interns left someone behind to answer the phones so we can all leave." So, I was there every night late with Senator Kerry. Finally, in a very funny exchange, Ted Kennedy had called and said he wanted to speak to Senator Kerry. I don't know if they didn't have direct lines, but I answered the phone and I clearly didn't have a Massachusetts accent and sounded southern. So Senator Kennedy comes walking down the hall and into the office and says, "Who are you and what are you doing here? You're not a constituent's kid, not with that accent." So, Senator Kerry came out and they both asked how I had gotten there. And I of course, mentioned Congressman Lewis and John Dukakis helping me and just I spilled the whole thing out in what I now think of as one long run-on sentence trying to explain to two Senators my very existence. Senator Kerry recognized I had been there late every night locking up the office and said since I wasn't an intern and was doing this work, I should be getting paid. And that was it. And suddenly I ended up with a paid job for the rest of the summer. So, I gave up the Wyche Fowler internship and I stayed with Senator Kerry. I was a receptionist, but I was getting paid, and it was a lovely first professional

job. I thought this was great; I love Washington, DC. It's an amazing place and full of so many opportunities. So, I went back to my senior year at Tulane thinking I wanted to do something in Washington, DC. I didn't know what it was, people were nice, and the politics were interesting, and essentially a glorified high school gossip game that you get paid for. It just struck me as a very interesting path. So during my senior year at Tulane, I decided I really wanted to do something that was going to get me to DC.

Q: Right. And it didn't necessarily infect you with the politics bug! I mean, I guess you had already been exposed to politics all your life, but you were going to stay with your psychology and communications major?

ALEXANDER: Well, I think I didn't understand the usefulness of politics. My parents did it. They were active, they were raising funds. They were trying to affect policy. But I never saw, as a child growing up, the connection between politics and policy until I was in Senator Kerry's office. And during his first term, he was diving deep on a lot of issues. He was on the Science and Technology Committee, and I suddenly saw how policy was made. And we, of course, all grew up with Schoolhouse Rock, the soundtrack of our Saturday morning cartoons like "I'm just a bill. I'm only a bill. And I got as far as Capitol Hill…" And I knew that. But then I actually got to see how it happened. I was able to see how his office would create something, how we solicited co-signers and how they solicited us. And I became fascinated with it. And I thought, this is why we need elected officials who are smart, and who have the same sort of platform that have things I believe in. At night that summer, I got to do all the Dukakis fundraisers in town, so anything happening during the presidential election cycle, as it was kicking off. I also got to be part of it. So I really saw how it came together. But of course, at that time, you're going into senior year, I had the majority of my credits, I still thought psychology and communication were a very valuable part of politics. But I did take some political science courses that final year, but again, not international relations, it was just political science. And I was able to have a better appreciation. So I think it was a perfect balance. But it was the exposure in that internship on Capitol Hill, my junior year, that really sort of set me on a path.

Q: Fascinating. You were only there for a summer. But I wonder if you could reflect on the atmosphere. People say, well, it's not like it used to be: you would have colleagues and friends working across the aisle or staffers would know people from other staff offices. Had it already changed? I think this was before Newt Gingrich, so maybe it hadn't yet.

ALEXANDER: It hadn't. I mean, I didn't know who was a Republican and who was a Democrat. I also was clueless about the Members. So, who was a Republican and Democrat? If I met somebody from another office while we were playing softball or while we were at a bar, I didn't think "Oh, they work for the Republicans." It was just, "Oh, we're all Capitol Hill interns or staffers." Or "You go to this school, and I go to this school." So, at my level, it wasn't as pervasive as I am sure it is now. And then I think at the higher levels, I think Senator Kerry had a good relationship with a lot of people. And that sort of leached down positively the way it leaches down now in a negative way. It

was just everybody's role on the Hill. “Are you on the Senate side or the House side?” That was actually the biggest division—like “How dare you think that you're as good as a Senate intern when you're only a House intern.”

Q: It'd be nice to get back some of that collegiality. Okay. So you go back for your senior year, your eyes have been open to Washington and politics in a different kind of way. And after you graduated, what happened?

ALEXANDER: I said the day after graduation I was going to jump onto the campaign, but I also didn’t want to wait the full year. I'd stayed in touch with the Dukakis campaign staffers I had met that summer. And during my senior year, Super Tuesday was happening which was a major Southern primary for numerous states on one day. And I ran Students for Dukakis on campus, which was not really a liberal campus and people weren't politically active. So, it was really me trying to get my sorority sisters and fraternity friends to come when Dukakis came to speak on campus. One of the League of Women voter debates was at Tulane that year. I remember doing advance work for that. So, I got my first taste of what advanced work was and sat in a chair to make sure the lighting was right. And trying to build a crowd for that. And so that was my first taste of real advance work.

In the winter, between '87–'88, I decided I was going to go to Iowa and work in the campaign during Christmas break, mainly because I had a boyfriend who was also in Iowa on the campaign who I'd met in the Kerry office. So I was sort of thinking, oh, that'll be fun, we’ll do this together in December and January right before the caucuses happened in February. So, I went out in December, and I was having such a good time. We were in separate cities. So, suddenly I was living in Ottumwa, Iowa, I was from Atlanta, Georgia; I was going to school in New Orleans, and it was surreal. I learned important life lessons like living in Ottumwa, Iowa in December and January is VERY cold, and they leave their cars running when they go into the grocery store because they're not sure otherwise the car will start when they come out. So, it was just this very small-town Iowa feel. And I was living with a local supporter who was a single mom, so that was a major experience for me, as well. And it was fascinating to me, I lured one of my Tulane friends out there with me. And she lasted a week and then was like, “Yeah, I'm going to go to Hawaii with my family for the rest of the break.” And I just loved it so much I wanted to stay. I felt like I couldn’t leave before the caucus. Like I needed to see what a caucus is. I'm doing all this work and phone banking and mailing things, but I want to see what the day of looks like.

So, I ended up staying in Ottumwa. The director of the office in Ottumwa became a friend and campaigns are all about the people you meet. As a side note, he is now head of the Omidyar Network and we remain very friendly to this day. He wanted me to stay because he didn't have any other staff people. So, I stayed in Ottumwa, past the holiday break, called Tulane and told them I had mono, and I was going to be late getting back to school. It was before remote access to classes, so my roommates would call me and tell me what the assignments were, and I would stay up all night and try to get the assignments done so I could get things in on time. I didn't miss too much. And I stayed

until February 10, I think it was the caucus and then I went straight back to New Orleans. And at that point, I had been bitten by the political bug. I resolved to be on the Dukakis campaign, if he got the nomination, I suddenly knew I had a plan for what I would do my first year after school.

So I finished up school, graduated, and the day after graduation, I was on a plane to California because it was one of the final two primaries—New Jersey and California were the final two that year. And half of my new campaign friends were from Iowa or New Jersey, the other half I'd met were in California. I did advance work for Lisa and John Dukakis during that time and learned how to schedule surrogates and then accompany them on events. So, at that point, I had already managed to do field work in Iowa, have some advance work in New Orleans, and then I was doing scheduling in California. So, when the campaign was over, and the convention that summer was in Atlanta, Georgia. All the people I met were all coming together to work on the convention. And I ended up meeting my now-husband there. He was on the campaign, but he had been in New Jersey for the last primary, and had been in New Hampshire while I was in Iowa so our paths had not crossed. But we knew all the same people who were all descending on the convention at that point. They were totally out of money and the campaign was barely able to pay the staff. But for me, I was a hometown girl and knew my way around Atlanta. And so all my new campaign friends ended up moving into my parent's house because it was a big house, and they were otherwise staying at the Emory dorms that were not air conditioned and had a roach infestation. So, they all moved in, including my now husband who was desperately trying not to date me because he likes to say he knew right away I was the marrying type. I was twenty-one years old and he was twenty-three and neither of us were in that place, but it just seemed obvious to him what could happen if we started dating. So we had a wonderful convention, it was truly a great summer experience. And then the convention ended, and I got offered a job to stay on the campaign and work on the Bentsen side, which was the vice president campaign side. So I ended up at the ripe age of twenty-one being the director of advance for Lloyd Bentsen.

Q: Holy cow!

ALEXANDER: Yeah. Well, I mean, it's a young person's game. And since I had done all these different roles, I apparently had enough skills in their mind's eye to be good at logistics, so they tapped me to be the one sending advance teams out. We had posted on a board, not a whiteboard, but just on a wall, about two dozen Post-its with advance staff names on them. And you'd move people around and figure out how they were leapfrogging and going from one place to another. So that's what I did through the November election. And then, of course, we didn't win, but I had decided I was moving to DC regardless. I went home, licked my wounds for about a month, and then moved to DC and started interviewing for jobs.

Q: Right. So, that's a fascinating, young person's introduction to politics. And it almost sounds too good to be true the way you just ended up in different spots at just the right

time. But were you surprised at the outcome of the election? Did you actually, as you were doing the work, think it was possible that Dukakis could make it?

ALEXANDER: Sure. It wasn't Walter Mondale. So I knew the polling wasn't great everywhere. And I knew that Georgia was one of the many places they just no longer planned to visit and put money into it, but it was a hard pill to swallow to watch entire states be written off from the campaigning perspective. But we were running, it seemed to my twenty-one-year-old eyes, a fairly competitive race in many places and I thought we might have the numbers. But you have to be optimistic when you're on a campaign because it's a lot of hours of work. And if you don't think you can win, you really can't be dedicating those kinds of hours. My boyfriend—now husband—and his friends started thinking about their Plan B well before I did; Steve was in a PhD program in Boston and he got off the campaign and went back to his course work. They saw the writing on the wall, they saw the tank event and they saw the question of what you would do if Kitty were raped and understood Mike Dukakis' very cerebral answer to it was not winnable material. They said "It's over." I was like, "No, it's not." So yeah, I was disappointed. But I was also on the Bentsen side. So Lloyd Bentsen won his Senate race. If you remember, he ran for VP [Vice President] and Senate at the same time. Texas on election night seemed a little happier than I imagined Boston was so there was still some joy in my mind.

Q: Right, I'm sure that's right. So did you go back to Washington?

ALEXANDER: So I went to DC—I decided that, again, having very little experience, but a lot of insight into it—I decided I didn't want to be in politics anymore. And in fact, I wanted to work and I wanted to be in politics, but not necessarily in a campaign space. Because I was a communication major, I interviewed with Greer Margolis Mitchell, and Peter Hart Research, thinking, maybe polling, and maybe commercials was more my speed. And I ended up getting a job with both of them. And because they were friends, they decided they were going to split my time. So I did half my time with Peter Hart and half with Frank Greer. And before I took those jobs, I did a stint at something called Taste for the Nation. It was a nonprofit that worked with homeless shelters and food banks, along with top chefs around the world and around the country, to put on black tie taste-testing benefits with 100 percent of the proceeds going to homeless shelters and food banks.

That was my first exposure to the nonprofit area. I thought, this is great. I get to go in and talk to all these posh chefs at these prestigious restaurants, beg them to come and give out free food in little tasting cups, and that we would sell tickets for hundred dollars apiece and we get twenty restaurants to set up tables. It was great exposure for them for branding and for urban exposure. And I would convince them of that with my communication background, like how great this would be for your corporate social responsibility to the community. And then the other days of the week I would be with the homeless shelter and food bank, teaching them how to write grant proposals for what they actually needed. Working with them to explain that if they had money coming in for specific shelter needs, but what you'd really like is to start something else, write a

proposal for that. And that's what will get funded with some of my money from the Taste of the Nation event. I loved that I loved that work. But it was not lucrative, and it was a little difficult to pay the bills. And when that was over, I wasn't sure I wanted to spend the year building up to the next one, which was a whole year away.

THE FALL OF THE WALL AND MOVE TO PRAGUE

And that's when I moved to the Peter Hart Research and Greer job. And so I did that job for two years. And my boyfriend at the time was working on his PhD, and the Wall came down in Eastern Europe, which was the topic of his studies. And he decided he wanted to be there because he was writing on the economics of political adjustment in Czechoslovakia. So, I just took a leap of faith, followed him to Prague, and took a chance. I love the nonprofit stuff and I love politics, but I didn't want to get into either of them as a full-time career. It was 1990 so after the election cycle, having done all the commercials for all the candidates, and the polling, I was like, “I think I'm finished with politics.” So sure, let's go to Prague. I moved there at the very end of 1990. And that's when my international focus came in.

Q: So fascinating. Through all of these steps, your parents were totally supportive?

ALEXANDER: Admittedly, my parents would not have been supportive of me lying to school about why I was not coming back for the first few weeks of senior year to stay in Iowa, so there is a strong possibility I didn’t mention to them I had lied! But they were supportive of this overseas move, with the caveat that I couldn’t move to Czechoslovakia until we were engaged. So that was sort of where they put their foot down. “You need a little bit more of a commitment” was their take on the situation. And they thought it was great. I mean, they thought the Washington exposure was great and they knew I was in love and wanted to follow my boyfriend. They came to visit very soon after we got there because they just wanted to check it out. I ended up getting a job with the Soros Foundation, and the Mott Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. So suddenly, at the ripe age of twenty-four, I'm now giving away money. They all wanted some sort of American beachhead in Central Europe because they had started giving away money and weren't able to follow it. It wasn't like people had cell phones and emails were not up so they were losing track of where their investments had gone. They really were excited that I was there following my fiancé, who was running a project for George Soros while he also was working on his dissertation. I had skills and time on my hands so it was a perfect match. I was paid a hundred dollars a month, which I kept under our mattress, and it paid for a posh lifestyle back then—oh, wow, I mean, a beer was five cents. And it gives you a sense of how cheap things were. We just lived this wonderful life for a year-and-a-half in Prague. And my parents just thought it was great. I don't think they thought their youngest, and their only girl, would have done something like that. But they were very excited. And I think only one of my brothers came to visit. So it was a good time, and I had full family support, which was nice.

Q: That makes a huge difference. So Prague, this is shortly after the wall came down. Certainly everything was opening up, that must have been an exciting time there?

ALEXANDER: It was very exciting. You could see the politics that were unfolding in front of your eyes; years of communism being overturned, years of socialism. Kids our age who really had only taken Marxist-Leninist course loads. They didn't understand the economy, market economy, basic theory of capitalism and things that seem to make sense to us. And when we would be amazed that beer was five cents, they would be like, it was two cents last week. It's like, well, it costs a dollar in the States.

It was very fascinating to watch things open up. It was also hard to live. I mean, if there was a line, I would get in it. I didn't know what was at the end of the line. But if other people were lining up, you just got into this mentality. I will get to the end of the line and maybe I get eggs and I'm like, "Okay, now I've got to figure out how to get these eggs all the way home on the tram without breaking them." And they all knew how to do it. And I was like walking trying to hold this little carton of eggs. They all came with their recyclable bags, which again, we didn't really have in the early 90s. They have a sweater to wrap things up. I mean, they knew how to do things that we didn't, some practicalities. Or I'd stand in line, and I would get mushrooms. I came home one day, and Steve said "You don't eat mushrooms." I stood in line for an hour and a half for these. We're eating mushrooms with a bunch of soy sauce, whatever I was able to find.

It was a fascinating way to live. And to sort of see how that generation, which was my generation, suddenly had all of this opened up to them. Robitussin was a big thing back in the States; people would get high drinking Robitussin. And there, Lubriderm lotion had just come out. And they had figured out Lubriderm on a piece of toast and toasted it, you could get high. They were coming out with all these new things in the marketplace, and they were finding hundred and one ways to use them. It was a very interesting time.

Q: And they were receptive to you as an American, I mean, you represented something new and different and maybe something they aspired to.

ALEXANDER: I think that's exactly it. They were receptive to a certain point. Someone introduced me to Madeleine Albright, who was head of the Center for National Policy at the time, and Madeline, having had a Czech background, was very anxious to get young Americans over to teach English or to do anything. And when she found out I had done advance work for political campaigns before, she said, "I need to introduce you to Vaclav Havel. You need to do his advance work because he is doing things like pulling off to the side of the road and using the bathroom on the streets in Paris, because that's what he would do in Prague or from jail. That's what he would do. He is letting women sit in his lap for pictures and posing with them as they're being very suggestive, because that's what Central Europe is." She said, "That needs to stop. You need to go in and help him do advance." I'm thinking "This is great."

So, I moved to Prague, and she introduced me to Michael Žantovský. who is his chief of staff. And Michael speaks fluent English. His thesis for graduate school had been

translating Woody Allen. He had done all of these wild things. Anyway, he has also been ambassador three or four times from the Czech Republic to the U.S. and to the UK since then, and he remains a good friend. Madeleine introduced me. And as I go into the castle, I'm twenty-three at this point or twenty-four—and everyone there's like eighteen or nineteen years old, and they've got super short skirts on, and they're all the daughters of the dissidents who suddenly get to play dress up and work in the castle for the president of the country. And I was considered old. I was literally old by their standards.

I was just learning Czech so it was a very strange position to be in. For me, I looked at the president's schedule and suggested things like building in executive time for things you have to do, like a bathroom break. They all said "No, he is not going to do that." Like he just won't. And then one time, he went by me on a scooter in the castle. He liked it. He would get on his scooter and people would be down in the courtyard, he'd pop out a window of an office and wave, and people were like, "Ahoj! Ahoj!" He was just a very fun-loving person and very thoughtful. Also, he's in a building that he could have been thrown from the window of a year before. And suddenly he's in charge. They were receptive to Americans. But my Czech was not where it needed to be to actually work in the president's office in another language, and they just didn't want to do what Americans thought they should do like building in a bathroom break to the schedule. So that did not work, which was fine, because the U.S. foundations were very anxious to have someone babysit the money that they had put in.

Q: Did you try to work for him and then just realized he didn't want to be "advanced"?

ALEXANDER: Yes. Michael Žantovský was very clear in the meeting. We went through a few things. And he's like, "I'm very direct, I just don't see how this is going to work. I know enough to know he's not going to like someone who he thinks is controlling him, who doesn't understand the Czech way." I think if I had been from the diaspora, if my parents had been Czech, if I had something that tied me to the country a little bit more than "I followed my boyfriend there," it might have worked. Žantovský and I are still very good friends. And I've seen him once or twice a year since then. But I think they just wanted to please Madeleine in what she said they needed; they at least had to listen to her. But she was not surprised at all–she was just trying to give them options.

Q: Right. And you stayed in touch with Madeleine over the years?

ALEXANDER: I did. I did. On the Carter Center website. I think there's probably still an interview with her for Carter Center weekend I did about a year and a half ago. And we joked about some of this because she had worked for President Carter. We stayed in touch. And she always loved the fact that Steve and I had just taken this leap of faith and moved to Czechoslovakia at such an exciting time.

Q: Right. While you were in Czechoslovakia, were you able to travel around? Did you have some time for tourism?

ALEXANDER: I did. Within the country and also Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania. And a lot of that was because my husband was setting up something called The Civic Education Project. It was an academic Peace Corps of sorts. So he was working with universities throughout Czechoslovakia to bring in lecturers, like doctorate [doctoral] and post-doctorate [post-doctoral] students in the U.S. who couldn't get tenure jobs here because there just weren't [any] available. And he would bring them over for a two-year stint, just like the Peace Corps, but at a high level within the universities to help reform the curriculums from Marxist-Leninist to market-led curriculums. And that was everything from law school to basic liberal arts. And so, once it was so successful in Czechoslovakia, George Soros said, "well, I want it done in Romania and Bulgaria and Poland." So, with Steve, I would go to some of these other countries, and we would take long weekends and get our own touring in.

Q: Soros paid for some of these education reforms?

ALEXANDER: He paid for the lecturers. So, he paid for all the lecturers to come and teach, he would give them stipends. There was a combination of the universities saying, "We will give you housing, and we will make the courses that you're teaching accredited courses. And in return, you will give us your free labor." And the free labor was paid for by Soros. It was very inexpensive–he was not spending a lot of money on this. But all these young twenty-something-year-olds were having the time of their life, like helping reform university curriculums and working in departments with the teachers and their counterparts.

Q: As you think about the countries of Eastern Europe, was there one that was more advanced economically? Or did they all seem pretty much at ground zero in terms of building up the new economy?

ALEXANDER: I would say Czechoslovakia as a whole as a country and Budapest as a city probably were more advanced because [of] their access to Vienna, their access to the West was really just a border. I mean, it was a forty-five minute drive from Bratislava to Vienna, and because of that, it felt more Western. Even their farming cooperatives–they were more advanced because they were closer to the West than they were to Russia. And you felt that when you were in Bulgaria. You go to a restaurant and you'd have a knife at your table and you'd say "I only have a knife, I need a fork," and the waiter would come over and hold up a knife and say "This table has a knife. Who has a fork that he'd be willing to change." The further away you went the further east you truly felt.

Q: Fascinating. Did you drive? Or were there trains?

ALEXANDER: We took trains. Everything was by train and by overnight trains we got to Poland, we got to Romania–it was all by train. Now, public transportation remains quite efficient in all of these countries and very inexpensive. Fascinating.

Q: You were there for two years.

ALEXANDER: We were there for about a year and a half, and we came back to get married. And it was another campaign—1992. And we swore we weren't gonna get involved. And we went back to Boston, where Steve was finishing his PhD. And I was working for a project called Project Liberty, which was working on public administration in Central and Eastern Europe. And because I just come from living there, and even though I didn't have a Masters, I had no public administration background. I knew enough about a country and a region that nobody else at the Kennedy School really knew that lived there. I became the Associate Director of Project Liberty, and my boss was Shirley Williams, the right honorable Shirley Williams, who started the social labor Democratic Party in the UK. And Shirley was married to Dick Neustadt. And Dick had been Al Gore's—sorry, stay with me for a sec—Al Gore thesis advisor at Harvard.

So, I was very happy working in my job at the Kennedy School, feeling like "How did I get so lucky to work at a school that I probably could never get in?" And then the Clinton-Gore campaign called and said, "We have a problem on the Gore/VP side. The person who's been running our advance has left and has left us high and dry. And we remember that you ran Lloyd Bentsen advance, and would you come back and do that for the last six weeks of the campaign?" I was like, "No, I have a job." And someone, Mark Gearen, who was Al Gore's campaign manager, called Dick and said, "So your wife has someone who's working for her, and we need her for six weeks." And Dick talked to Shirley and Shirley came in and said, "Why didn't you tell me the Clinton-Gore campaign wants you?" "Like, because I have a job here?" "Yeah, but these guys are going to win. And then you could have a job in the White House. You should probably go do this for six weeks." So, she released me, and I moved to Little Rock and did the tail end of the Clinton-Gore campaign. And the same job I did in '88, essentially, four years later, and they won.

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And so, fast forward, go back to Boston. And I started getting calls saying, "What job do you want? And send in your résumé." And then they'd see my résumé and see I had international experience. So suddenly, unlike most of my friends who are all looking for domestic-related things, it opened me up to the UN, State Department, AID [Agency for International Development], USIA [United States Information Agency]. And I came to town. And I remember in June of '93 I did a round of interviews that the White House placement office had set up and I talked to David Schippers; he was at the UN and Wendy Sherman who are both working for Madeline. I had talked to Wendy and David and then I went and talked to Jerry Hyman at AID and Peter Orr. I went to USIA and spoke to Donna Cole Pepper and not Marylin Wyatt, and I can't remember who else was at USIA. And those were the interviews. I remember Jerry Hyman said I met with Peter Orr because he was the country desk officer who was in charge of the country desk for the new bureau for Europe and the NIS (New Independent States) task force that had just been established. And Peter must have called Jerry Hyman and said, "I've got someone who's more than just an envelope licker, she actually knows about democracy. She's been

there." And Peter knew Jerry needed someone. AID was still at the State Department at that time.

So, I was on my way out when someone from Peter Orr's office ran down and said, hang on a second, someone else wants to talk to you. And then down comes Jerry Hyman into the 23rd Street entrance to the State Department. So, let's take a walk. So, I'm wearing heels, carrying a briefcase, trying to look really professional. And Jerry wants to walk around the Vietnam Memorial. He just thinks this is a great idea that you're gonna have this interview. And again, it was June, so it was warm, but he wanted to get steps in before people got steps in. And by the end, we came back and he said, "I don't have a job now, but I'm going to have a job. And will you talk to Susan Kaczynski and Catherine Stratus? I want them to talk you into my job." I didn't meet them in person, but I had a follow up conversation with them later. And they were both PMIs [Presidential Management Interns] I guess, at the time or IDIs [International Development Interns]? PMI I guess.

And they said, "It'd be great to get you in this office, you seem to know what you're talking about. You've seen it firsthand. But we don't have a position." And Peter had a position. And so I was like, "I'll go be a desk officer." So I went to be one in '93. And I guess, Czechoslovakia was just dividing up. So they asked me to come in and be the desk officer for the Czech Republic. So that was my first job at AID.

Q: Fascinating. If Jerry had a job right then would you have been eager to do it, or were you just trying to get into USAID?

ALEXANDER: I really just wanted to get in, I think I probably would have wanted to do substance a little bit more than being the desk officer. But I didn't know what either really meant. I liked Catherine and Susan, and Susan and I are still friends to this day. And I liked the idea of that office. But I knew what I knew. And I knew the Czech Republic–probably better than anyone in that building knew it. And to go into a job thinking, I might not be under-qualified for this, I might actually understand this. And so it was a good match. And I thought Peter was great and his deputy in that office was great as well.

Q: And was there an AID mission at that point in Czechoslovakia or in the Czech Republic?

ALEXANDER: The bureau itself was called the Regional Mission for Europe [RME]. So RME was just setting it up. And the NIS Task Force, I think, was under Malcolm Butler and Carlos Pascual. Patricia Lerner was in Slovakia as the AID rep, and Lee Roussel in Prague. And yeah, everyone had computers on their desk, but they only had one terminal that would send things back. So, everyone would be at their desk working on typing up things, and then they'd take out the floppy disk and go to the one terminal, they'd stick it in and then suddenly everything would get sent to the States at one time. It'd be like a data dump. I mean, there were phone calls.

Q: There were phone calls, there were cables I guess. This was before email and the internet?

ALEXANDER: Well, email had started and maybe it was just intra-emails. I think emails, it definitely started because I feel like I spent a lot of time on the computer. I'm not sure what I would have done if it was not somehow communicating and Jim Bednar and John Rogers like all those guys who were in the Prague AID rep office at the time. If we had any regular communication I just don't remember. It might have just been more phone than anything else.

Q: Fascinating. Did Steve find a job in Washington? Or was that difficult?

ALEXANDER: He was still finishing his dissertation–which anyone who's written a dissertation knows it's a long haul. So, he came when we came to Fairlington. That was the first place we lived. And he was still working on his dissertation for quite some time. He finished in '96 and got a job with Claiborne Pell. And the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Q: When you started on the desk, what kind of a budget was there?

ALEXANDER: Yeah. I still was so amazed that people threw around millions of dollars as opposed to tens of thousands, which is what I had worked with, with the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Mott Foundation. I wouldn't be surprised if our budget was more than fifteen or twenty million, but I actually don't remember. I mean, I could go back and look, we had a very confined program as to what we were looking at–primarily market adjustment, privatization, economic restructuring. There was some agriculture–there really wasn't that much on the democracy side. I think it was 1995, and Jerry was trying to put the SEPs (Strengthening Electoral Processes) mechanism in place, to support elections and political processes. That was the first. It's funny to think about it. That was the very first panel I ever sat on, in 1995, for the SEPs mechanism. And I think that Jerry Hyman and Gerry Donnelly at the time sort of ran that. "Let's put together the privatization/economic restructuring unit with these IQCS [Indefinite Quantity Contracts]" which were kind of a new instrument at the time. And Jerry was trying to get a "leader with associate" or some sort of IQC type of award on the democracy side. So, I remember sitting out by the pool in Fairlington with proposals, my highlighter and circling things and putting post-its on them saying, "Well, what do they mean by this? And sort of getting my education on election and international election observation at the time."

Q: The focus was on market adjustment, but over time the political side of things came to the fore. Was [Were] there no environmental programs?

ALEXANDER: No, there was an environment portfolio. And we had agreements with [the] Treasury. We had agreements with [the] EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], with the Department of Labor. At that time, I think Brian Atwood talks about thirty-six different agencies working in Central and Eastern Europe. And we, as AID, were

building our own staff expertise as well. In the meantime, we were doing all these transfers using Intergovernmental Personnel Act authorities.

Q: But basically, it was money being transferred from AID to these other government agencies.

ALEXANDER: We were trying to start recapturing that in '95 and '96. We were trying to bring it back in-house. So, there was a lot of hiring. I mean, we had PSC [Personal Services Contract] authority–which no other bureau had. So, we were shocked. I mean, I was very fortunate to work in a bureau that was not the typical AID, because we were special. And I really enjoyed being special and getting out of the bureaucracy.

Q: And also being able to get the staff you needed, through whatever mechanism. I'd like to talk a little bit about the relations with the State Department at the time, and whether you personally were an interlocutor or whether you were just an observer of what was happening?

ALEXANDER: In the first part of the Clinton administration, I was much more sort of the country desk officer. The FSA–Freedom Support Act–and the SEED–Support for Eastern European Democracy Act–had been passed by Congress in like '92-'93, so suddenly there was money. And how to spend the money was sort of the main conversation, but also, there was a mandated Assistance Coordinator. The first one that I remember on the SEED side was Ralph Johnson. And he had an office, and I would occasionally interact with him. But that came later, like in '96 or '97, when we were doing a little bit more on the Balkan side with the Balkan War. And on the FSA side, I guess it was Bill Taylor. I'm trying to figure out who Bill's predecessor was, but I think it was just Bill Taylor. I wasn't doing the NIS side until the second part of the administration. And we were just becoming flush with money after FSA and SEED legislation happened.

And there were a lot of benefits to having the assistance coordinator, because we were able to freeze out the Department of Labor and some of the other domestic agencies that didn't have any international experience. They really wanted it, but it was taking more time to try to explain to them how to work in these areas. For example, you go overseas with someone from the Pension Benefit Guaranty Authority, and they'd never been in a foreign country before. And they were supposed to be the experts. And so I think we saw the benefit of the assistance coordinator to help with country team organization back in DC. But they quickly expanded their remit, and we started thinking they became less helpful as time went on.

Q: I do remember that: how many different USG [US Government] hands can you put in our pocket?

ALEXANDER: I will say it was all 100 percent personality driven. Don Pressley had been the mission director in Poland. After being the Czech desk officer, I became the Poland desk officer. So, I got to know Don. And when he came back to Washington as the DAA [Deputy Assistant Administrator], I think, at that point, I was working on the

Balkans, and I ended up as a special assistant with Tom Dine in the front office. I started having some insight into how the NIS side worked and seeing that Tom Dine, Bill Taylor, and Ralph Johnson all had a really good relationship. And Don had a great relationship with them. Then Linda Morse came in, and did not. But at that point it was time to start getting the assistance coordinator out of the job of assistance. And it just became very personality driven.

Q: Barbara Turner?

ALEXANDER: Barbara Turner. Yeah, Barbara Turner and Carlos Pascual were the two DAAs. Carlos covered the NIS side and Barbara the Europe side. And I guess they both work for Tom. I'm picturing in my head when we were at the State Department and Barbara and Carlos were the DAAs. And we moved over to the Ronald Reagan Building. And Barbara was leaving and Don came in. That's how it happened. And then Tom left, and Don ascended to that acting role. And Carlos left and George Ingram came in. And then John Tennant came in to replace Don. He was a very good friend of Don's, and he had been mission director in Bulgaria. And that's when I was sitting as chief of staff, or special assistant, and it's because Don trusted me and knew me and Barbara had trusted me and I wasn't knee-deep in any particular area.

Q: Your initial AID career developed as the Eastern Europe Program was getting under way. So, you started out in the Czech Republic, you had responsibility for the Balkans, because that's where things were happening. You did Poland at some point. You were chief of staff for the entire bureau. The Bureau was very lucky to have these special authorities. Would you say there were any things that we (USAID) missed at that time or any mistakes, anything that could have made a difference?

ALEXANDER: When you're inside the belly of the beast, you think you're very nimble. And I moved over to do the Bosnia Reconstruction Task Force in '95-'96,with Ted Morse. Brian Atwood and Kelly Kammerer had put Ted in. At that time, the E&E [Europe and Near East] Bureau resulted from the merging of NIS and the regional mission for Europe. The E&E Bureau under Tom Dine and the BHR [Bureau for Humanitarian Response] under Doug Stafford were fighting about [the question of] when does humanitarian aid become post-conflict and get a longer-term reconstruction focus? The regional Bureau was trying to get involved in Bosnia reconstruction, while the Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs was saying no, this is our work to do. And so the two of them were just fighting: there was a lot of money and who was going to take it. So Brian said, “I'm putting Ted Morse in to run the Bosnia Task Force. I'm gonna give him one person from BHR,” which is Mike Mahdesian, “and one person from the E&E Bureau” who was actually a political appointee and a speech writer. They wanted sort of equivalent ranks—Mike was the DAA. But Tom could not carve out Carlos or Barbara to do that. And so he hired one of his many special assistants. She was professionally mature. She worked on the Hill, she was a speechwriter.

Mike and this woman—can't remember her name—did not get along. So then, Brian said, “Paige is going to work with both of you.” Ted ended up working directly with me on

that. And then the government shut down, furloughs happened. Remember the furlough snowstorm? Three people were chosen in the Europe Bureau to be essential. And Tom chose Barbara, Carlos, and me—because I was doing the Balkans. Suddenly, I'm at the State Department every day when only Strobe Talbott and a handful of people are there. And I ended up more-or-less running the Bosnia Task Force. Ted Morse got prostate cancer and went out for surgery. And so Kelly Kammerer, who was the counselor at the time, stepped in, and Kelly had other things on his plate. So he just kept asking me to take care of this, take care of that. And I thought we were incredibly nimble. But given that I, at the ripe age of twenty-eight, or whatever, was suddenly in charge of reconstructing the Balkans after Dayton, we were probably not leading with our best. I would say that we probably should have spent a little bit more time on staffing, which I will tell you was very interesting, because when the furloughs happened after that, AID had figured out how to say no, we don't have to put anyone on furlough. And I think that was a big game changer from the '95-'96 furlough to what happened in the 2000s when we were able to keep people on so we could keep things running. David Coles, Jerry Hyman, and I would say, we got to do something. I mean, it was very hard to be nimble in a situation during a furlough, but I think we did the best we could.

Q: Can you talk about relations with the Hill? I mean, obviously, I think Congress felt a proprietary interest, especially in the East European and the NIS programs. Were you going up to the Hill all the time to brief them?

ALEXANDER: The woman who was the other co-chair of the Bosnian Task Force with Mike Mahdesian, her name is Delena. I can't remember her last name. I was not the point person for the Hill; Tom Dine was. Back in the day, everything rolled up to the AA [Assistant Administrator]. I was doing a lot of briefing papers, and getting them prepped for those meetings. But aside from backstopping Brian Atwood in a couple of situation room meetings, I was very behind the scenes and getting everyone prepared. But the Hill conversations were interesting. Bill Schuerch had set up the enterprise funds and I had seen the start of them. Coming back in 2011 and seeing the wrapping up of the enterprise funds was quite interesting to me.

There were a lot of good ideas for the Freedom Support Act and the SEED funds. And it was a bit like Whac-A-Mole, because everyone had a good idea, right. But it was also sort of like, let’s see if 1,000 flowers will bloom, let’s see what sticks. And I think a lot of good intentions just went astray. But on a whole, I still think we did a really good job. The U.S. government was far more active and faster than the EU [European Union]. Everyone thought that AID was nimble, listening to advice from on the ground and trying to build up programs based on that. And I think where we fell short was after two to three years of those programs, we always have a hard time cutting things off. If they weren't working we didn't get out. We just continued and said “Well.” Sometimes it was good–you need to make mistakes and figure out how to adapt–but some programs we probably continued past self-sufficiency. I think these countries could have taken over, but it became a donor feeding ground for bottom feeders.

Q: A lot of money chasing ideas.

ALEXANDER: Exactly.

Q: Can you remember any good ideas that didn't get picked up?

ALEXANDER: At the time, when we set up the enterprise funds, it would have been better to know what the long-term projection was. No one thought they would make money. And when it was set up, everyone thought it was going to be a grant program. So, there were really no rules of engagement or rules of the road. When we started getting returns on those funds, what were we supposed to do with them? I think we could have probably made use of reinvestment at the time, as opposed to holding funds to full liquidation at the end. And then comes 2010, like, "Oh, now what do we do with it?" It probably would have been better to recycle the money within the period of time that these countries really needed it. But hindsight is 20-20 on that. I think the rehabilitation for the damage done during the war for the Balkans was the first time that I, as an international development specialist, saw the synergies that need to happen in this development continuum. And given that I came from a regional bureau that has longer-term development aspirations, getting us involved earlier so we could do work hand in glove with the emergency responders was really important. Sort of a lesson for me.

I had moved away from the Balkans back to Poland. Our economist came in and said, "McDonald's is setting up everywhere in Poland." He talked agriculture folks into getting farmers to grow a different type of potatoes, not the seed potatoes that the Poles ate, but the potatoes that you would grow for McDonald's French fries. So, an entire ag [agriculture] program was dedicated to changing the potato crop. And then someone finally had the idea to go talk to McDonald's and say, "Hey, you can look for resources right here in Poland." McDonald's responded, "We're a franchise, we have to buy these frozen bags of potatoes and have them sent in. They're already cut. Everything's already done. We sell french fries around the world and McDonalds' have to be the exact same. Everywhere. We can't buy local produce for this." And so suddenly, the Polish farmers came and dumped all of their potatoes in front of the U.S. Embassy, saying "What have you done to us? We lost an entire season of crops and you don't want these potatoes and we're not gonna eat them. These (seed potatoes) are the potatoes that we eat." There were mistakes like that. Don Steinberg had this funny story about breeding pigs in Haiti. But in Russia, we were trying to breed a better cow. And you can't fly cows over to Siberia. So we sent semen, cow semen which had to get there within thirty-six hours or something. So we sent it over in a FedEx plane! You took chances and some worked–and some did not.

Q: Do you remember any training programs? I've been struck in doing these oral histories how many people talk about the long-term impacts of training and the impossibility of measuring it in the short-term. And I don't know whether there was any training going on as part of your program.

ALEXANDER: Well, I was a political appointee, who came in as a desk officer and left as an acting DAA. And in the [George W.] Bush administration, I stayed for a year. I was

asked to stay on because I was not strictly political. But that did not come with a lot of training opportunities. A lot of my colleagues were doing COTR (Contracting Officer Technical Representative) training and things. That was available to me, but no one really told me, so I didn't have that. But I would learn from my colleagues; they'd come back and they would sort of be able to tell me why something couldn't be done. And so I use them to help me. I never had those opportunities, but I knew they existed.

Q: And that's because you were an AD and training was restricted to career officers?

ALEXANDER: I think so, although now that my daughter joined AID as an AD—and now she's at the State Department as a PMF—she seemed to have access to trainings that I don't think I would have had access to. I mean, yeah, I got on the ground job training. I was on a panel for the first SEPs, and twenty-five years later there is still the SEPs mechanism, which is pretty amazing and, for me, formative. The most training I think I got was, was "This is what you should be looking for. This is how grants and cooperative agreements are graded." That was the type of training I got, but only because I think they just needed a warm body on the review panel, and I seem to be enough of a knowledgeable person to be on it.

Q: Right. Did you see any of the backsliding that we're now seeing in Poland and Hungary? I'm trying to figure out when things started to go south, because at the beginning these two countries were considered the bright lights.

ALEXANDER: Tom Dine used to have this chart that showed democratic reforms and economic reforms, where they met and where AID could then graduate countries. You started seeing this decline in democratic reforms. Economic reforms were still doing well. And the Czech Republic is a prime example. I mean, Václav Klaus—who is the Minister of Finance—was incredibly conservative. And then when he became prime minister, he took the country in a different direction. But the shock that Poland went through—based on a Jeffrey Sachs model of how things had happened in Latin America—set back democratic reforms a bit. Not all of those shock therapy options would work in every country, especially while you're trying to build democratic principles. I think it set back democracy a bit because people didn't have a say on particular reforms. But on the other hand, no one would have said, "Sure, you should start taxing my gas." The backsliding hadn't really started in the '93–'96 period. You saw non-democratic actors coming in, but I don't think we really saw the backsliding because we were just all about graduating—we were going to graduate out of the northern tier. From 1991 to 1997 was when we were graduating all the northern tier countries—that was the goal. And so we weren't looking for backsliding, and we were kind of keeping blinders on. Because the Freedom Support Act said these funds will be available for three to five years, though they lasted a lot longer than that. But Congress was also like, "Get out, it's not going to be our problem anymore."

Q: That's short sighted, of course.

ALEXANDER: It is short-sighted. And it's also Europe's neighborhood. But the EU was having trouble moving money, because they weren't moving up fast enough. So, we sort of went in at the beginning and said, "We're plugging these holes, but at some point, there will be an exit and EU neighbors should come in." And Congress was saying, "We've done what we need to do, we should be thinking about graduating." So, I think there was a bit of a rush to graduation.

Q: Right. Did you personally have any dealings with the European donors?

ALEXANDER: Not during that time; I spend so much time with them now. I'm trying to figure out if I spent any time with them, then. Not really. No, I think they were trying to get their house in order. We did donor conferences with them on the Balkans later. Well, probably like '97-'98, we were doing Balkan conferences with the Europeans. But I think that was the first time I had that kind of contact.

Q: Right. Obviously, there were things you wanted them to do. And there were things they wanted you to do. And it's quite a delicate dance.

ALEXANDER: And they were very honest. Like, we're not going to get to this for another year and a half. We're like, "Okay, so we're going to plug this gap now, and we're going to train officials on the rule of law for the European system that you need." We were plugging holes in advance of when the EU was going to come in.

Q: Just amazing. So, you stayed in AID until the new administration?

ALEXANDER: I stayed until August 2001. President Bush came in, in January, and I stayed for six months. I was asked to stay because I was doing the Balkans. But at that point, I was essentially acting DAA. Don had left. Andrew Natsios came in and was trying to figure out who he was going to bring in. Barbara Turner had gone to the Global Health Bureau at that point.

Q: And then PPC [Policy and Program Coordination], I think.

ALEXANDER: Yeah, then PPC. I thought, "He needs his own people." And I can't just pick up and call someone at the White House anymore, because they all know I'm a holdover—and that's not a good place to be. I was working for Don, and he had been elevated to Acting Administrator after Brady Anderson left. And he was in that role for a while. So we were both sort of sticking around. He said he wasn't coming back to the bureau. He went to Booz Allen and I was like "I'm not sure I want to stay here without George and Don." And then I got a call from IREX [International Research & Exchanges Board] and I decided to move on and work for an implementer as opposed to a funder like AID.

Q: Right. Although, in many ways staying in the same geographic universe, although IREX runs programs everywhere.

ALEXANDER: We only had programs in Central and Eastern Europe then. I mean, it was a Sovietologist haven for anyone who wanted to work in the former Soviet sphere or on the former Soviet Union. I was there for nine years. And we didn't start expanding to the Middle East until a couple years after I got there.

Q: Right. When you left AID, did you think that was it—that you were finished with AID?

JOINING IREX

ALEXANDER: I loved public service. And I thought, "How fun is it to give away money and to work collaboratively?" But because I had been both in the field and in headquarters, I saw the difference. And it was important to me that I felt like I was in the belly of the beast with AID. And I really wanted to be on the implementer side. This opportunity, to work with IREX and to work with peer NGOs [Non-governmental Organizations] that were administering U.S government programs as implementers, was appealing. These were the real on-the-ground people, I just felt like I wanted to see that. When I was at AID, I thought that we were the real on-the-ground people. I also knew when I traveled, I had these lovely per diems, stayed in nice hotels, went into the U.S Embassy every day and had a diplomatic passport. And it was very different from setting up an office and country program without an RSO [Regional Security Officer] to help you. I wanted that opportunity.

When the next election happened (2004), I, of course, thought John Kerry was going to win. That was 2004, and then 2008 came, and I was very happy at IREX and was not looking to do anything else. I was asked to do some backroom staff for Obama, which was writing some briefs on things. And so I did that in my spare time. And then lo and behold, he won. I was still very happy at IREX and it took a while for them to figure out what AID was going to be.

Q: Right. I remember it took two years or something.

ALEXANDER: Exactly. Which is why when they reached out to me in 2010, and said, "Do you want to come in and talk about a job?" I was like, "Well, I didn't really work for Obama." I was still thinking not that I was being recognized for my extensive experience, but that I was being seen as a political envelope licker. I just didn't quite know what they wanted me to come in to talk about. But I went in. I had never met Raj Shah [former Administrator of AID] before—and I went in and had an interview with him. But the whole time I'm thinking "It's probably the DAA job, or even a Chief of Staff job, maybe in the Europe and Eurasia bureau." And during the conversation, I realize he's talking to me about a top job—like a Senate-confirmed position. And at the end of the day, as with most women my age, but not my daughter's, I have impostor syndrome. I truly felt like, "How could he be talking to me about Tom Dine's job or Don Presley's job—those were my mentors. I'm not ready for that type of responsibility. I'm a very good number two."

And when I walked out, I thought I didn't do well in that because I kept thinking he was talking to me about the DAA job, and I'm pretty sure he was talking to me about being

AA. So I go out to get the cab and the person getting out of the cab is a friend of mine, who clearly is coming in knowing full well she's being considered for an AA job. And I was like, oh my god was I up against her? She should absolutely get this and she would have gotten it. But, she had not paid her taxes in a timely fashion. And the Obama administration was absolutely clear about that issue. So she ended up elsewhere in AID. And she did very well in the long run and became an Ambassador. And I ended up with a job. But again, I am very sure she had gotten the nod for the job, and it was just because of her tax issue that they had to go to me. Still, I was excited about coming back to AID, because I felt like it was home. As you said, I grew up there. I spent nine years there and felt like I had seen the bureau develop and was excited to come and work outside the bureau. I still had a lot of friends at AID, and was excited about the idea of coming back in.

Q: Right. I know you've got a hard stop and I want to make sure to respect that. But I'd like to go back to your years at IREX. Did you do a lot of traveling when you were at IREX? There was only so much traveling you could do while you were at AID since you were needed in Washington. But was it the same thing in IREX?

ALEXANDER: I was the senior VP and the only VP at the time. And I was also very hesitant because I felt like I couldn't go visit AID missions because I had been acting DAA. I spent a lot of time getting memos and calls just to make sure I was keeping my nose clean. I mean IREX wanted me because I knew everyone but I felt like I couldn't go talk to anyone at AID. And so I did travel. I did more travel in the NIS region than I had done when I was at AID. I'd actually never been to Russia. I'd never been to Moldova; I'd never been to those places. That was strictly George Ingram's territory. Mine was in the Balkans and Central Europe.

I traveled a lot—to Ukraine, Georgia, Albania, and Armenia. I wanted to go to places that I was less familiar with. And I really got to see how AID and IREX run programs, and what the relationship was like with the U.S Embassy—not that we were funded by them, we are funded by State/ECA [Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs]. So we're funded mainly by Education[al and] Cultural Affairs, and not by AID, which made it a lot more comfortable for me to have those interactions.

Q: Did you also have private or foundation funding or was it all government?

ALEXANDER: We had private foundation funding, and we had an endowment. The one difficult experience I had was when we realized at one point that there was embezzlement happening in Tbilisi in the Georgia office. And I went out there and Denny Robertson was the mission director at the time. I had stayed in contact with him and considered him a friend. I went to his house; he had had some event that night, and I stayed later. And we were sitting around having a beer, and I said, "Why I'm here is I think we have embezzlement in our office. It's not U.S government funds. It's private foundation money. It's our money. And we haven't traced anything back to anyone yet. So, this is just a matter of 'Are we going to write it off?' but I need to take care of the management issue." And Denny said, "Let me have the legal attaché work with you," which was great.

And he set that all up–and the legal attaché was wonderful–and decided they were going to wire me because they were going to help the Georgians figure out how you take care of something like this. They were going to use my situation as an example. And in the meantime, all this is happening and it's the middle of the night or early morning in Washington. I can't call the president of IREX or any board member and say, "Are you okay with me being wired?" because then I'll turn the wire over to the FBI. And it's kind of out of our hands even though I said we will decide if we prosecute since this has nothing to do with the U.S government. I couldn't reach anyone. So I ended up calling my brother, who is the U.S Attorney in Georgia, and said, "So somewhere we're in a situation like this, what would someone want to do?" And he was like, "Oh, you will lose any ability to have that wire once you give it back to the FBI. You can no longer use that." And I just thought, "Denny wouldn't lead me astray. He trusted these guys." They seemed to understand that I didn't really have the authority to say "We're going to prosecute this." We could handle this with our own insurance. This has nothing to do with U.S government funds. I went ahead and I was wired that we ended up never getting to confession. Well, I did get a confession: "We were building a house and it cost more than I thought. And so we ended up taking out more money. And we intend to pay IREX back for this type of thing." Fast forward—that was 2004 when it happened—and then I went back into AID in 2010. They prosecute, the guy gets thrown in jail, as is his wife. He sat up in a cage. And he got up and he was screaming, "I'm gonna kill you, I'm gonna get you because they play the wire in court." He knew they heard everything he had said, and there were no laws in Georgia that I had to tell him I was wired. And he was like, "I'm gonna get you." Fast forward, I'm back in the U.S government, as an assistant administrator in the E&E Bureau, and I said to Raj and Don Steinberg, "I can't go to Georgia, like there is a guy who has already said, he is going to kill me." And the first trip I had to take was to Georgia, and I went with Don Steinberg and told the ambassador to put extra security on me. I was a nervous wreck.

So, my traveling with IREX? I did different things with IREX than I did with the U.S government. Sometimes it was cleaning up messes like financial mismanagement; sometimes it was as vice president; it was a ribbon cutting; celebrating the tenth anniversary of the IREX office in Armenia. But I did actually get to go a little further into the field than I was able to do when I came back to AID. And then again, when you're a government person, you go out to the field, and everyone's excited to meet you. Going out as IREX I was just working with the staff.

Q: Are there other lessons from the IREX experience that you want to highlight?

ALEXANDER: Well, I think being on the other side of the table from AID and from the U.S government, I had an appreciation for why, for example, when an RFA [Request for Applications] was listed, and it looked like they did a cut and paste, but they forgot to change a country. And so everyone would be like, "Why do they want us to look at the Armenian rule of law strategy when this is a program for Albania?" I was like, "I'm sure this is a cut and paste issue." That's why AID says you should ask questions for clarity. Not assuming malice, not assuming that they're intentionally trying to get you screwed. I

think part of the other issue was watching from IREX's perspective, when, for instance, AID decides to spit out an RFA the week before Thanksgiving, and it's due the week after New Year's. But that's just the way the procurement system works. You have to say, can we get an extra forty-five days. It's not the bureau COTR who did that, or that the AO (Agreement Officer) knew it was going to happen like that. It just worked slowly all the way through the system and then procurement sends it out with that type of due date. You just have to ask. They're not doing things intentionally to make our life difficult, but it's a lot of money. They're trying to move a lot of bureaucracy within the agency that causes these things to look like they're intentionally trying to mess with us. And yeah, telling the IREX staff that, and then going into AID offices and saying, "Really?! You want this out for a thirty day turnaround?" If you have someone you want to give it to then do a limited solicitation. Don't have all organizations running around. And so being able to speak that language, I love being the bridge, I love the ability to actually be on the IREX side and NGO side and speak the language of both. I think it was really important.

Q: Right. Well, I think, calling yourself the bridge is exactly right, because you've seen both sides. I guess it was only the first two years that you were prohibited from having much direct conversation with AID, right?

ALEXANDER: Right. Although because I've been acting DAA, you sometimes end up with a lifetime prohibition. But I had been acting and I was GS-15 (General Schedule 15 payscale). I was something that basically, I was never getting, like once you go from the GS fifteen to something else. There are different rules as well. And Carlos was very helpful in trying to say, "No, you don't have a lifetime prohibition." Because I'll tell you I did go back to one mission. And they were treating the cooperative agreement like a contract with IREX. And I said to the head of the Democracy Program, "If you want to make this a contract, make it a contract. You cannot keep asking us these intrusive questions under a cooperative agreement." And I said, "I'm gonna go talk to the Mission Director tomorrow. And I just wanted to tell you, this is what I'm coming in to say." And he thought that was a threat that I was going over his head. He called the IG [Inspector General] and said that I was out there illegally. And I ended up with an IG investigation that went from 2002 to 2003. And, of course, I was cleared because I had this letter from Carlos. But the IG went around to everyone before they finally came to talk to me. And I'm like, "Well, here's this letter." I thought I was okay. I mean, if I wasn't, then you could ask me straight up. But I had no idea.

They closed the case. But I'll tell you that the IG investigation stayed with me through both my Senate confirmations in 2010 and 2014. Because no one put a resolution of the case in the file. And so fortunately, I sit here with this letter from the IG saying, "I had been cleared October 20, 2003," the day I gave birth to my son, which is why I remember it. I got the letter, and I insisted that I get that letter, because I was worried that somehow the case would follow me. I mean, GC [Office of General Counsel] and AID, all they had was an open investigation, in 2010. I gave them the letter, so I could get my confirmation and my clearance. Again, in 2014, they still have it listed as an open investigation. I'm like, here's another copy of the letter.

Q: Wow. That's incredible. And so that person is not your favorite person.

ALEXANDER: He isn't. But you know what, I hired him in the E&E Bureau when he wanted to leave another bureau. I did not like him for a long time. But he is a really good program officer. But yeah, I was bitter for a long time, mainly because the system didn't alert or talk to me first. They could have said "You have this complaint," but they didn't. Before they came to talk to me, they had already started the investigation. And so I always felt like my name was pulled through the mud, but it's all fine.

Q: You just said in passing that you were cleared the day your son was born ! So you've been raising a family amidst all this too.

ALEXANDER: Three kids. Three wonderful kids. I have my Bosnia baby—which is what I call Rachel because she learned to walk or crawl while I was in Bosnia; my Kosovo baby, which is what Carly was. And Josh was the Iraq baby.

Q: It's the Bosnia baby that's now in AID?

ALEXANDER: Well, she just left AID. She's now in State as a PMF. But I spent an entire year explaining to her what acronyms were and having people come up to speak to her. She's got a different last name, she's got my husband's last name. They'd be like, so wait, are you related to Paige Alexander? And she's like yeah, I'm her daughter. A lot of friends at AID thought it was fun that she was there.

Q: A huge credit to you that you made it look like something really worthwhile doing too.

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RETURNING TO USAID IN THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: THE EUROPE AND EURASIA BUREAU AND THE MIDDLE EAST BUREAU

Q: Today is September 15, 2022. And this is our second conversation with Paige Alexander. And when we stopped last time, we were talking about coming back to AID [Agency for International Development] after a distinguished interlude in the nonprofit sector. Paige, do you want to talk a little bit about coming back to AID?

ALEXANDER: Sure. Well, I was surprised to have gotten the call for the AA [Assistant Administrator] job. I expected that to have gone to somebody else. The whole Senate confirmation process is something that you're not aware of until you go through it. And so filling out all those forms and having such an intense look at your personal and private life and that of your family. They had started the process in a very different way than the previous time I came into AID, where you filled out security forms, but essentially, you were just worried about whether or not if you said you had smoked pot at some point, if that was going to be a problem. And then suddenly, when you're in the Senate confirmation process, they're asking your kids names, and they're checking your kid's Twitter feed.

And they're asking you questions—one of my favorites was in an interview with the White House counsel, and they asked me if I'd had a drinking problem. And I said, "What would make you ask that?" And they said, "Well, one of your daughters has posted something." I'm trying to remember whether it was Twitter or just Facebook, or what. But she had not set her privacy settings, and we had gone out a couple nights before for my daughter's birthday at Melting Pot. I had a glass of wine, and I let my daughter drive us home because she had her learner's permit. She was always looking for opportunities to drive. My other daughter took a picture in the backseat saying, "Save me, Rachel's driving, Mom's been drinking." And it made it seem as if somehow that there was something wrong. And I literally said, "I can show you the receipt from dinner. I had one glass of wine, I was modeling good behavior." But the White House counsel was very concerned about that.

So, I came home, and I mentioned it to my daughter. I said, "We've always talked about privacy settings, yours aren't set." Of course, as a teenager she's like, "Yes they are" "Then why was I just asked at the White House counsel about a post you had." And of course, at that point in time, I didn't follow my kids on Facebook or Twitter. That sort of intrusion into your life is something that a lot of people at AID are not aware of when you go through a Senate confirmation process. You really do put it all out there to serve the government. And especially when you're taking a job where you're getting even less money than you were making at a non-profit. It's really because you want to serve and you're anxious and you're excited and honored. So, I came back to AID that way. People were happy to see me. They had known me before. They knew I had started as a desk officer and suddenly I was coming back as an AA. So, I had women saying you're the epitome of what we can aspire to, that you can start as a desk officer and come back as both the mother of three and in this position. So, coming into the bureau was wonderful. But even in Washington people were saying you have to get out to the field, things have changed. And because I've been out for nine years, and although I'd seen and overlapped with colleagues at AID in Central and Eastern Europe, I knew it was going to be a different experience going in.

And the Europe and Eurasia bureau had also just been moved to SA-44 (State Annex 44). There were a lot of hard feelings about that, and people had felt shunted off, so I was working with a new administrator to make sure that E&E had a space so when people came over to the RRB (Ronald Reagan Building) they had a place to be and they didn't feel abandoned. That may be a post-COVID error, though I think no one's come back into work anyway, or very few people have gone back into work. So you can be anywhere! But it was getting used to the new space that was discombobulating for staff who felt that they had been sort of given the shaft. And so rebuilding morale was my main focus at that point.

Also, we had an administrator, who, I think, in retrospect, rightly said his focus was going to be on Africa, Latin America, and Asia. And so he sort of said to me, "You need to care enough about the bureau so that I don't have to." And I considered that great, because that meant I had a lot of authority and was empowered to pursue things that I

understood and knew. He didn't really want to. But he also said, “You're coming in as an AA to a bureau that I don't think has a longevity to it.” Because the SEED [Support for Eastern European Democracy] account and FSA [Freedom Support Act] account were supposed to be three-to-five year programs, and we were in our twenty-fifth year! He said, “I'm going to ask you to do other things.” And I thought, “That's such an odd thing for you to say after I went through this whole confirmation to prove my credibility in this bureau and in this region.” I came in in December 2011. And by gosh, I'm getting confused now. I should get back and look at the dates. But I was first asked to run the Middle East Task Force, which of course had nothing to do with E&E. But the issue was with people running the Humanitarian Bureau and the Middle East Bureau. The Humanitarian Bureau was Nancy Lindborg and she was Senate-confirmed. But there was no one for the Middle East Bureau who was Senate-confirmed. Just George Laudato and Chris Crowley—great Foreign Service officers who knew what they wanted to do. So it was just not working as it tended to happen with DCHA [Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance] at the time. So, he said, “Can you come in and just run this Middle East taskforce?”

Q: While also being AA of the Europe and Eurasia Bureau?

ALEXANDER: Yes. So, he asked me to take a little leave of absence. I had my deputy, Roberta Mahoney, who had been actually running the bureau before I got confirmed, and Jonathan Hale, who's the political appointee. [Raj] Shah said, “They've taken care of the Bureau until now, you can do this.” That was during the Arab Spring in March. So that was March through June, I ended up leading the Middle East taskforce and trying to get all the players to agree. I had no Middle East background myself. But my husband was working at Brookings on the Middle East. And so we would literally, in the morning, while making sandwiches for the kids, I would say, “I've been tapped to go to a meeting at the White House on Bahrain. What do you think?” Now, USAID doesn't have much to do with Bahrain. But we didn't want to lose the seat at the table that we were being given to hear what the other agencies were thinking.

And I said, “I don't know anything about Bahrain, and I'm not getting a briefer from anyone because we don't work on Bahrain.” My husband would take the peanut butter, and he would just put on a slice of bread, and as he's making a sandwich, he’d say “There’s this pearl bridge.” And he would basically give me a Brookings briefing on Bahrain. Before I walked into the meeting I’m thinking, “AID is trying to reserve a seat at the table, although this doesn't really have a lot to do with us.” But as with everything, it was connections and spending time in the situation room with folks that really ended up making critical networking possible. And the biggest thing I worry about post-COVID is that that culture of networking over M&Ms and Coca-Cola at the White House is entirely lost.

Q: Did you have a sense of what the White House wanted from AID vis-à-vis response to the Arab Spring—was that clear? Was it evolving as these meetings occurred?

ALEXANDER: It was evolving as things went on, because we have led on the humanitarian response. That was happening, and that was very much caught up in one bureau. And then the questions were primarily about Egypt at the time and what had happened at Tahrir Square. AID, prior to the Obama administration, had kind of let go in Egypt. And being at IREX, I saw this. We had wanted to work in Egypt, but if you didn't have the necessary registration—your golden ticket—you had to be registered to work with AID there. So during the previous administration, if you weren't registered in Egypt, you could still get DRL [Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor] money. And if you were registered, you could get AID money. And so there was just a very small group who were registered. And in Egypt, the more exciting programs were the civil society oriented work that DRL was funding. When Tahrir Square happened, the DRL grantees were the ones who really had a foot in the door. And so I ended up in a lot of unfortunate situations with Anne Patterson—not the AID Anne Patterson—but the Assistant Secretary Anne Patterson, who was coming out of Egypt, having been Ambassador during a very difficult time. She was awaiting confirmation to be Assistant Secretary, and she was making a lot of decisions about AID and how AID was going to work. And her decision was that MEPI—the Middle East Partnership Initiative—were going to take all of the foreign aid funding for Egypt, and AID would not get anything because she said we weren't doing exciting programs and our programs were for the longer term.

AID was sending me in there to fight to make sure that we had a good piece of the pie. And probably one of my more memorable meetings ever was at the State Department when Anne Patterson had announced that she was going to do it this way. But previous [prior] to that I had gotten together with Tom Melia [Thomas O. Melia], who was the deputy assistant secretary of DRL and a longtime friend of mine from the former Soviet sphere, and Tamara Coffman Wittes who was running MEPI at the time, and we sat down and I said, “What are you going to do with ninety-five million dollars?” And their eyes popped! Because DRL and MEPI weren't used to working with that much. And I said, “Look, why don't we do it this way? Why don't we each take a pot of funds, and we see how far we get by August. And then we figure out who's got the most traction, and they'll take the rest of the funds.” And we had sort of cut this deal.

And then suddenly, we're in this meeting with Anne Patterson, who announces DRL and MEPI are taking all the money. And Tom Melia leaned across the table and said, “Although I hate to agree with our friends from AID, I think we actually have a different solution.” And he laid it out and Tamara supported it. And Anne Patterson came back and called Don Steinberg—who is the Deputy Administrator at AID—and said, “Who the hell was that you sent in? Who totally tanked my meeting?” And Don, sort of thinking, “Well, Paige wouldn’t normally tank a meeting so that seems odd.” So, he calls me and he's like, “What just happened?” And I told him, and he was like, “That is impressive. You just totally back-footed Anne Patterson at her own game.” And that's exactly what we did. And we each took a chunk of change. And AID moved faster, more effectively. And we didn't care anymore if someone was registered or not. It was the middle of things falling apart in Egypt. And we ended up with the bulk of the money by that summer.

Q: And what was the programming like? Did you have to do a lot of new programming or working in new areas or with new organizations? Or was it basically building on what you had?

ALEXANDER: Well, so here's the benefit of running a task force, you actually fight for the money and then you give it to the bureau, and you tell them to do what they need to do. So to my knowledge, I mean, Chris Crowley and George Laudato were still running the bureau. So, I was just trying to do inter-agency and intra-agency cooperation. My memory is that NDI [National Democratic Institute] ended up with two grants from AID and IRI [International Republican Institute] ended up with two grants—one from DRL and one from AID. And the AID ones stuck and the DRL one was a little bit more risky, and we were risk-averse. And so, theirs did not work and ours did. By August, I had turned it over to the bureau because I fought for the funds and got them and Jim Bever was in the field trying hard to get money.

Q: That's pretty exciting. So, were you then released from the task force?

ALEXANDER: Then I was released from the task force. I went back to the E&E Bureau for a little bit. I should look at the dates when the South Sudan International Engagement Conference was happening (2011). I happened to be talking to Don Steinberg, and Raj came in and said, "Well, Paige, you were in charge when the last new country, Kosovo, was declared. And now we have South Sudan. The White House wants to do an international engagement conference with South Sudan and it's not going well in the Africa Bureau." The political appointee, Raja Jandhyaia, was having problems working with Gayle Smith at the White House, and they had lost confidence that AID was going to be able to pull off the conference. It's already been delayed once, I think. And so he said, "Can you work on the South Sudan conference?" And I remember walking to the front office and going to the galley to get a soda from the soda machine. And Carla Koppel walked in. And I was like, "I've just been asked to work in South Sudan, and I literally am not sure I know anything about the country. I don't even know what language they speak." "Well," she said, "a lot of dialects where they also speak English." And then she started telling me a little bit and I said, "Do you want to do this together?" And she said "Sure." So, we walked back into the front office with my soda and I said to Don, "I'm only going to do this if I can do it with Carla."

Q: And what was her role at the time?

ALEXANDER: Carla's role— I can't remember what she was brought in for. I think it was to work on gender—I think she was the gender lead. I think at that point, she didn't necessarily have enough to do or maybe there were issues. She was basically just saving my butt. And she came in with me.

Q: Well, she's a very can-do person, so I'm sure she was a great ally.

ALEXANDER: She was. And then we did the International Engagement Conference [for South Sudan]. I remember that it was December 11, 2011[December 14-15, 2011].

Q: The political pressure around South Sudan must have been even more intense than around the Arab Spring.

ALEXANDER: It was. I was brought in to basically make sure that Gayle Smith was happy with AID. The conference hadn't been put together well. There were a lot of questions. Mine wasn't a substantive role. It was just getting this conference off the ground.

Q: Right. And so that will become your full time preoccupation for a couple of months, I would think.

ALEXANDER: Yeah, it did. And then I went back to the Bureau for a little bit. And then I was asked to run HR [Human Resources].

Q: You were the utility infielder, right?

ALEXANDER: Exactly, exactly. I did that for about seven months, and then we hired a real Chief Human Capital Officer. And then I went back to E&E for a couple months and then was asked to take on the Middle East Bureau, and ended up being nominated and confirmed. So, I did the Middle East Bureau for about a year and a half, I think I got confirmed in 2014.

Q: And that was the second confirmation hearing?

ALEXANDER: That was the second confirmation hearing, at which point, all of my kids had privacy settings on all of their social media! But it was a matter of who could get confirmed, the person who had come in after the Arab Spring had not worked out. And so, Raj was just looking for someone who he thought he could work with who could get confirmed. And again, the Middle East Bureau was not a place he gave a lot of attention to, because Africa was really more of his passion and food security. And I, once again, ended up in a bureau that did not have a whole lot of front office attention, which was just fine. And the bureau knew me a little bit from the Middle East Task Force.

Q: Right. But your deep roots were still in the E&E area. My memories are probably a bit fuzzy – the Middle East program had a lot of money, but a lot of it was tied up in long-term programs. So, there wasn't really a lot of flexibility if you even wanted to try some new initiatives. But am I wrong there?

ALEXANDER: No, I mean, in certain countries, like in Egypt, by that time, we had MOUs (Memorandums of Understanding) with the government that Mary Ott had set up when she had been out there as Mission Director. And we were stuck a little bit in those lanes. The Palestine program was actually quite interesting. There had been a big political push to build a number of houses. And so that had actually taken on a life of its own and community development around different Palestinian areas. And so there was a lot of creativity there. But it was primarily a lot of political oversight as to where the money

was going. There was a big chunk of change that was going to UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees] and the State Department control of it, but we were doing all of the implementation.

Q: Right. So you are working closely with the State Department. And then I'm sure White House issues came up.

ALEXANDER: Yes. For me what was one of the more interesting things was having been in a bureau when the Maidan Revolution (in Ukraine) happened, and when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014. And having been in literally weekly—if not numerous weekly—situation room meetings, talking about the invasion, getting to know all the people around the table, our concern about the little green men—as we referred to them—who had invaded Ukraine, and our fear about what to do to pressure Russia.

And I'll never forget another one of my famous family stories. When I came home, we always did family dinners where we sat around and I'd make each of the kids talk about three things they did during the day so I'd understand what had happened during their day. And occasionally, they'd push it back on me and say, "Well, tell us three things that you did." And most of it was classified–I really couldn't talk about it. And they remain convinced I am a CIA agent, which is kind of funny. But I did say, "You've seen a lot on the front page of the papers about Russia invading Ukraine." So, we're trying to talk about what we can do as a punishment to Russia. I explained what sanctions were. And, at that time, my ten-year-old son said, "Well, they shouldn't have the World Cup games in 2016." It's like, "What are you talking about?" And he's a soccer player and he explained that there are FIFA [Fédération Internationale de Football Association] rules that if a country takes over a team and does not pay for the team, that they get kicked out of FIFA. Josh said, "Well, it seems that if they went into Crimea, there is actually," and he Googles it and said, "Yeah, there's a FIFA registered soccer club. And if Russia has taken it over and hasn't paid for it, then they should be kicked out of FIFA."

That's fascinating. I go into this situation room the next day, and Tony Blinken is like, "Does anyone have any additional ideas of what we can do?" I was like, "I'm just gonna throw this out there." And I mentioned it. And he started laughing. He's like, "How did you know that? "I was like, "I have a ten-year-old son who plays soccer." And he goes, "You and Angela Merkel—she mentioned that this morning. And so we're actually running that down, because I love this." And it didn't end up going anywhere, because FIFA is one of the most corrupt organizations. But it was wonderful opportunities like that, where you could talk about what we could do to Russia.

And then fast forward, I get confirmed. And three months later, I'm sitting with a lot of the same people. But no one's anti-Russia, because we're talking about Syria, and we need Russia for Syria. Suddenly, a lot of the same people who were having conversations about how we can pressure Russia, suddenly we can't have these conversations, because we need them. And so, for me, it was just fascinating to watch how conversation in the situation room with people who you think are fully engaged on the issues you care about entirely changes depending on what bureau you're representing.

Q: I'm curious on that point, did we actually think that Russia was playing a positive role in Syria?

ALEXANDER: Yeah, well, remember at that time Russia was actually removing the weapons. They were being very helpful. But I had also lived through the Balkans, and I had seen how helpful Russia could be and how harmful they could be. And there were a lot of people who did not trust Russia at all. Yet we're having to recognize that we couldn't get things done in Syria without Russia's help. So we could not spank them on Ukraine while also asking for their help. And so this is why Secretary Kerry and Sergey Lavrov, the foreign minister, were having daily phone conversations. I mean, there were funny readouts of those conversations. I mean, they literally knew everything about each other, because they were talking every day.

Q: Keeping the lines open, which initially is good, even if you're only talking about the weather. Okay, so did you do a lot of travel during your stint as AA for the Middle East?

ALEXANDER: I did. Israel-Palestine, I was in Tunisia, I led a Countering Violent Extremism delegation to Algeria for the region. As in Egypt, I did a fair amount of traveling, but because the NSC [National Security Council] was calling constant meetings, it was really hard and there was just no one else. They were saying "principles only." And I was always allowed if Don Steinberg couldn't go, or I was always allowed as the plus one if they took it as plus one. But I wouldn't have been able to delegate. So, there was a need for me to stay in DC [District of Columbia]. Syria was a huge portfolio for us. And we were able to be very creative there together with OTI [Office of Transition Initiatives] to try to get work done out of Gaziantep with the SRTF—the Syria Recovery Trust Fund. And that was huge, because we did it with the UAE [United Arab Emirates], and we did it with the Germans. And it was very creative, something that was slightly akin to the loan guarantees that we had done in Bosnia back in the 90s, the Bosnian reconstruction trust fund. I was able to help with some parallels between what we had done in Bosnia in the 90s, and what we were doing in Syria in 2014. There was a lot of room for creativity. Back to your initial question–you had to know enough and have this historical knowledge to say, I know we just did this in Ukraine, we did these loan guarantees. Why can't we do this in Tunisia? And sort of leveraging that.

Q: And was there ever a time when you were optimistic about Syria?

ALEXANDER: Not really. I mean, I think when we decided to train and equip, I thought there was a chance, but the administration at the time stuck its toe in and pulled it back. Because, again, we were also hampered by the Russians saying "Don't give them weapons. This is our area, we'll take care of it." And then the Turks were also very upset about us giving any support to the PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party]. I've got a picture in my office, where I was talking to President Obama. I was invited in to have this conversation. And he asked what I was working on, and I talked about the Mosul Dam. We were worried that in Iraq, the Mosul Dam was going to break and flood and in ninety-six hours all will be underwater. And all the infrastructure that would come down

from the dam was going to destroy everything. Basically, it would be a flood of epic proportions. And I mentioned this to him. And he said, “That's one of the three things that keeps me up at night.” And I thought, “Oh my god, the president of the United States—like I'm working on an issue that keeps the United States President up. Maybe I should stay up more.” Yeah, but Iraq, Syria, and Yemen sort of burned me out. And I only did it for two years. But there was not a lot of hope there. It was just an attempt to actually save what we could save at the time.

Q: So with the intense scrutiny, and the insistence that it'd be only you at the table, I can see how that would really burn you out. Did you stay till the end of the Obama administration?

LEAVING USAID, JOINING THE EUROPEAN COOPERATIVE FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN AMSTERDAM 2017

ALEXANDER: I stayed until the end. We had decided to leave in the summer before that, regardless of who won. Our son was really the soccer playing son, and had gotten an offer to play in Europe. He had had numerous offers, we had said no, because we had jobs. And my husband and I looked at each other and said, “Our middle daughter graduates from high school a couple of months after the election. Why would we not just go to Europe?” Gosh, so it was a perfect out. I didn't have to worry.

Everyone was like, “What job do you want next?” And I thought, “I’ve been Senate-confirmed twice, for two regional bureaus that I care deeply about. I don't know what else I would want to do. I can't continue in the Middle East Bureau” I mean, my heart was breaking daily with those countries. And so we told everyone, “We're just going to follow our son overseas for his soccer career, and we're going to take a one-year break.” And I stayed until the very last day. It was very clear, given the contentious election, that Trump was not going to ask anyone to stay on. I didn't really want to stay so I left. I stayed until January 21. And then January 23, I went to Europe to interview for a job that they had wanted me to interview for. But I was so worried about conflict of interest that I didn't want to do anything that was gonna be a problem—I wanted to be out of my government job. So, I interviewed for the job, got the job, came back, our daughter graduated high school and then we moved to Europe.

Q: Unbelievable. You were in Amsterdam?

ALEXANDER: I was in Amsterdam working in Brussels on African agriculture, because I had never worked on Africa besides that South Sudan stint. And I never worked in agriculture. And so in my mind's eye, I was keeping my nose clean of any conflict of interest, which I thought was going to be a big deal, but it was not with that administration! They did not care as much. But I fell in love with Africa and the concept of doing international development work there. That made a lot more sense to me. I was continuing to do the policy work that I was doing in the Middle East in Europe and Eurasia.

Q: In addition to a new continent and a new sector, you also had basically, new colleagues. First time you weren't working for the U.S government. But was this a private organization or was it governmental?

ALEXANDER: No, it was private. And it was a small NGO [Non-governmental Organization], it was a Dutch NGO, but the office was in Brussels, because they thought they could access EU [European Union] funding better that way. But it was all Dutch people in the Brussels office. Agronomists, all of them. I could not tell the difference between red or white sorghum if you had paid me, and they would have rather cut off a limb than have to go in and talk to a funder. And so, it's a perfect mix of me having an opportunity to learn about agronomy and learn about Africa, while doing what I did best. I had no problem walking into the EU, talking to the Brits, talking to the Belgian foreign aid people, and knowing where to look and what to apply for. Because they didn't know. And Heineken was our main client. We were helping them locally source. And I loved the folks from Heineken. And they love the fact that they were doing something that was helping African farmers. I did two days a week in Brussels, and three days a week in Amsterdam, and a lot of that time was with Heineken as the client.

Q: Fascinating.

ALEXANDER: It was a non-profit, it was 100 percent a nonprofit.

Q: So, you are approaching other donors, but from the other side of the table. Do you have any insights on how they approach grantmaking differently from the way the U.S. does?

ALEXANDER: It's a slower process. And when you're dealing with agriculture, it's very different from grants set up for civil society or for infrastructure. And everybody had technical expertise. I was talking with the Belgian aid agency and also talking a lot to private sectors, like beef and dairy producers. They're great in the private sector, which is much easier, because they're like, "Oh, sure, we'll take a chance on this, we'll throw in 50,000 Euro." Governments donors would ask such technical questions on farming. And I couldn't answer any of those. I used to be able to go in and know the whole portfolio. So I would be scolded by them. But if they started asking specifically about crop yields and things I needed my agronomist with me, and they hated going into those meetings. They did it, but they didn't like it. They thought it was all for show. I said "I can do the show side, but you've got to come and be the farmer in the room."

Q: That's fascinating. Did you enjoy it? Was it two or three years in Europe?

ALEXANDER: It was a good experience. It made me appreciate it–going in and talking to other funders and explaining I'd spent fifteen years at USAID. There was this automatic "Oh, you're going to create bureaucracy, the problems we're gonna have if we would fund this!" But talking to the Dutch foreign ministry, they were forever appreciative that I wasn't just coming in to get the money, that I was appreciative of the fact that I knew they had a schedule that they were going to need things by. I did not like

it. I mean, I'd much prefer to give away money. But if you really believe in something you're working on, it's not that difficult to hawk for it or pitch it. And I think being on both sides of the table–having had that experience was incredibly important for me and I think that it was appreciated by folks I worked with. Because, I think I mentioned, during my time at IREX, an RFA came in, and it was for Armenia, but the RFA said Albania. Clearly it had been some cut-and-paste mistake. And everyone was like, "Why do we need to go to Albania to do research." I was like, "No, no, no, no, no, this is very clearly a cut and paste mistake, and all we have to do is ask the question." People make those errors, but everyone thinks the other person knows more, or you have to do exactly what the donor says. You can ask the donor, they're usually pretty willing to compromise.

Q: I think you had exactly the right background for that. So how was the soccer career?

ALEXANDER: The soccer career was great. And the parental success we had was helpful, because we wanted him to go to Europe. He wanted to play professionally, we wanted him to go and realize that was not his path in life. And so although we got a lot of credit for following our son's soccer career, the reality was living in Amsterdam for a year was not going to be a hardship for us. And after a year, like six weeks into it, he said, I want to stay for a second year. I was like, "Well, okay, well, I have a job. And my work permits are good through 2023. I'm fine. And so we stay for a second year, and then we stay for a third year. And it was during that third year that he realized that a lot of the kids who were playing soccer had stopped their education in eighth grade, because soccer was going to be what they did. And he just didn't have as much in common with them as he did with his school friends, because he was also doing the IB program. And he was just super smart and decided he wanted to come back to the States and get recruited for a good school. So that's when we started making plans to come back and I got headhunted for my current job.

Q: Ah, great. We'll talk about that. But did it work out for your son? Is he in college?

ALEXANDER: Yes, he is in college. And he was just about to sign with a really good Division 1 school and he skied into a tree and destroyed his leg. He's very happy to play for Emory and he's the only freshman who starts in games. And he's actually scored. And this has been his first series like four games into it. So it's probably not as high level as he would have liked. But he's having a perfect college experience.

Q: That's great and perfect for you. He's nearby.

ALEXANDER: Right. Although, we're ready to launch him. We don't treat him like he's nearby, which is good.

BACK TO ATLANTA AS CEO FOR THE CARTER CENTER 2020

Q: Yeah. Which is probably good for him as well. Can you talk a little bit about this last recruitment? Did it come out blue?

ALEXANDER: It was out of the blue. My husband and I kind of wanted to stay in Amsterdam. But we knew with the IB program, you have to do junior and senior year together. A lot of foreign service officers go through that as well. And you have to be at the same school because the classes are together. We knew we had to leave before junior year if it was going to happen. We just started saying it looks like we're coming back next year. And I got this call from the headhunter and I had the conversation with her. And I thought : the Carter Center is great, Atlanta is where I grew up. I left here in 1984. But my parents still live here and my brothers are here. So we were always back two or three times a year, over the thirty-five years that we didn't live here. We really were already packed. And so I thought why not? I'll try. And which turned out to work quite well.

Q: Yes. Well, you obviously knew the Carter Center from way,way past.

ALEXANDER: I actually didn't. I knew nothing about the Carter Center. It did not open until two years after I left Atlanta. And so it started 1982 out of Emory, but it didn't open the thirty-seven acres that we sit on now until 1986. I'd never been to the Carter Center. I knew they did election work, because we had occasional overlaps. They weren't part of the SEPs mechanism, which was the big political process mechanism in AID. I only knew them tangentially and the rest of the work was on neglected tropical diseases and along with agriculture, the other thing I've never worked on is health, and especially NTDs. I came into the interview just being very clear, like, I'm not a global health person. I am a civil society, democracy, Democracy, Human Rights and Labor type person. And they said, well, the good news is that we're losing both the VPs for peace and health. The technical VPs, so whatever CEO comes in, gets to hire those two. And I thought that‘s great, I can basically build an organization that's transitioning from the founders, President and Mrs. Carter. When I accepted the job, I was studying really hard about these neglected tropical diseases. And it was just one of the many times where I was just honest about what I could do and what I couldn't do. I'm fifty-six years old, so I do not know modern technology in terms of how to up our game and social media, but I know people I can hire who can do that. So it's really been a wonderful opportunity. And I now have a lot of AID people working at the Carter Center.

Q: I’ll bet you do. But there always were some former AID professionals there. There's such admiration for the work of the Center.

ALEXANDER: Well. I think there were people at AID who had been interns at the Carter Center, but I literally know no one at AID who had worked there except for Alexius Butler, but she had been an intern as well. I mean, I was recently in DC and saw Jake Tapper sitting at a table next to me, and we started talking. He had been an intern at the Carter Center. Of course, we here had no recollection of him because in the 1980s we didn't set up a database. And the number of people who tell me, I used to be an intern at the Carter Center. It's crazy. Now Barbara Smith is down here. She had worked with me on the Middle East transition response team. Susan Reichle had given her to me to work with and so that's how I met her. She ended up in the Obama administration as the DAA for PPL. She went off to Colorado, and she applied for the job. And so, she is the VP for

Peace, which is lovely. Additionally, Stacia George is the director for our conflict resolution program. She was deputy director at OTI.

Q: Oh my gosh. So, there are people there that you've already worked with a lot!

ALEXANDER: Actually, not a lot. But having come from a similar background, we speak each other's language. Barbara and I only worked together for four months. And Stacia and I never really worked together. But she understands AID and the U.S government, and that's helpful.

Q: Right. Can you talk a little bit about organizational culture and what it's like working in an organization like the Carter Center? You don't have to go raise money the way you used to?

ALEXANDER: I don't have to raise money, which is nice, because we have a very large endowment. That was one of the discussions when I looked at the job description. I said, how could this Center not have to raise money? And Jason Carter, who's the chair of the board said look at our SF-99 and see what we have in an endowment. I said that must be the property that we're on. He's like, nope, that's money in the bank. So, we have over a billion dollars. But having said that, President Carter was always quite keen to make sure that we were leveraging our money with others.

And so right now our U.S government funding is eight percent of our budget. I would like to make it fourteen percent. But we have a lot of private sector support from pharmaceuticals for all the work we do. And we have amazing donors. We've got people who will pay a million dollars for a painting that President Carter has made, because they believe in our mission, and they love what President Carter has done. And so, for me, I spend a lot of time with donors to explain to them what we're doing to get them excited about anything new we're doing and accepting awards for the work that we've done. And trying to think strategically about how we innovate and grow by honoring our existing commitments, because President Carter made them, to eradicate and eliminate diseases.

But how do we do that in a way that looks at health systems strengthening through more horizontal programs, as opposed to just going vertically, focusing on one disease? Like, once we eliminate those diseases in certain areas, what do we do with all the staff? Where's the workforce development? We've trained the staff, and now they don't have this to work on. How do they find something else?

Q: I'm sure you work with other donors a lot. Do you have any that you would consider competitors?

ALEXANDER: Well, I think, in our peace programs, and this is very much like IREX , we do rule of law, we have different divisions for conflict resolution, rule of law, human rights and democracy programs. All four of those could be independent NGOs. And the democracy program would compete with anyone in the SEP consortium, doing election administration, citizen observation. Our rule of law program competes with anyone who

does rule of law. Our conflict resolution is the same way as is our human rights program. But we try not to make them competitors, because the Carter Center works where other people won't work. And we're usually at the end of the road. And so often other people don't want to be there.

So, we're not doing Ukraine right now. We're not doing COVID. Because we don't put vaccines in arms. But we have talked to Pfizer about the fact that we've got 3,000 staff overseas, and they are doing behavior change programs and discussions about water and sanitation and health in eleven different countries. And so, while Pfizer's pushing out vaccines, we can certainly be talking to the villagers about why the vaccine is good, but we're not going to put the vaccines in arms.

Q: I had no idea. 3,000 people overseas.

ALEXANDER: Yep. two hundred fifty in Atlanta and 3,000 overseas.

Q: That's larger than USAID. I might just point out.

ALEXANDER: No, it's not. USAID is 10,000 staff. When I was head of HR, we had 10,000. Foreign Service, civil service, and PSCs. But Foreign Service. Yeah, I think 1,700. I can't remember how many foreign service officers there are now.

Q: Small.

ALEXANDER: Sadly.

Q: Well, incredible. And you're not done yet. What a trajectory. It's been really fun talking with you about it. Do you have any thoughts as you look back from your first visit to Czechoslovakia to today, coming back home to Atlanta?

ALEXANDER: It's been a great ride. No, I mean, as I tell new staff, you need to really trust your instincts. I took the leap of faith to follow the man who fortunately ended up being my husband and father of my kids to Czechoslovakia. And I think that that set me on this trajectory of finding useful things you can do wherever you are, what you're passionate about and what you're good at. Again, I felt like I was one of the few people at AID, and I'm one of the few people in the Carter Center that does not have an advanced degree. But if you listen and you're willing to learn and work hard, then I think you can get an advanced degree in reading people. And so for me, I never thought I was the smartest in the room. And that allowed me to listen to those who were smart, but just didn't have the instincts or the decisiveness or the position to make decisions. So it's all about listening.

Q: I think that's a great way to end this conversation. It's about listening and about knowing yourself, knowing what's important to you and knowing what you can bring to the table and what you can't. Throughout this conversation you've illustrated that brilliantly. I really want to thank you.

ALEXANDER: Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, it's not hard to talk about yourself but it's been a sort of retrospective on your own life a little.

Q: Well, we'll probably have to have a follow up conversation, because you have at least two decades more to move to new heights. But anyway, enjoy your time at the Carter Center.

ALEXANDER: Thank you. I will and take care.

Q: Take care!

End of interview