

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

AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE

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INTERVIEW

Q: Mr. Blake, first of all, could you tell me how you happened to get into the Foreign Service?

BLAKE: I've always had an idea of doing something like that from the time I was a young man, but I felt that it probably wouldn't be possible. I'd never known anybody in the Foreign Service. I lived in a small town in California. I took diplomatic history at Stanford but then went on to law school, part of the time, until the war came. And then when I was in the Navy. One day, I saw on the bulletin board a flyer saying that the Foreign Service was looking for a few good people. And I decided to give it a go. I tried to get back to the States to take the examinations in 1945, but the war was on and the Navy was not willing to let anyone come back to the States just for these exams.

As soon as I got out of the Navy in the spring of 1946, I went to graduate school, first at Stanford, and then at the School of Advanced International Studies here in Washington. I took my written exams for the Foreign Service in the fall of 1946, and my oral exams in April of 1947. I expected to be called at the end of the summer, after a nice vacation, but was told to show up on May 1st. At that time I had not finished graduate school, had not taken my orals, had not taken my final exams, had not finished my thesis. So I had to do all that, plus work a full eight-hour day at the Foreign Service Institute for about three weeks. This was, perhaps, the most rigorous use of time ever in my whole life. I got through it somehow.

Q: Could you tell me something about your early days in the Department and your first assignment with the Foreign Service?

BLAKE: My first assignment was the usual training assignment in the Foreign Service Institute in an old building on C Street, which is probably about the same place as the present diplomatic entrance. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about that period except the fun of getting to know a number of people who I continued to know through my 30 years in the Foreign Service. I first reported to offices in the old State Ward Navy Building, which is now the Executive Office Building. But just as we were beginning to get going, all of the offices of the State Department were transferred over to what was then called New State, the Old Army Building.

It was a long, hot summer. I remember being very discouraged at learning that I was being assigned to Managua, Nicaragua. As a bachelor, I was considered eligible for what

was then one of the most difficult posts in the Foreign Service. But compared with some of the posts that opened up later, it was, in fact, a very nice post.

Q: I note that you were later assigned to Russian language studies and that you served in Moscow from, I believe, 1950 to '52. Can you tell me anything about that period?

BLAKE: Sure. Before I went to Managua, I became very interested, as everyone was in those days, in what was happening between the United States and the Soviet Union--the beginning of the Cold War, and the active effort by Communist Parties throughout the world to do us in. I thought that, perhaps, it would be interesting to work on the problems of Communism in Latin America.

I had gone down to Cuba during my grad-school days and spent some time writing about the Cuban Communist Party and its relation to the Soviet Union. I had got to know a number of people in the embassy down there. I met Fidel Castro who was, at that time, the Student Body President of the Law School of the Havana University. He was a fascinating character. And I decided that Soviet specialization would be a very good way to spend at least a few years of my Foreign Service career. So I put in my application as soon as I got to Managua.

In Managua, I had several interesting assignments down there. The first was as commercial officer. And then our administrative officer had to be carted off to the loony bin and, with no knowledge of the job, I was made administrative officer on the spot. The embassy was in a fascinating position because we had no official relations with the Nicaraguan Government. Somoza was in disfavor in Washington because he had thrown out his uncle who was the nominal president. Washington was unhappy about that.

Then, after awhile, I was made political officer and remained in that job for my remaining time in Managua. I dealt with the opposition elements, many of whom were the lineal descendants of the present Sandinistas. As a whole, the country was very pro-American. But my group tended to be fairly anti-American, even though they weren't, at that time, of very much political importance. They were kept down and didn't have, as far as I could tell, any substantial support in the community. Things were prosperous. Somoza, unlike later, seemed to be relatively benevolent in his hold on the country and things were moving fairly well as far as most people were concerned, including most of the poor.

In Early '49, I heard that I had been chosen for Russian language and area studies and went back in April of 1949 to the State Department to take Russian, again in the same old building on C Street. From April until September we spent eight hours a day on Russian language training. Since then they have reduced the number of hours one spends on language because eight hours was a little bit too heavy. After that summer I moved to Columbia University and the Russian Institute. I continued my Russian language work and also got the equivalent of a Master's Degree in Russian Affairs. After finishing at Columbia, I was ordered to Moscow.

Of course, this was the great adventure of all time. Life was very difficult for the Russian people at that time. They hadn't really recovered from the War. The embassy was very carefully guarded and political relations between ourselves and the Soviets, which were already very bad, were made even worse when the Korean War broke out in June, just a few months after I got there.

My first job in the embassy was as consular officer. I had working with me in the consulate three Russians who, it was quite obvious, were reporting to the Soviet Government--if, indeed, they weren't members of the KGB. We always assumed they were, in any case. The work of the consulate, as far as normal consular functions were concerned, was almost zero, signing a few passport applications, issuing official visas to Soviet officials travelling to the states..

The real problem was the protection of dual national Americans. Most of them were children born in the United States of people who had come to the Soviet Union at the time of the depression but had become very disillusioned with what was happening there. Many of them had managed to slip out and get back to the United States. I don't remember exactly how many of these people were left, but they were a sad bunch. One after another, the active ones were sent to prison camp in Siberia.

I attended several of the show trials of these people. Literally, there was nothing we could do for them. And it got to the point that we were afraid that even the records that we had, which were about all that these people had to prove they were American citizens, might be destroyed by our locals. So one night we took all the records out and shipped them back to Washington. Essentially, we closed down the operation.

Very soon after that I was transferred to political work. No, first I worked for awhile as a general services officer. We didn't have a very big embassy and everything in the Soviet Union, every job, is very political. The general services required people who spoke Russian as it required people to deal with Soviet authorities. It was very good training for other things that one did later. The general service work was complicated by the difficulty of getting supplies, maintaining cars, and rebuilding buildings in that kind of hostile environment.

Then I went to work in the political section where I spent the rest of my time in Moscow. I worked on the political side of economic development, not much action in that section. One of the highlights of being in Russia was living in Spaso House. I was the inform aide to the ambassador, Admiral Alan Kirk. And being there I was able to participate in all the very fascinating things that happen in Moscow.

Another high point for me was the travelling around the Soviet Union. Despite the difficulties of the times, we did a substantial amount of traveling. I made one very long trip through the Ukraine to the Black Sea at Odessa. And, in fact, I was there and held incommunicado for a day or so when the Korean War broke out. I had no idea what was happening. I just knew that I was being held in our hotel. Then without explanation, I was

put on a plane back to Moscow rather than being allowed to continue, as had been planned, to Kiev.

Another high point, of course, was the really interesting people in Moscow's diplomatic colony, not only in our embassy but in other embassies, too--friendships that I maintained throughout a lifetime--very, very interesting, well-informed, Russian speaking people from all over the world. Life in Moscow was difficult for the Russians, but for us it was rather pleasant. There was skiing and skating in the winter, visits to dachas in the summer, picnics. All in all, it was at times somewhat hair-raising and somewhat tense, but we had a very, very interesting time.

Q: They say that you were also the officer in charge of the USSR affairs in the Department, I believe, from 1955 to 1957. Do you have any comments on the changes that may have taken place in Russia in between the time you were there and the time you were a desk officer in the Department?

BLAKE: Well, it was actually January 1, 1954, when I came back to the Soviet desk from Japan. I stayed on that job until the fall of 1957, almost four years. I was first the number two on the Russian desk. And then, when Walt Stoessel was transferred, I became the officer in charge.

The big change that had taken place in the meantime, of course, was that Stalin had died. And the period I was there was dominated by the changeover from Malenkov to Khrushchev and Bulganin. Khrushchev was the leading light during that time. We had his first denunciation of Stalin, which was the beginning of some rather remarkable things that Khrushchev did to try to bring new life to the Soviet Union.

I had, in the meantime, been nearly two years in Japan. I had gone there in 1952. I was the political officer working on Soviet affairs and Japanese left-wing politics. I don't know whether you want me to talk about that period or not.

Q: Yes. Go ahead, please. I was trying to tie-in the two Russias.

BLAKE: Right. Maybe you want to go back to finish the Russian part?

Q: Whatever you want to do.

BLAKE: Okay. Well, let's talk about the Russian part for just a minute. The things that stand out most in my mind were the interesting experiences that I had going to some of the big Soviet-Western conferences of the day, the summit conference of 1955, at which Bulganin and Khrushchev met with Eisenhower and with the leaders of France and England. All of us were trying to establish a new, somewhat different relationship than had taken place under Stalin. But, in the end, it was a very Cold War and we could find no real give in the Russian position.

I also was a member of the delegation to the Geneva Conference in 1954 on Indochina and Korea. And that was a fascinating time for observing people like Molotov and Zhou En-lai, the Emperor Bao Dai of Vietnam, a really interesting group of people.

Much of my time on the Soviet desk was spent in trying to move things along for the opening of cultural relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. It was just at the end of the McCarthy period. Senator McCarthy was on the way down. In fact, at one time, I was accused by someone unknown of being a communist and denounced to Senator McCarthy. The reason given was that I was favoring the opening up of cultural relations with the Soviets.

On hearing this, I went right to John Foster Dulles and told him everything I knew. He immediately called up Scott McLeod, the fellow who was more or less working with Senator McCarthy, but was the State Department Security Officer. Dulles told him my story and asked if there was any information other than what was alleged. When McLeod said, "No," Dulles said, "Okay, then, you have to admit that President Eisenhower is a communist because this is his policy and the Soviet desk is carrying out what he wants. And I want to hear no more about it."

In fact, I didn't hear any more. Later when I had an opportunity to review my records in the Department, mention of this charge had been expunged, if, in fact, it had ever been there. That was just a very short byplay, but one sort of indicative of the times.

I spent a certain amount of time with Khrushchev going around the States. He had a rather dramatic tour of the United States. At which point was a trip to Iowa to see Bob Garth and the hybrid corn, which interested Khrushchev very much. He was very interested in US technology, both agricultural and industrial, and spent most of his time looking at that.

Of course, I was involved in all the big events of the moment which concerned the Soviets. Fortunately, despite the tension, but we didn't have any major outbreaks of trouble. It was mostly a period of negotiation. And, of course, much that was happening was happening at a very high level, some of which I didn't even know about. For example, I only had the slightest inkling that something was happening with the U-2 overflights of the USSR. We had a big office with six, seven, or eight officers because we had an enormous amount of work to do in connection with visits back and forth, the first since the war.

Maybe we can go back to Japan for just a minute. When I went there my job was to report on Soviet activity in the Far East and on Japanese communist and socialist activity in the domestic area. It was very interesting. A lot of my information was derivative. It came from Intelligence sources, the Army and the CIA. They were wired in very well, but they didn't have much on what was happening on the Soviet side.

My most important task was to help the Japanese Foreign Ministry set up an adequate Soviet Affairs Section. The Foreign Ministry had just begun to expand with the end of the occupation and they were establishing the normal kind of regional setup in the Ministry, one that they hadn't had before. The man in charge was Niizeki Kinya, who later became Ambassador to the Soviet Union and then Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs. He was an excellent diplomat. He and I spoke mostly in Russian because he hardly spoke any English and my Japanese, while it got better, was never really high quality. We became quite good friends and did a certain amount of travelling around the country together.

I lived in a Japanese house, which was a little bit like camping out in Rock Creek Park in the winter--paper and glass walls. What heat you had in the winter came from little charcoal braziers, the hibachi, and from the steaming baths that you took early in the morning as soon as you got up. Japan was a very interesting assignment. I did a lot of traveling in the Far East and would have been happy to stay longer. But, of course, I welcomed the Soviet desk assignment. It was a thrill to get back there for that job.

Q: After your Soviet desk assignment, that was when you went to Tunis, wasn't it?

BLAKE: Yes. Originally, I had been assigned to India to handle Soviet affairs there. But that was cancelled because I broke my pelvis in a skiing accident and was laid up so that I couldn't travel for three months. They needed to fill that job, so somebody else was sent. Then I was called in by Bob Murphy, the then Under Secretary for Political Affairs. He asked me if I would be interested in going to Tunis, not only as head of the Political Section, but to work with the FLN, the Algerian rebel movement.

It was becoming clear that the French were not moving very fast towards trying to find a solution to the Algerian problem. The war was getting ever more ferocious and was creating a number of difficult choices for the United States. General sympathy with France was strong, but there was very little support for France's colonial policies. And the idea that Algeria was an integral part of France just didn't impress many Americans, particularly, American politicians.

Murphy decided that it would be important to open talks with the FLN with several purposes: to make the Algerians recognize that they could deal with us. Secondly, to keep them, if possible, from moving too far over towards the Soviet Union. It was thought that my experience in that country would be helpful in talking to the Algerians. And, indeed, I think it probably was.

And we also wanted to give the French a little scare. They were very worried that the United States might try to step in and take over in Algeria. And while we never gave any indication that this was what we wanted to do and, indeed, never did try, it was felt that, if they knew that we were talking to the FLN, it would probably add pressure to move things on. And I think that probably was true. That was a very interesting aspect of the work.

Of course, most of my work was with the Tunisians. It was a very difficult period for Tunisia. The French were withdrawing from Tunisia, bit by bit from various army posts. There were a lot of problems. At one stage things were going so poorly for the Tunisians that we sent them a token shipment of arms. That enraged the French, but was taken as a sign of good will by the Tunisians and, in fact, by the other Arabs.

I had Tunisian friends all over the country. I travelled very extensively. We lived a very, very pleasant life, with a house in Carthage overlooking the bay and another at the beach at Hammamet. We went to Tunisia when my son, Rob, who is now in the Foreign Service, was just a few months old. And our daughter, Lucy, was born there. We had an extremely interesting and extremely pleasant time then.

Q: Then after Tunis you were assigned to the Naval War College?

BLAKE: Right. I spent a year there. Nothing of enormous importance happened during that year that I can remember. I met many people there who later became admirals or generals. It was an interesting assignment and a chance to get to know a lot of the future military leaders.

Q: And then you went to the United Nations?

BLAKE: Yes, to the US mission in the United Nations, that is. In the Spring I was asked to go down to speak with Ambassador Adlai Stevenson. He was trying to recruit people that he was comfortable with for service on his staff. He and I got along very well right from the start. I was assigned there to work on Soviet affairs, but that was only part of my work.

In the United Nations almost every issue involves every country. While I did liaison with the Soviets on some problems and did handle the Hungary item at the General Assembly which had come up during the time I was on the Soviet desk with the Soviet occupation during the Hungarian revolution, I spent more time on Middle Eastern and on African problems, minus the Congo, which took all the time of one person. Most of my work during the General Assembly concerned the Special Political Committee, which handled the political items in the General Assembly, other than the disarmament and arms control items.

Q: What were the dates you were at the U.N.?

BLAKE: I was there from the summer of 1961 until the spring of 1964, just under three years. The biggest thing that happened during the time I was there, and one I was heavily involved in, was the Cuban missile crisis. And it was a fascinating time when from that inside position it really looked like we were within inches of going to war as the Soviet ships, with missiles on their decks, steamed confidently for Havana and our President saying that those ships would be stopped. I found that a fascinating period.

One of the things about the U.N. is that one meets so many interesting people, junior officers who later became and foreign ministers of their country. I got to meet many people who I knew right on through all the rest of my diplomatic career. It was a fascinating and absolutely exhausting period. The amount of contact with the then probably around 100 missions on matters of importance was fascinating. You didn't get much sleep, but you had a lot of fun. It was not a job that one wanted to stay in for a long time because the burn-out rate was pretty high. So I was happy to leave after three general assemblies. I enjoyed working for Adlai Stevenson very much, and getting to know so many of the other people there, but was happy to move on after that.

Q: And where did you go after that?

BLAKE: Then I was assigned to Zaire, then called the Congo, first as DCM. I was DCM there through September 1966. At that time I was in the United States on home leave and had been, in fact, ordered to Saigon to take Phil Habib's place as chief of the political section. And I got a call saying that I should return to the Congo right away because the ambassador was going to be declared persona non grata. And, indeed, that happened shortly after I arrived back in Kinshasa. I remained chargé d'affaires until the middle of the next year. We had, in the meantime, told President Mobutu that we were very unhappy with the fact that he declared our ambassador PNG and that we weren't going to send another ambassador. So that was a period of great interest, responsibility, and change for me..

Almost from the moment I got to Zaire it was very active. Indeed, it was a very dangerous place. The rebel advance started across the country almost immediately after I got to Zaire. And we were very quickly involved in trying to help to organize the defenses of the country, largely through work with the CIA. We arranged for airplanes, small trainers, T-6s, to be brought in with to fly for the Congolese. We also arranged for European mercenaries led by Mike Hoare to come in to backup the Congolese Army. The story of the advance and then retreat of the Congolese rebels, and then the revolt of the mercenaries against the Congolese and their attempt to take over Zaire was the story of the almost four years that I was there.

Also, we had the fascinating and very worrisome time during the capture of the American consulate in Stanleyville by the rebels, the holding of our people, including the consul, Mike Hoyt, and the others as hostage. A high point was the complicated rescue operation of our people and the other foreigners being held by the rebels, which was carried out in the fall of 1964 by the Belgian paratroopers launched from US planes.

Q: Right after that you went to Paris?

BLAKE: Not immediately. I went from there back to the States for a school year at the Senior Seminar, during which year I spent a lot of time traveling around the States. A very enjoyable period. And then I went to Paris.

I had been told, again, that I was going to Vietnam to have one of the top jobs in the embassy there, head of the so-called "I" Corps operation. I was actually training to go there when I was told that I was to go to Paris, which, of course, delighted me. Sargent Shriver, the new ambassador in Paris, did not like the DCM who was there, Woody Wallner, a very capable Foreign Service Officer, but older than Sarge. And so he asked for a list of names and chose me from this list to be his DCM. I had not met him but he turned out to be a very good friend, and my wife and I had two very fascinating years. I stayed there until Shriver left and then overlapped for a good six months with the new ambassador, Dick Watson.

Q: *Was De Gaulle still there?*

BLAKE: De Gaulle left office while we were there and Pompidou took over as President. And I saw a certain amount of De Gaulle and, indeed, got to know Pompidou quite well before he became the President. It was a period when our relations with the French, which had been extremely bad, began to improve. First of all, there had been the riots of the students in May, just before we got there. We arrived there just at the time of the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia after the "Prague spring."

Q: *That was 1968.*

BLAKE: Right. We were in Paris from 1968 to 1970. The United States was helpful to the French in a number of instances and the relations with De Gaulle began to unfreeze. Indeed, they were very much improved by the time of the visit of President Nixon to France just after his inauguration. This was as a part of a broader European tour, and Nixon did an excellent job. De Gaulle came out of these talks with a high regard for President Nixon.

Q: *And it was following your assignment to Paris that you were appointed as Ambassador to Mali.*

BLAKE: Yes. There were a lot of politics involved in that assignment. Not long after Shriver left, a new ambassador came in, who, of course, was a Republican. The ambassador went on leave to the States, when he came back, he told me that people in the White House were convinced that I was a card-carrying Democrat because I had served first with Adlai Stevenson and then with Shriver; they didn't want me in Paris.

This report was confirmed to me by the Deputy Under Secretary, Bill Macomber who, while he regretted it, said that there wasn't very much he could do and that I could have any embassy that was open at the time. He felt it was important for me to get to a new place, get established, and get this behind me.

I chose Mali from among seven posts, in part because it's such an interesting country and in part because we had major famine relief operations going on, which had a lot of appeal. We were in Mali just under three years. It was a quiet but fascinating post.

I got very interested in development and AID. The AID mission was actually located in Senegal. It was a difficult post for my wife and children. There was no American school there. My wife had to teach the children. The Malian schools simply weren't good enough to prepare our children to get into good schools in the States. Although I enjoyed my work a lot, I was ready to leave after three years.

I was offered another ambassadorial post in the Ivory Coast but decided that I had had enough of Africa for awhile and wanted to get back into something a little closer to the work I had been doing on Soviet affairs.

Q: Well, the last entry I saw in the biographic register, which was the last one available to the public, was that you were made Career Minister in March of 1973.

BLAKE: Yes. Soon after that I went back to the States and was made the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations. That was a very interesting job. Of course, the most interesting part of it was, in many ways, dealing with Secretary of State Kissinger. He was a hellcat to work for. He didn't like the U.N. and tended to take it out on me, but he was so bright and so interesting that, even if his personal relations were bad with most of us--really, all of us, assistant secretaries and acting assistant secretaries--he was a fascinating guy to work for and work with.

I stayed in the Department until the summer of 1976 when I had a chance to go on an expedition to climb Mt. Everest. I asked Kissinger if I could have time off to do that and he said no. He said that it showed that I wasn't very interested in my job if I prepared to go mountain climbing instead of working for him. So I said, well, I'm going to go climbing anyway. I'm taking some leave without pay, even if it means that I won't have this job. I had a long period as acting assistant secretary because Bill Buffum, the assistant secretary, had been put on detached duty as a negotiator of the Cyprus crisis. I can't remember exactly how long, but I think it was about six months.

The chance to climb Mt. Everest was a once in a lifetime opportunity--at that time I was 55. Being the oldest person on the expedition, I wasn't one of the two people in our expedition who actually got to the top. We went very high and had an absolutely wonderful time.

When I came back and, until the end of the Ford Administration, I marked time by working with my old friend, EPA administrator, Russ Train, on international environmental policy. At that time, international environment programs were just beginning to be of great interest. International environmental problems was something I decided I wanted to work on after I retired. I wasn't exactly sure when I would retire. My wife was happy to stay in the Foreign Service. She loved it. Of course, I did, too.

On the other hand, I had already had 30 years in the Service, and decided that if I was going to get out and do some other things, it was probably a good time to go rather than

waiting until I had to retire in a few years. Nevertheless, we decided we would wait to see what came up in the way of offers for the next post. It was suggested--I didn't get a formal offer--that I could go to Ethiopia, another African post. So I decided to retire. That was in March of 1977.

Q: This was during the Carter Administration?

BLAKE: Yes.

Q: And you've, obviously, kept busy since your retirement. Would you like to comment on your activity since retirement?

BLAKE: Well, I guess I've had as much fun since retirement as I did before. I've been in at the start on all the problems of the international environment, from tropical forests to the environmental aspects of international development. I was the head of a group called the Tropical Forestry Working Group for nearly ten years, and I later set up another group working on agricultural development policy, which is very interesting and very important.

I've also had plenty of time to travel and to ski and do the other things I like to do. And I have taken off every summer to be at our home on Mount Desert in Maine. So it's been a very, very interesting life. I feel that Foreign Service Officers are particularly well-placed from their experiences in Washington and Washington politics, and from their international contacts, to have second careers like mine, and to have one which is more under your own control. This gives you more time to do some of the other things you want to do in life, such as travel, that you hadn't had a chance to do before. I find that I'm almost as busy as I was in the Foreign Service. I find that I'm often working ten hours a day. But that's my own fault; if I didn't want to, I could walk away from any of these tasks at any time.

Q: Well, since you said that your son had gone into the Foreign Service, I assumed that you would say that you would recommend it as a career for a young man or woman.

BLAKE: Yes. Of course, it depends on the person. I would recommend it for one of my sons, but not for the other. One son is the kind of person who is ready to move, to take on the difficult aspects of Foreign Service; I hope his wife is, too. She was a very high powered, professional woman; a banker before they were married. And it's not so easy these days to reconcile the interests of a professionally inclined wife with the Foreign Service. They've done very well so far and I hope it will work out.

He loves it. And, if you remember, his grandfather--my wife's father--was also a chief of mission. So he's third generation in the Foreign Service and it's fun for all of us because of that. I wish his grandfather had had a chance to see him in this job.

Q: Well, is there anything else you would like to say on this?

BLAKE: No. Sometime it would be fun to talk at some greater length about relations between the Algerian rebels and ourselves, or some of the memories of working in Zaire during the rebellion. There are wonderful stories on that, but I'm a little bit hoarse today and I think we should leave that for another time. Or, if there are people who are especially interested in these subjects, I'd be happy to go into them at some length.

Q: Thank you very much. We may well be getting back to you one of these days. Thanks very much. I'm very glad we had the interview.

End of interview