

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

WILLIAM CENTER

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is March 9, 2018 and we are beginning our interview with Will Center. Where and when were you born?

CENTER: I was actually born in Suburban Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. It's kind of ironic, I suppose. I have four siblings who were all born in Japan. My father was an intelligence officer, and he was posted in Japan on four occasions, mostly through the '50s and '60s, so I was more or less born on a home leave, the fourth of five.

Q: That's great. Literally born on home leave, but your brothers and sisters, your mother gave birth in Japan, she didn't come home?

CENTER: Right. Tachikawa Air Force Base in Tokyo

Q: So it was thought even back then that the facilities were adequate.

CENTER: It's interesting. I'm in the health care business right now, we're trying to achieve universal health coverage for Africans. The Japanese actually had the same challenge after the war. They had a ruined economy and they didn't have health care for everybody. Some of the leaders of the health movement today are from Japan and they have memories of what it was like and how hard it was to give health coverage to everybody.

So my earliest memories were of Japan. I spent most of the first five years of my life there, did some fun things, got into some mischief. One of my memories was, along with some older friends, who were like 10 or 11 years old, we either accidentally or purposefully, it's a little ambiguous, set fire to a house that was made of wood and paper. All I remember is Charlie Wheeler said, "It's time to go," and we left, and then the fire engines came and we chase the fire trucks back to the place where we'd been playing. The next thing I know I'm down at the police station, I'm four or five years old, and my father, who did not like talking to the police, was very upset with me. My foreign service career really started as a Foreign Service brat, with a younger brother and three older sisters. I'm the only one who followed in my father's footsteps. My brother dabbled a little bit. He went to Sophia University in Tokyo, and he ran a guest house in Jamaica for a while, but then all four of them decided to settle in the Washington, D.C. area, and I'm the only one who said, "It's boring here, let's go!"

Q: Interesting. So to go back, did your mother work as well when you were growing up?

CENTER: She was always busy, but mostly in volunteer organizations—teaching English as a second language, volunteering for the Red Cross, being involved in a number of women’s associations. She was also highly educated. Both my parents went to Harvard, but in that era that’s what they did.

Q: So you were housed on the Air Force base as well?

CENTER: No, we had a house. There was more than one house, but my memories were of a house in central Tokyo, not far from Roppongi today, where there was a yard and a tree and a driveway. There was some other mischief I got into there with a cat in the tree but I’ll leave that out.

Q: As a child you began your education in whatever the American school or international school was?

CENTER: My sisters went to Sacred Heart. I don’t really recall, I think I went to some kindergarten for a while. I was reminded the other day by my mother when we came back and I went into first grade in Chevy Chase that I had issues with my syntax in English, and it took a while sorting that out. That very same problem is what made it easier to learn Asian languages when I was in the university.

Q: So it was the interference of the little bit of Japanese you learned as a toddler...

CENTER: Yeah, juxtaposed with all the other kids in the class who were from more traditional backgrounds, I was just putting objects in the wrong place, verbs in the wrong place. It didn’t cripple me, I didn’t have a “learning disability,” I just had to sort it out.

Q: Where did you do most of your childhood and teenage education?

CENTER: I went to first, second and most of third grade in Montgomery County, in an elementary school, and then my dad was posted to Vientiane in Laos. The whole family went.

Q: What year was that?

CENTER: That was ’67.

Q: Holy cow!

CENTER: From a boy’s perspective, so I would have been eight-nine to 11, it was sort of like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. There was no television in Laos, we had horses grazing in our front yard, we had a little canal that looked like a moat surrounding our house. We kept all sorts of pets. We had pigs and turkeys. Some pets we couldn’t domesticate, like civet cats. We had parrots and cats and dogs. We just did what, as a boy, after school you have to make your own fun, so we used to go down to the morning market in Vientiane and buy Sulphur, salt peter and charcoal, grind it up and make

gunpowder. So, just burning things, taking hikes, you know, playing games with the monks. I shouldn't have done some of that stuff.

Q: Oh, when you say 'playing games' you mean all kinds of practical jokes?

CENTER: Yeah, sort of! My wife's a Buddhist, so I don't want to go much into that, but we were just sort of having fun. I went swimming in the Mekong, so in the dry season it was the best time to swim in the Mekong because you take a bucket, a pail of water, and you throw it against the side of the banks of the river, which were just clay, and you'd get a head start and you'd run and hit that clay and slip into the river and swim. Around Vientiane, there were a couple of sunken Navy boats that were sunk during some coup we had just missed or something, and I remember one time swimming out to the boat and we found a clip of bullets. This was during the Vietnam War, you know, everyone had shell casings and shrapnel and military paraphernalia. We were at war, and we knew that our moms and dads were the good guys and the other side were the bad guys, and that Laos was for the longest time the source of many of my favorite memories.

Q: The only question I have in all the fun you're having, the great out of doors of Laos...I mean, there are some very toxic critters that run around that part of the world. How did you manage to avoid all that?

CENTER: Well, when the floods would come the snakes would try to go up to higher ground, so we had cobras in the house, and the worst snake was a banded krait that we needed to avoid. We'd sometimes buy a box of baby chicks that we'd try to raise into chickens, and we failed because we let them loose in the yard and the snakes would get them. So there were some critters to watch out for. The values have changed, you know. My mother, she had five kids of course, and she just wasn't paying much attention, and none of us got seriously hurt.

Q: You knew more or less how to navigate among the fauna that you shouldn't get too close to.

CENTER: I guess, I guess. It just never really came up. Everyone was worried about the snakes, but we had domestic servants so my parents had some help. If I recall correctly, they paid the live-in cook something like \$150 a month, and that was a very handsome salary in '67ish, '68, and we also had a live-in laundry maid, a live-in housemaid, and a live-in gardener. So it wasn't until I moved back to the United States when I was 11 or 12 and my dad said, "Mow the lawn," and I said, "Mow the *what?*" (*laughter*) That helped my parents, and it was a different world. For a guy in the intelligence services, it was a serious time. Careers were made and my mother was there supporting my dad, and we brought home decent grades and were otherwise healthy kids, there was not much to worry about.

Q: Okay! Did you start reading anything in particular, or was there a lot of reading going on back then?

CENTER: Uh, huh...comic books. We used to collect comic books. We had so many that if you sat on the floor of your house and you were reading the stacks would come up to your eye level and so forth. Sergeant Rock was a favorite back then, all the Spider Man, all the Marvel stuff. We traded them, we read them. Our parents were both intellectuals, so reading was always a big part of their lives, we just got started with the graphics.

Q: Alright, so you have the Laos experience. Where to from there?

CENTER: The timing was fortunate. I came back to Montgomery County, moved into the same house, and I entered seventh grade, which in those days was the junior high system. I was able to come into a school where a lot of kids were coming from a lot of different elementary schools and it was easy to adapt. It was harder for my older siblings who were going to high schools' mid-way through. My brother was ok. My younger brother went to an elementary school, he did fine. That's where I went.

Q: If you have to move as a teen, going into a new place in seventh grade is kind of perfect because everyone is going in new.

CENTER: Exactly. I always made a lot of friends and took off from there. This was 1970-71 timeframe. It's a different era. Our hair was longer, we liked Jimmy Hendrix and all.

Q: Was it a very diverse school?

CENTER: No, I don't think so, not by today's standards. Now, my high school was very diverse, but the junior high school drew from wealthy white suburban neighborhoods. There was some diversity but not a great deal.

Q: So you're a young teen now, are you beginning to get into any of the after-school activities like Boy Scouts or track or anything like that?

CENTER: So, Boy Scouts...our current Secretary of State is proud to say he was a Boy Scout, and I can say the same. I stay in touch with my old troop, I've donated money to them, and the funny thing is, in hindsight, not only does the Boy Scouts teach young boys the beginning of leadership, giving them some leadership skills, but it also fills a hole in a lot of families with absent fathers. In hindsight I realize that some of the guys had lost their dads and some of the guys' dads were never around or what have you, and it was a great camaraderie. I belonged to Troop 8 in Bethesda, Maryland, and we're one of the oldest troops in the nation. I was not bent on the advancement track, I was more interested in the camping. Having fun has always played an important role in my life.

Q: Very briefly, I had a Boy Scout experience, but not very long, basically because kids began moving away, their fathers left, and we ended up not having enough fathers who had enough time and were willing to put in, so I only got to Second Class Scout, but I loved it for the time I was in it.

CENTER: As I said, it's really hard to think of another organization that is so good at taking boys at the tender age of 11, 12, 13, teach them what it's like to be with other boys, how to conduct your meetings civilly, and what it means to be a leader, and how you get elected to be a leader in that system. You have to demonstrate it in different ways. So, I loved my time in the Boy Scouts and so I played...in those years, you know, it was outdoor sports, Boy Scouts, a little bit of school government. That's kind of what I was doing.

Q: Okay. Were you beginning to do better in some subjects than others, or did some begin to interest you more than others?

CENTER: I always had a love for social studies, history, literature, the humanities. I did ok in math and science but I was never drawn to it. I can remember in junior high school going through a mandatory aptitude test that they did from time to time. It came back and said I would make a good salesman, and I was just crushed. *Salesman?* Why not astronaut? Architect? Give me somethin' here! Again, in hindsight, I realized you can sell shoes, or you can sell your government's foreign policy, and it's the same principle.

Q: Absolutely, and we'll get to that. Going from junior high to high school, was the high school close enough for you to go to or did you go by bus?

CENTER: Took the bus to junior high school and the bus to high school, but it was close, I could have walked it if I wanted to. I went to a really good high school that I'm proud to be an alumnus of, Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School. Even today, it's one of the few high schools in Montgomery County that has open semi-urban campus. In those days it was really cool—at lunchtime you could go—I never did, but if you want to, I could go to a McDonald's, a Roy Rogers, you were allowed to wander off the campus and buy stuff. It was in downtown Bethesda, and this was a *very* diverse high school. It drew from different socio-economic classes, from Silver Spring that was a little bit lower, working class, to the more tony Chevy Chase suburbs. We had a lot of diplomats, all sorts of international influences. I would say between a third and a half of the population were black and Hispanic people, so very diverse. Very good academic achievements, we were perennially ranked as one of the top achieving high schools in the country. It was a real tolerant air. I graduated in '76, so that was just as we were losing the Vietnam war...

Q: Just a quick question, so your father was assigned to the U.S. the whole time, then?

CENTER: No, no, he went away. He went to Vietnam, left my mom, it was too dangerous for families. He came back and was restless and went to Japan and this time my mom said, "You're going on your own." She was tired of moving. I think she said she'd moved 14 times, and we were getting older, she didn't want to dislodge the kids. But the tolerant atmosphere in the '70s was I think a byproduct of us having lost the war, post-Watergate, a lot of people lost faith in the institutions. Things weren't so rigid. There was a little bit more searching for new norms, new ideas.

Q: I would agree. I went to a much smaller high school, but also diverse, also by bus, and as we were going through high school, they tried different methods of teaching. If we're very honest about it, we're going to try this and see how it is and see how it works, among other things.

CENTER: We've had many very famous alumni. Little things about that era stick with me. Ben Bradlee sent his kids to our high school. We watched the movie The Post the other day and I said, "man, I know where they lived. They went to my school!" It was a great time to grow up. I owe a huge debt to my parents for raising us in a loving, secure environment in the era where the top people who were the top in their professions sent their kids to public schools. They don't now, and that's not so great, in my opinion.

Q: So you mentioned student government, you mentioned athletics. Are there other things that went on for you in high school that began to give you an interest in international stuff?

CENTER: It was at my core. After coming out of Laos, walking around, I never doubted that I was going to go back out overseas. I never planned it, I never said "this is what I'm going to do." I was too busy just having fun. I had to follow in the footsteps of my sisters, they used to tease me mercilessly about my French accent, all I was trying to do was get through high school and get into a good college. Getting into a good college was the goal, and it all worked out.

Q: As you're thinking about college, your three sisters ahead of you, I imagine they talked to you about college, and your parents talked to you. What were you thinking about in terms of what you wanted from college?

CENTER: My parents didn't look at my application or go over it with me. They just said, "here they are, fill it out, and get into the best one." It worked out. I was a good student. I wasn't at the very top of my class but I had a rounded background, I was the senior patrol leader in my Boy Scout troop, I was holding down some jobs, we were on a championship soccer team, I was class president, and I could write pretty interesting things about my upbringing, and that was enough to get me into the Ivy Leagues. So that was great!

Q: Did you have a particular school for a particular reason that you were after?

CENTER: Nope. My parents both went to Harvard, but I only applied to Brown. I applied to Brown, Northwestern, Haverford. Colgate was my safety school.

Q: And you liked it?

CENTER: Yeah, but I liked my high school more! Brown...I realized towards the end of my college career that it was unlikely that I'd ever be in another environment with so many smart people, so concentrated, and everyone had worked hard to get there and had

interesting backgrounds, and it was really interesting. So I really had fond memories of it. But it was hard to beat the experience I had in high school. Everything was clickin'. I was making money, had lots of friends, girlfriends, the team was winning all its games, we were all living large.

Q: That's marvelous, because not everybody has every single one of those things going right in high school.

CENTER: Yeah, lucky, I guess.

Q: So let's come back to Brown for a second. It's a great school, but were you interested, in terms of major?

CENTER: No, Brown has this really interesting approach to its curriculum, where they allow you to take any class pass-fail that you want, and you don't need to declare your major until the second semester of your junior year, I believe. Or maybe the first semester of your junior year. But you can postpone the major for a very long time. The theory behind that is to encourage science majors to dabble in the humanities and vice-versa. I don't know if it works, but you never worry about your GPA. I took classes in 11 or 12 departments before I graduated, and it was very late, when I needed to do the math and see if I had enough credits for a major, that I ended up with a history major. My minor was Chinese language, and I didn't even decide that, take a Chinese language course until the summer before my senior year. I went to an intensive course at the University of Washington in Seattle where I was able to rack up a bunch of credits, and then I came back and did one full year at Brown of Chinese (Mandarin). That would have been '78, something like that. China was just opening up, the third plenum of the fourth or fifth CPC (Communist Party of China) Congress, when Deng Xiaoping made his famous pronouncements. It was right around that time. My father had built a career around being a Japan expert, and this was my way of being different.

I played soccer at Brown, too, and I was proud of that. I walked on to that team. In that era, Brown went to the Final Fours of Division I teams three times. We just had our 40th anniversary get-together in Providence, and it was good to see the guys. It was the first time I'd been back to the school in 40 years. That was an intensive occupation in college. You put in three hours a day easily just practicing soccer. We were fit, it was a good time.

Q: Did you also work while you were there?

CENTER: Yeah, I was sweeping up the library, earning pocket money. I never needed money to pay for the tuition or the board, but my parents made it clear that if you wanted to buy yourself some pizza or whatever you were on your own.

Q: It was a bit of an _____ and discipline, you had to begin thinking about how to budget your time and so on.

CENTER: Right. I took some Asian history and I took the Chinese language, but I took a lot of other things. I was particularly interested in American history. I think the reason I felt that way was I always felt that I was going to be overseas representing my country, or that's how I felt in hindsight now, and I wanted to have a grounding on what the early principles were.

Q: You mentioned going to Washington for the intensive Chinese. Did you do any travel or study abroad?

CENTER: Nope. I just waited. After college, I worked for about a year to save up the money to buy a ticket to go to Taiwan. That all made sense to me. I couldn't see the future, but I knew I wanted to be in Asia. Sometimes, when I have the opportunity to give young people advice, and they're not sure what they want to do, the question I ask them is "where do you want to be?" And that sometimes gets things rolling.

Q: Interesting. So, you do now have a short-term goal of getting to Taiwan, and I imagine working on your Chinese and so on. How'd that work out?

CENTER: Well, it was good. How do I want to describe Taiwan? I had a bit of luck. The head of the AIT (American Institute of Taiwan) was an old family friend, and I knew their boys growing up. We had in fact met in Laos. They were there sort of in the background, but I was living on the local economy and going to school. I resisted teaching English because I thought that was just too stereotypical, until...obviously, it was the best thing you could do to earn money, so I compromised and instead taught at a junior college. That was fun in the sense that the students in China, they revere their teachers. Each of the students independently invited me to meet their families and go to their homes, so I saw a lot of the culture that way. The rest of the time I was running with the Hash House Harriers, drinking lots of beer, chasing girls, doing what any normal guy would be doing at that time.

Q: It sounds like sort of a typical post-college experience in a foreign country. But, on the other hand, your Chinese must have improved significantly.

CENTER: That was the big jump. I had a year under my belt in the academic setting, and then I joined a Chinese advertising company. I was the only American in the company. They were publishing trading magazines and they also had a public relations arm which I gravitated towards, where they had some large corporate clients. I was the only native English speaker there, everyone else was Chinese. So that's where I got the hang of it, it was fun!

Q: Whether you were prescient or not, it was sort of a perfect moment for you to become an expert in Chinese because our relations with China would only become ever broader and more complex.

CENTER: Right. This was 1981-1982. I graduated from college in 1980, I worked for a year to get the money, went to Taiwan in '81 and stayed there for three years. You're

right, we were just starting out, and I was counting on this. By then, as a young man out of college, I knew I needed to support myself and I was counting on my Mandarin language skills to get me a job.

Q: Ok. You've had your year or so, what are you thinking about? Were you thinking about graduate school? Continuing work? Because you're now a _____, and in theory you could just keep working.

CENTER: I hadn't thought of graduate school at that stage. I just wanted a decent paycheck, because while I was getting a good experience, I was working off the local economy, so I was being paid in new Taiwan dollars. I was hoping to find something regular. I came back to the Washington, D.C. area to basically search for work with the different government institutions.

Q: So you were already thinking about some kind of government work.

CENTER: Right. I'm the only one in my family to have that interest. My brother may have been running that B&B (bed and breakfast) in Jamaica by then.

Q: Whereabouts?

CENTER: I don't know, I never visited it, but he only did it for about a year, year and a half. My sisters started getting married. The oldest one had a job with the phone company, my second oldest sister was a stock broker, and the third eldest sister married this guy who ran a business and she was supporting him in a variety of ways. Nobody was focused on the government. In a way, I was saying, "what's wrong with Dad's line of work?" Dad got a lot of bad raps. He was an absent father, he really was. Later in life he told us he was just trained not to talk to his family. My father never came home, ever, to talk about work, never. That made him a little unpopular when we were getting to be teenagers.

Q: How could he possibly? Everything he was doing he couldn't talk about.

CENTER: Well, he was an interesting guy. Another time we'll talk about him. He's someone I admired a lot. He was very, very intelligent. Both of my parents are. My dad passed in '97, so I talk about him in the past tense. He was an interesting guy, he came from a small town in western Massachusetts, summered in Rhode Island. Part of the reason I went north for school was those family connections.

Q: Interesting! You still had family that you could see during college.

CENTER: We're a pretty small family. My mother was more or less estranged from hers, and she only had one brother, and her father passed away before I was born. My father had two sisters, and they each had two kids, but they were a little bit younger and we weren't that close. We saw them in the summertime at the beach.

Q: So you're now serving different U.S. government agencies.

CENTER: Just looking for a job! Remember we're still coming out of a recession. In '80, at the end of the Carter administration--people forget this--interest on the short-term credit was 20%, and there was seven percent unemployment. To get a job was "I'll take it!" you know. Whatever was available. When you're that age, you don't need much to survive. I just wanted something that was Foreign Service oriented. I can say I was very much influenced by my father's career.

Q: Which agencies do you look at seriously?

CENTER: I don't think I ever applied for the Foreign Service exam at the State Department. I'm not sure why. I think I was interested in the intelligence agencies, and then they took a dim view of all the pot I smoked in the '70s. So that wasn't working out, although I kind of came close to one job at the DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) which was an analyst position.

Then I went to a Seder dinner and met a gentleman who had worked at the Commerce Department. After he heard my story about Taiwan, he said you should go see so-and-so, I think they're hiring Chinese speakers at the Commerce Department. That's how it all happened. I went in to see this guy, I want to say it's Jim Moorehouse—I'm trying to remember the name of the guy who introduced me. I went to see Jim Moorehouse who was quite senior in the ITA (International Trade Administration). He was just being polite, he agreed to take the meeting. It wasn't until I could tell he was being polite, and I was literally out of my chair and walking to the door, and he said, "Wait a second, where did you say you were?" I said, "Taiwan," and he picked a piece of paper off his desk and said, "You might want to take a look at this." It was a special recruitment for Mandarin speakers to become Commercial Service Officers. They ended up recruiting in Hong Kong, in Washington, D.C., and maybe San Francisco. I did well in my interviews, I had my language, and I got offered a position as a FS-4, Step 1. I think it was around \$24,800.

Q: So all of your interviews were with the Foreign Commercial Service, and there was no test.

CENTER: There was a test, there was an assessment. It was competitive, but it wasn't administered by the State Department, it was administered by the Commerce Department.

Q: Interesting. I did not know that.

CENTER: I got hired on a limited appointment, and from there I was eventually converted to Career Conditional, and then I was tenured and I made it all the way to Senior Foreign Service. They were in a hurry. The (Foreign) Commercial Service was created by the Foreign Service Act of 1980 and they wrestled 200 positions from the State Department. The State Department was not happy about it. These guys had big plans to do something innovative with the Commercial Service, and so when China was

opening up, they had to move fast. They didn't have a pipeline, they didn't have the infrastructure, they didn't know how to do it, and so limited appointments were one technique for them to get moving. They hired some great people that way. I think Sandy Randt, who was our Ambassador during the Bush administration, was hired that way. I think, I'd have to double check that. I certainly knew Sandy when he was an assistant commercial attaché in China.

Q: You initially began, not necessarily because you had a great desire to be a commercial officer, but it offered this position, it offered the language, and it offered a salary!

CENTER: I mean, I was cutting grass with my friend's lawn mowing service. It was a paycheck, but this was a paycheck in a field that I was very interested in.

Q: Fair enough. What year was this?

CENTER: This was 1984.

Q: Did they give you any training? What happened?

CENTER: No. *(laughter)* Commerce, bless its heart, they sort of like invent it as they go along. The history of the (Foreign) Commercial Service is fun, it's a fun thing to reminisce on. They didn't have any programs, there's no training. There was a list of people you talk to. I think during my second or third day of interviews, when I finally stumbled across somebody that was coming from the post I was going to as a senior commercial officer, and no one had bothered to tell me he was in the building. The training was more or less about how to figure out the arcane numbering systems of the rooms in the Commerce building. I can remember one time going down this long hallway and knocking on this door, and a bright voice chirped, "Come in!" I walk in, and there's this empty office with this guy waiting for me from the Import Administration and he wanted to talk about countervailing duties. I sat down, we start talking about his job, and I was falling asleep. I kept looking at his bookshelf, and he had Robert Ludlum novels there and he had his softball bat in the corner, and I'm saying, "What the heck am I doing here?"

So that was sort of what they would consider "training." And on my way to Hong Kong, I stopped off in San Francisco and in Tokyo. Again, they were exposing me to people in the field. I don't remember the gentleman's name, but he was very gracious. He took me around in San Francisco, and it was embarrassing. They had arranged meetings with the high tech companies in San Francisco who were going to go over to Hong Kong and help their commercial interests, and the meetings were about our export administration regulations that the Commerce Department administered. I bluffed my way through those meetings with this nice guy, senior guy with me, and I remember after the last meeting I looked at him and said, "I don't even know what these are!" We were at the hood of his car, and he had this big binder and he opened it up, we started looking at it, and I said,

“Oh, ok, that’s sort of interesting.” In Tokyo, I met some nice people but I didn’t learn anything there. Then, plop, I landed in Hong Kong and I was told to start working.

So, Hong Kong. Great first posting. Free port, business dominated the headlines and the upper half of the first fold of the paper every day. That’s all they care about, no one cares about where you’re from or what you were doing yesterday, it’s just all about making money. Wonderful, wonderful city. When I got there, they didn’t have the housing for me, so I was in a hotel for almost three weeks, I think. I didn’t care, but the senior commercial officer was probably bothered by that. In those days, the State Department was still annoyed at the Commerce Department about taking away those jobs, and so we were getting the poorest housing assignments, or I had to wait in a hotel for three weeks. We didn’t have any furniture, the furniture pool was not very good. But it got sorted out, what did I care? It was in a wonderful, exciting city. When they finally found me a place, it had this picture window view of the Hong Kong harbor, and the lease was more than my annual salary. It was quite comfortable, the housing turned out fine. Boy, Hong Kong real estate is so expensive...

Q: Even back then...

CENTER: Definitely back then. So, the housing was great, the city was good. I can’t say enough good things about Hong Kong. But the work was challenging. We were understaffed. I had a chance to review some of this stuff before coming out here today, and I was reminded that we had a lot of staffing gaps. I was a first tour junior officer, and I was having to act as senior commercial officer for several weeks at a time. I had to assist in the briefing of congressional delegations. I met a lot of governors. I met Governor Clinton there, and Hillary. I still have a thank you note from when I took care of them in Hong Kong. I was pushed into some pretty senior level jobs as a first tour junior officer with little to no training.

Q: At that time, we had an Embassy there?

CENTER: It was always a Consulate. My accreditation was through London. I was a vice consul, and it came through Whitehall. Then they still had an English governor. It was cool, really just a wonderful, dynamic city. And China was just opening up, so there was a heightened concern about the theft of our proprietary technology and that the Chinese were coming after our military technology. We had to watch that. We were trying to sell stuff in competition with the Japanese and the Europeans. We were trying to figure out what the Chinese were up to, doing some reporting on some of their early organizations. For me, when we did have the full complement of officers, as a junior officer I was relegated to doing a lot of the trade promotion work. Hong Kong was such a magnet for the _____, it was the best way to get into China, so everybody came. The State Department kept dibs on senators and congressmen, and then the Commerce Department would take the State delegations because they often had a trade component, along with the mayors. So I saw a lot of mayors and governors, many of whom became quite prominent later in political life. It was really very stimulating. I was able to participate in the briefings of the codels (congressional delegations). The Foreign Service is a very

collegial culture, at least it was then, and it was easy to be a part of things if you wanted. We spent a lot of time going to the airport for VIPs.

George Shultz, that this place is named after? Yeah, I was assigned to support a secdel (secretary's delegation) when he was through. I'll never forget having to catch up to deliver some classified documents to his hotel suite, and he was in these canary yellow trousers. Really Ivy League prep.

Q: Now, you spoke Mandarin, and typically Hong Kong is more...

CENTER: Cantonese.

Q: Right. How did that work?

CENTER: Well, I didn't use it much. I went into China on a couple of special trips. I went in to Shenzhen when it was still a fishing village, and then I went to Beijing once on a trip with an aerospace delegation. They needed some help and I went up there for a short TDY (temporary duty). I guess I used it some, but they spoke English in Hong Kong. I've always had an interest in the language. I've let it get rusty, but I listen to the VOA (Voice of America) in Chinese just to kind of keep some of the phrases current.

Q: Did you learn to write Chinese as well?

CENTER: I learned the system, and I can copy the characters—only a couple of characters to fill out a form. My name, my gender, my age, that's all I ever learned, but I never needed to rely on that.

Q: What were the major trade accomplishments while you were there? What were you able to get going into China?

CENTER: I was there for two years, it was my first tour, it was mostly like a concierge service, is my memory. I remember the deputy principle officer was really fond of a cable I wrote on a Chinese organization called the China Merchants Steam Navigation Company, I think. They were actually a commercial arm of the Ministry of Communications for the Chinese, so we learned a lot about their investment strategies. Other than that, I can't remember any particular advocacy cases because it's a free port. There was concern about infringements on export licensing that was handled a little bit above my pay grade. Now that I think about it, we were principally trying to help U.S. companies who were trying to get into China meet the Hong Kong trading houses that could represent their lines. There were particular houses that were good in automobiles, others that were good in health technology, others that could handle semiconductor manufacturing equipment. Trade was booming, it's not a hard place to do business, but if you need some initial introductions, that's what we were principally doing.

Q: Okay, and that makes perfect sense, because it's the other side of the Pacific, it's a different culture...

CENTER: No internet, even the faxes came out fuzzy. In fact, those were the good old days in the sense that Washington had to trust you a little bit. Once all that communications stuff got locked in, then you were on a short leash. Back then you had some room to be creative.

Q: As you're working there, do you begin to make contacts or a network in terms of how they could help you in getting your next assignment?

CENTER: I had a successful career overall, and I made it to the Senior Foreign Service, but Hong Kong was probably the hardest post for me, and I'll tell you why. Not that I sensed a challenge about the economy, it was an easy place to do business. But when they hired me through the limited appointment process, I got the job ahead of three or four guys in Hong Kong with a lot more direct experience in China who were friends of my boss. I know this all in hindsight now, and in fact it's something I have very warm feelings about. It took years, but my boss and I became very close friends. But when I first started, he was ready to get me fired. It was not an easy introduction. As I said, I reviewed some of this stuff before coming out today, and I'm reminded that he couldn't believe that this guy who was 26 years old was getting the job over guys that were 36 years old and 10 years of direct experience in China and spoke the language fluently. I don't know why those guys didn't get the job, maybe they needed a higher starting salary, who knows what it was. My own sense was that I was a Washington D.C. hire, and headquarters reserved the right to pick one person. I think that's why I got the job, because they said, "Ok, he's a great guy, we're going to pick one ourselves."

So I went out there, and there was a lot of dynamic stuff. I remember one time going into Guangzhou, and amazingly getting a tour of a submarine manufacturing plant. When I came back, the Defense Intelligence guys wanted me to tell them everything about it. They showed me pictures, "Was it this big, or was it that big?" There was a lot of interesting stuff. You know, the job is fascinating, every day you're in a position to make a difference for somebody who's just trying to turn a nickel and make a buck and keep the factory open back home. I remember there were some tensions there with that Guangzhou trip because someone in our Consulate in Guangzhou couldn't believe I got that interview either, and she was always resentful that I was able to take that information. She ended up coming down to Hong Kong as the deputy, and there was a lot of bad juju in that office. There were a lot of personality conflicts. I was 26 years old, my eyes wide open, having a great time meeting congressmen and senators and governors, you know, working as hard as I knew how. It was a lot of fun but not my most successful tour.

Q: How did they arrange the choices, or did they give you an opportunity to weigh in on where to go next?

CENTER: I sort of felt I wanted to stay in this game. The person who picked me, the head of personnel in Washington, later asked me, "I was very surprised that you didn't extend in Hong Kong," and I said, "Extend? How do you do that?" No one tells you

anything, I had no idea. There was a guy in Beijing who wanted my job. He's a good guy, commercial service guy. I didn't know what you do to extend, and he knew what he needed to do to get the job, and he was paneled into my job and that was that. There was no career counseling or anything, no one you could talk to, no ombudsman, you just had to figure this out. Again, I was the youngest guy around, and I don't know many people who were younger than me who were ever hired by the Foreign (Commercial) Service, frankly. Later I had a chance to meet the guy who was going in to take the senior commercial position in Beijing, Rick Johnston. He came out of Chase Manhattan Bank, another nice guy. I had dinner with Rick, and that was sort of a quasi-interview. I think I passed, I'm usually good in interviews. Rick needed to fill jobs. 1985 isn't like 2018 where there are actually people who speak Chinese and want these jobs, there were *no* Chinese speakers. There were people who wanted those jobs that he may not have wanted on his team, and so he said, "Ok, you'll be alright." So I went up, I was willing to take anything, and I took the Shenyang assignment. Manchuria. Cold.

Q: And coal dust.

CENTER: That worked out great. Shenyang, because it was a hardship assignment, years later (not during the tour), I realized that to have a successful Foreign Service career you need to have a hardship assignment somewhere along the way. That was really hard. We spent our time trying to figure out where to get food. We'd go once a month eight hours by train to Beijing and come back with our suitcases filled with cheese and meats and things like that. But it was a fabulous experience, cut short because of the Tiananmen incident, but I did good work there, and I helped companies make money, selling some oil field equipment, getting some health tech into Heilongjiang province, creating bridges with the local authorities and the business community. I did really good work in Shenyang.

Q: The nature of your advocacy was principally American companies that wanted to export goods, or was there also an element of companies wanting basing in China?

CENTER: That came later on. Later I served in Shanghai, and that's when there were more regulatory issues and barriers. In 1986, I'm trying to think—I left Hong Kong in '86, so it was '87-'89 in Shenyang, and in those days they didn't have cars, they rode around on bicycles, they all had only two sets of clothes, they were dirt poor, and there was this real edict coming back from the Politburo that we will open up our economy and the United States is going to be a trading partner. These people were just as curious about us as we were about them. We were fascinated by what was going on with the Chinese and the Soviets—it was still the Soviet Union. What's all this barter trade going on, how are they trading with North Korea? The real reason for us to be in Shenyang was to keep an eye on North Korea, the commercial priorities were probably in other cities. There was nothing else to do but work so you worked a lot in that place.

I ran sort of a frat house. By then I was a seasoned age of 28 or something. I never locked the door of my apartment. I put a ping-pong table in the living room. I'd come home from work, open up a window and fire off a couple of bottle rockets to let people know I was

home, and people would just come over. There were probably 100 expats in a city of five million people, and half of that city were factories.

But you know, the beautiful thing about the Foreign Service is you learn so much, you travel widely and pick up so much about geography and history. I was at a tender age but wherever I went I was met by either the mayor or vice mayor or vice governor. The Chinese are very protocol-conscious, but they stretched it on my account because they just didn't have enough contact with Americans and wanted to see what we could do for them. My territory was the size of half of Western Europe and had 90 million people. Everywhere I went there were banquets. The car industry was of interest, the aerospace industry was of interest, oil and gas. I got a taste of oil and gas in Hong Kong because they were exploring for oil and gas in the South China Sea when I was there, so I knew that industry. The beautiful thing about commercial work is, unlike negotiating the Law of the Sea, you can start with the problem presented to you by a client company in January and have a reasonable chance of sorting it out by the end of the rating period, or a year and a half at most, and many times sooner. If you like people, and you like helping people, there's a lot of gratification in the work.

Q: You mentioned North Korea. I'm kind of curious – did you do any significant reporting on what was going on between China and North Korea?

CENTER: The econ(omic) officers were keeping tabs of how many Korean restaurants were being created, because there was a little bit more entrepreneurial spirit in the Korean expatriate communities than there were the Chinese at that time. I sort of like to joke, one of my favorite stories of that period was going skiing. Shenyang is flat as a pancake, industrial....

Q: Today is May 7, 2018 and we are resuming our interview with Will Center. Will you complete your assignment in China in what year?

CENTER: Would have been 1989. I had to curtail because the Tiananmen incident curtailed all commercial activities. We had drawn down, I was active in consular activities and getting the word out to American citizens that we didn't think it was safe for them to stay, so I was kind of helping out. It was pointless at that point to continue, so I curtailed and headed back to the States. One of the ironies of that, and I'll do this a little bit tongue in cheek, but I sent a letter to the head of personnel at Commerce whom I knew, it happened to be Mary Frances Costantino, and I asked her for a U.S. assignment, and listed among the reasons that I'd like to marry an American girl. I knew who I was writing the letter to. What I didn't write, but she could read between the lines, is that an awful lot of the officers and general expats who went to China came back with Chinese brides. So I had fun. I got the assignment. This goes into a whole bunch of Commerce politics, I don't know if it's interesting.

Q: No, absolutely!

CENTER: You know, the Commercial Service is a very small agency, only has roughly less than 200 officers worldwide or it did then. It's a little bit above that now. We were carved out of the State Department, State never liked it, didn't like losing 200 slots. Our perspective of State was that the Commercial Counselor positions were given to the good ole boys or the network of people who weren't going to make it to ambassador. The good ones got political, got econ, and then it was sort of let's look after Fred or whatever—and it was just guys back then, right? It was one of several reasons why it made sense to create a separate Foreign Service agency that was only focused on helping business. I've run into this all the time, I ran into it last Friday, where a State Department person was talking about a new initiative for econ/commercial affairs which had at its root a concern about how the Chinese use consortia to win deals around the world, but it had a geopolitical focus. While the problem is real and while the long term goals are aligned in the interagency process business is overlooked. Business needs short term immediate relief and our clients can't wait for the geopolitics to get sorted out.

Q: This is a good place for you to explain a little bit in more detail about what you mean by Chinese using consortia and why that particular form of training or approach is not as valuable from your point of view.

CENTER: It didn't really matter in '89 because the Chinese weren't organized by then. But 20 or 30 years later they are, and they just don't follow free market principles. They're very mercantilist in their outlook and they're very much about capturing market share and actually not very different from the way the Japanese were in the '70s and '80s. But I'm getting ahead of myself, we'll get back to that later. The thing is I came back to Washington for my third tour. Commerce in Washington was always sort of a dysfunctional operation dominated by the civil servants. I was supposed to go to the office of Japan because my ambition was to have a career that was based on China and Japan, I wanted to hopscotch between the two. The people in the Japan office didn't want me in their office. It was internal politics and I can only conjecture what the true reason was, but next thing I know I was sent on a somewhat jury-rigged assignment to the office of China, who were more welcoming, I knew the people there. When the word got back to the head of personnel, she rubbed her hands in glee, because she caught her foes in the office of Japan, the civil servants, in an indiscretion, and they broke the rules. So they went at it, and I was sort of a bargaining chip, and the next thing I know I end up in some sort of administrative position in Washington, which on the surface was bad, it was rough and it wasn't very interesting. It served me very well later in my career because I was responsible for analyzing all the budgets of every post in the world. Every post would come in with its justification and it would present their strategic outlook on the markets. I saw how those budgets were received at headquarters, how they were approved or disapproved—very good training for me to prepare myself as a senior commercial officer later on in my career.

Q: This is a little bit odd in that you were welcomed in the China office, and in theory you were happy there, but somehow at the end of this personnel battle you ended up out of the China office doing administrative analyses of budgets. How did that happen?

CENTER: They broke the assignment. The assignments panel met again and they basically broke the assignment, so I guess in the end my commercial service allies lost that one in a way. Incidentally, in those days George Mu was running around Commerce's halls. He became an ambassador at State but he was a commercial service guy before that. He was in the office of Japan around that time. Office of Japan had a lot of heavyweights in it, and they just saw me as an interloper and didn't want me in there.

Q: How did you lose out on the China desk job?

CENTER: Well, it was never a real position to begin with. I was an FS-04 (Foreign Service Officer rank 4), a bachelor, I was back in the States, my family is from the D.C. area so I had plenty of friends and family to connect with. I came back with my girlfriend—I didn't manage to meet an American wife, I met my future wife in China, and she's an Australian! So we were living together in Woodley Park, we got married soon after I got back. But then my career started taking other interesting twists. Although I say I got good experience working in the Office of Planning and Management, I was reporting to civil servants who did not know anything about the Foreign Service, so it was not a good fit. I finally got into the Office of International Operations in the Office of East Asia/Pacific. So I joined the office of East Asia/Pacific, which was great because up to that point I had considered myself a China hand and an Asia person. I was trying to segue into the Japan business, because in 1989 Clyde Prestowitz put out his book "Japan as Number 1" or...

[Note: Ezra Vogel is the author of Japan as Number 1. Clyde Prestowitz published Trading Places in 1988]

Q: ...and "Japan that Kept Saying No"

CENTER: Right, right, right. I felt I wanted to be part of a mission to push back on that. It was good to be in that office. The internal reorganization that was occurring at that time melded units that were formerly dedicated only to trade promotion, and mashed them together with the guys that were doing the country desk functions. I got my first taste of trade promotion in that office, at the real business of it. I'd done trade promotion in my first two tours on a small level, but I started to be around guys who had been doing it for 20-30 years, who were rolling out big USA pavilions at large international expositions which is how they did it in the '70s and '80s. I started to realize that if you looked at USTR, at Treasury, at State, a lot of those places, you keep bumping into people who all want to be at the big table deciding policy. But nobody liked trade promotion...except our clients! I glommed onto that, I thought this is a skill set, a transportable skill set, and if I ever left government I would know how to organize trade shows and so forth, it's a business. I really got interested in it.

That lasted for a time. There was a rotational requirement, and I ended up in the Office of Western Hemisphere. I may have been mixing it up, it may have been Western Hemisphere first and then East Asia, but I think it was East Asia first, then Western Hemisphere. I didn't think I'd like it because I was out of my region. I ended up loving it,

and I think largely because I worked for a very good supervisor who was a wise man and gave me a lot of latitude but gave me just enough latitude and mentoring and supervision that helped me steer the right course. At the time, I was one of the youngest people they had ever sent out to do a management audit of three posts. I wasn't 30 yet, or maybe just 30, 31.

Q: Let me just ask here: management audit. Were you going out as part of the Inspector General's, or was it different than that?

CENTER: Different than that. They are called management program reviews (MPRs), and they were the right thing to do so that internally you knew how well a post was running, and hopefully you discovered problems before they caught the attention of the IG (Inspector General). I did Ecuador, Peru and Chile. That whole experience was probably less than a year, about one rating period in Western Hemisphere. It was always a really good memory for me and gave me a lot of room to run. I learned a little bit about that region.

Q: So here you are, you've had the administrative, budget analysis portion in Washington, and now you're going out to posts and essentially doing a similar function.

CENTER: A similar function. As country desk officer you have to approve all the SCO's (senior commercial officer) plans, you give their evaluations, giving input because all the senior managers are too busy, and so I was still an FS-04 doing very senior stuff. Anyways, I thought it was all good experience. I was pushing, pushing so hard for Japan that my betters had decided they had a better idea for me, and they sent me to my third choice on my bid list, which was France. It was a surprise, and I remember calling my wife and saying, "well, I didn't get Osaka, I didn't get Jakarta, they're going to send us to Paris." (*laughter*) And Paris, after all these years, I can safely say was my most enjoyable post. Not only enjoyable, but two of my three children were born there, and I got promoted twice, which is very rare. A lot of people end up, you know, 'Paris is its own reward' is sort of the saying. I did some of my best work when I was in France.

Q: When did you arrive in Paris?

CENTER: '92.

Q: So it's a new administration, the Clinton administration, new ambassador etc. What were your basic goals when you arrived? Were you the head of the commercial office when you arrived?

CENTER: I was still an FS-04.

Q: Wow. So what were you in charge of?

CENTER: Maybe I got promoted to (FS-0)3 when I got out there. So my last rating period in Washington got me the promotion to 03. It was a very big post, one of our

larger posts. We had a minister counselor, a commercial counselor and I think four or five officers, and then about 20 FSNs (Foreign Service Nationals). It was one of our bigger offices.

Q: Was it also regional or was it exclusively for France?

CENTER: It was exclusively for France. We had a consulate, some representation in Lyon, but we didn't have an officer there. When I first got there the SCO was thinking about it, putting someone there, and I think my name came up, but that didn't...

Q: SCO, senior commercial officer?

CENTER: Correct. Mel Searls, whom I had known as the SCO in Beijing but I had not served under him. I served under him in Paris. I knew him and his wife and got to be friends, but it was sort of a rocky start at first. I think I was moving too fast for his taste and he wanted me to stay within the lanes of his org chart. I don't really have a lot of great memories of my first year in France, but that all changed when there was a new senior commercial officer who came on board, Peter Frederick. Peter, to this day, is a friend, a mentor. He's coming to my daughter's wedding in a few weeks.

I have to tell you the Peter Frederick stories. Here's a guy, he's a graduate from Dartmouth. He took a job with DuPont first in the States and later went to Argentina and worked for DuPont in Argentina, and then he changed careers and joined the commercial service. So he'd been in the corporate culture for 10 or more years. He was actually in the minority in the service as someone who actually had true business experience. I was green when I was hired, so they molded me, and I grew up with the organization but they had a lot of people that they had brought in from State, and they recruited business people too but a lot of them washed out because the business cultures and the government cultures are very alien towards each other, and some of these business guys just had trouble with the slower pace and the need for consensus and all that stuff.

Peter had a sense of humor or mischief, just like me. He started in Vancouver, and then they made him SCO in Australia. After that they made him the DAS (Deputy Assistant Secretary) for Operations, he was held in that much regard. I remember on his way back to Washington to become DAS he stopped in Hong Kong where I was serving and asked me what I was doing, and I showed him this assignment to put together the quarterly PCAP (post country action plan) report. It was a statistical report that this fine southern gentleman back in Washington, John Runyan, was sort of consolidating worldwide to come up with some numbers for OMB (Office of Management and Budget) or something like that. But it was baloney, and I was taking several hours to do this, and Peter says, "Let me give you a little tip. Just make it up." (*laughter*) I don't think I ever followed that advice, but it gave me an appreciation for Pete and his sense that some of this stuff is a waste of time, just focus on your clients and what's really important.

So when Pete was a DAS, he did not have a successful career because of the business/

government culture clash I mentioned. They kind of ran him out of town. Usually, after you do the DAS job, you get your pick of assignments anywhere in the world. They wouldn't give him his assignments and packed him off to Seoul, Korea, which was then and is now a difficult, hard place to work. There's a lot of important commercial issues, but no one will tell you that eating kimchi for four years is all that it's cracked up to be. Then Pete got Paris...but let me back up. Before he went to Korea, I was on consultations in Washington and I asked to see him. They had kind of pushed him in a small office somewhere, and I greeted him and shared a few experiences, and I told him "Someday I hope I get to work for you." It was a dream come true. So when he saw me, after he'd been kicked around for a few years, he knew he had at least one guy in Paris who was on his side. He didn't have to worry about that because everybody loved Pete. He was one of these field generals who had the undying love and support of his troops, we were all loyal to him, but he got in a lot of trouble in Paris. I got him into some of that trouble, but it was all in pursuit of exports and everything else.

So that's my memories of Paris. Pete reorganized the office. I had sort of an inconsequential position, I don't even remember what it was, but I did remember I had some resentments about how this was my...let's see, Hong Kong, Shenyang...this was my fourth assignment and a first tour officer who got Paris for some reason was given a lot of authority by the previous SCO and I never understood the logic of that. So Pete basically turned the whole tables, put me in charge of the biggest section, gave me the best talent, and we ran for it. I had manufacturing and trade promotion. As I said earlier, I did some of my best work.

This goes into the context of European issues, but one aspect is the Europeans sort of invented trade shows through the beginning of the guilds. In many cases, they are very selective about who they allow to exhibit. I came across, serendipitously, on an opportunity to take advantage of some internal dissension in the French trade association to get Americans into the biggest defense industry exhibition in the world, called Eurosatory. General Jean Daniel Rualt, a retired French general who was the head of the ground armaments industry association...basically the U.S. Army association equivalent in France. He and I struck up a partnership where he was being whipsawed by his membership and his politicians to do things and he was expected to grow the business and at the same time give more business to French industry. It was an impossible task, so he made up his mind that he would like to have the U.S. in it, and it was not easy. On my side, I had to get it cleared all the way through the deputy secretary of defense to get it done, but it was the first time we exhibited. We were a smashing success. We had the Third Army come over from Germany and we showed Patriot batteries and Chinook helicopters, we had all of our jets and missiles. We made, off the ground, I think it was \$18 million that we guaranteed we sold on the days of the show, but many, many millions of dollars of sales, and it was really one of these happy confluences of government and business. It is very much part of the Foreign Service, it is very much part of our foreign policies. The deals we do are only with allies, or people we're trying to make our allies. We have to balance regional considerations. We had the chief of staff of the Army come to this thing, this is a big deal.

Q: There's large equipment, but did it also go down to things like night vision...

CENTER: Armor, everything, soup to nuts. So these would happen in the even years, and in the odd years they would have the Paris Air Show, which I coordinated. I was starting to handle big budgets. For Eurosatory, as an example, my budget for that show from a standstill—no one had ever done it before—was \$700,000. That didn't mean that the U.S. government gave me that amount. That meant I went to each company, sold them some space, and they paid me \$700,000. I used the ambassador. Pamela Harriman was one of my favorite ambassadors, she was really something else, and I had her sign letters to the head of General Dynamics and the head of Lockheed Martin saying her staff was coming to the United States to talk about the opportunity and I'd be received at very high levels of these companies. I went to the west coast, I went to the south, I went everywhere. I called these guys. It was funny, because if I had been a salesman or a business guy, they wouldn't have given me the time of day, but I was a Foreign Service officer sent on behalf of Pamela Harriman, and they took me very seriously and they showed up.

That was my big home run in France. I got us into a similar show that was concentrated on the naval industry, and that was just a corollary. After we broke the dam with the Army guys, the Navy guys followed. But you know, many ministers of defense show up at these things, these are big events.

Q: Let me just ask you a more general question here. So you are handling a very large sector and this particular sector builds very large, expensive equipment that gets the attention of both foreign buyers, the foreign government—principally foreign governments, I guess, the principle buyers. Other colleagues of yours who do trade shows for smaller scale industries or farming goods, I've talked to them, and they have a harder time convincing American corporations to go to Europe. The only thing I wanted to mention here is that you were lucky in a sense that you were dealing with such a high visibility product. Did you also deal with lower visibility products that were a tougher sell?

CENTER: Oh, absolutely. I did the composites industry, the automotive industry (which was kind of high visibility), but my sectors were principally aerospace industry and defense. The show that got me into trouble was agriculture, was food processing. I should have stuck to things that exploded. (*laughter*). I was too creative, and we ran into...this is a lesson I can still reflect upon sometimes.

Q: So set it up a little. What were you assigned to do?

CENTER: I was assigned to help my boss's buddy, the agriculture minister counselor. We had planned on the books a small food processing component called...I forget what it was called now...but there was a very large companion food event called SIAL, a global food show. Everyone came from the states, everyone came to the show. George Pope, the ag minister—who I think Pete had served with in Korea together—was complaining that the Agriculture Department was squeezing his budgets. So I came up with an idea and said “why don't we join forces and co-organize a space. We will take the VAT (value

added tax) refunds and process them as revenue.” Actually, it wasn’t an innovation. That’s what we’d been doing for a long time. So the way it works, at least in our environment, was you hired a company to process the receipts, because it was a lot of receipts, a lot of paperwork, you would have needed a fulltime staff to do it yourself. So you took all the receipts, handed them over to the... (*change of recording equipment*) ...

This leads to another vivid memory of the France days, was how I got my boss into a lot of trouble. We were helping the ag minister, who had a budget problem. He didn’t have the resources he needed.

Q: Here again, we’re talking about the U.S. embassy minister for agriculture.

CENTER: Right. We basically offered to him to use the same procedures that we’d been following for some time in our section, which was to take our VAT refunds and claim them as revenue. He didn’t have the same authorities as Commerce has. Once we collected a certain amount of money, we were allowed to go back to Washington and they would send us the same amount of money once they approved our budget plans and our programs and everything else.

Q: Then you can use that money for your program and so on?

CENTER: Exactly. So the ag minister had by far the much bigger operation, and they weren’t doing anything with their receipts, which was amazing to me. Some of these details are getting a little fuzzy, but I remember we processed the VAT refunds, and by doing that we were able to have a bigger and better presence at the show on behalf of the U.S. exhibitors.

Well...that was all well and good, but the problem was Pete was busy creating a lot of enemies in Washington. He had these people he didn’t think highly of, and he would get up in the morning and he would start poking them in the eye. Eventually they decided to send an MPR out to investigate him. They did, they sent an investigator out. We opened our books and showed them everything. What they sort of settled on was that technically we were not following the right procedure because...and this gets extremely technical...the argument they made to us was that when we made the obligation of funds, if there was anything that was returned to us it should have gone back to that original obligation. That was their argument, and I can remember when they explained it the first time I said, “Huh, that’s interesting, we never thought of that.”

That wasn’t good enough for them, they wanted to get my boss. This was all happening while Gingrich was shutting down the government. They sent the director general out here (Paris) to basically fire him. We got out of it by the skin of our teeth. The way we got out of this was...I can remember this, because he was such a close friend of mine, it was the one and only time I saw him steamed at me, and he said he wanted to see me in his office. I was sitting across from him like I am across from you today, and he was saying--he knew what was coming at him— “How could you do this?” And I said, “What do you mean? Pete, I *told* them what we were going to do. I went to Washington and I,

face to face, told these people how we were going to do things. We put it in a *cable* how we were going to do this. We sent it in to Washington!" Then I saw him deflate and realize that no one was cutting any corners, it was just a witch hunt pure and simple.

So you learn a few things. I remember I took the "60" and "62" reports from the budget office, which showed your obligations and disbursements, pages and pages and pages of numbers. I was doing the budgets so I knew how to read these things, and I pointed out to Pete this is the money we spent and this is the money we said we'd pay back, and we paid back every penny. The DG (director general) went and saw him, because she had the authority to work since she was an essential member of government (the rest of us were on furlough, I think), and she saw Pete and said she was basically there to fire him. He said, "ok, I heard what you said, but before you do that, I'm giving you this document, you take this back to the people in Washington and you tell them how to interpret that." Then it all went away, but they still didn't like him, so they gave him another small post after that.

Q: So that's the personnel issue with him, but were you able in the end to get the VAT refunds for the ag rep?

CENTER: We basically, and this is testing my memory, but I think the money we used was for common space, for exhibitor lounges, demonstration areas, so it was a clear benefit to both of us. No one was getting subsidized, ag wasn't subsidizing commerce, it was something that was expanding both of our budgets. The lesson for me was, and I don't ever think I lost this, was "watch your back." There are people in D.C. who are gonna get you. Trust but verify, along those lines. Be very careful.

Q: It is interesting from just a technical point of view that a commerce department rep is able to get benefit from the VAT refund as commerce rep, because I don't think any other agency of the federal government that's represented out at embassies can do that.

CENTER: Right. So you're writing the archives of commercial service officers. This is something that makes us very, very special in a Foreign Service agency. We have the authorities, I think it's called the 1962 Mutual Education and Commercial Affairs Act, something like that. It gives us specific authority to take revenues from companies. So if you are in another foreign affairs agency, and you find different ways to persuade your senior management that you need to resource a particular area either with people or resources. Good luck with that, because senior managements have a tough time juggling money, and in tough times it's even harder. Now, just reduce it on the commercial service level, if you see an idea that you think is going to lead to economic or commercial activity, you can sell it to any company you want. There are ethical considerations, but you have the freedom to say, "wait a minute, we could be very competitive here." You go talk to an industry association or a few companies, whatever you want, saying "look, I can do this for you." We even have these programs called single company promotions. You can talk to companies and say, "if you want to invest in this area, this is what I think you can get in return." You're an advocate, but it's tangible, it's something you're probably going to see the fruits of your efforts within a year.

Q: While you're in Paris, of course you have these victories in the defense equipment, were there other noteworthy ones in other sectors, and how did you accomplish them?

CENTER: I was the coordinator for the Paris Air Show two and a half times, so there were some aerospace victories there.

Q: And that is a bit different from defense because there's the whole civilian side of aircraft.

CENTER: Right, of course. I did some satellite launches. We got a customer for an Atlas, a General Dynamics Atlas rockets division. We got a customer with Eutelsat, which is a big satellite company based in Europe, and I did a cozy little lunch with Ambassador Harriman and the president of General Dynamics Atlas and Eutelsat people to kind of push that along. That was a \$90 million sale. I think back to my days in China, in Shenyang, helping a small U.S. firm make \$1.5 million in oil field equipment to a new customer, I remember that. Frankly, there have been so many deals that I haven't fixated on the specifics too often.

Q: I'm not looking necessarily for a specific deal so much as what were the skill sets that you needed in order to get these companies to do this?

CENTER: We had some big advantages in France. We had this building called the Hotel Talleyrand, which was a historically registered monument on the Place de la Concorde. We had the use of the reception rooms, which looked out over the Place de la Concorde to the Quay d'Orsay, and you could have a view of the Eiffel Tower. We sold that thing over and over again to companies who wanted to hold receptions there. A lot of State delegations. Met a lot of governors—New Jersey, a group of Alabama, a group from Alaska—those guys were interesting.

I just had a lot of fun there, but I had this tremendous team of talented FSNs. In Europe in those days, and I'm sure it's still true today, the FSNs, the caliber were a notch above what you found in the rest of the world. Not that the people in the rest of the world weren't talented individuals, just that they received such a superior education in France. These people, and they had these secure jobs—and once you hired them, you'd never get rid of them, so you'd better be careful. I had this just outstanding team, and they made me look good. One of them is coming to my daughter's wedding in a couple of weeks, so we're still in touch, we're friends with all these folks. So at the apogee of this experience, I had charge of the team that did the events. We were doing about 60 events a year. The Paris Air Show was usually around a million bucks. The defense shows were about \$700,000-\$800,000. The rest of the stuff was smaller, so it was less than \$2 million in the year, but that was a lot of money to account for and to use. We had fun, we had fun.

I do have one memory, and again this is a bureaucratic memory. It was a group of people in Washington that were used to running the Paris Air Show, and it justified the trip of a whole lot of people, sort of the highlight of every two years, it was a biennial event. We

kept looking at the way they did things, and what they did was they used to charge all the U.S. exhibitors who came to the Air Show \$100 a ticket to attend the Ambassador's reception. A thousand people would show up, something like that, so they would take most of that money and use it to subsidize their operations, because they were basically losing money on the other stuff. I never thought that was fair. *(laughter)* So when I had my turn, I budgeted \$40,000 for that event, and spent it all on the event. We had four bands, we gave out 800 long stemmed roses to the ladies, we had 450 bottles of champagne, we had great food. It was an event that people talked about. It was the way it should be. I was still friendly with the head of aerospace office after that, but it put a strain on our relationship. I just made a case that we're running the event, we're running the Ambassador's reception, and they weren't paying attention because after they agreed to that they forgot that they were skimming that money. I liked those guys, I worked with them, but what they were doing was not fair. That was a bureaucratic memory. Gosh, it was a great embassy to be part of, there was a lot going on. You had ex-presidents coming through, lots of important people, big events, the president of the United States would come through regularly.

Q: Did you get new American exporters or new contracts for people who had either not marketed to France before or who were redoing the kinds of things that they were exporting?

CENTER: Absolutely. They were usually run through our regular programs, like our Gold Key programs and our Agent and Distributor services. America is an engine for innovation, so there was always someone in the market who wanted to represent some of these new products. Some of the big issues at the time were about cybersecurity. This is 1992-97, but the French were demanding to have access to some basic encrypted software programs. So these issues we're dealing with today have been around for a long time. The main thrust of Commerce programs is to help small and medium size enterprises, and I'm not doing them justice because I don't remember them. I was having too much fun doing the Paris Air Show, but certainly that's what we do.

Q: I wondered because obviously the larger shows take up the lion's share of your attention, but I was curious if you saw new trends coming from the U.S. in terms of the kinds of things that were now being marketed in France.

CENTER: When I think back on trends that I should have been aware of, there were a couple of things. The globalization and digitization and so forth were making it less necessary for American companies to be represented by British firms. The U.K. really benefited from the fact that Americans wanted to expand into Europe and didn't speak any languages so it went that way. That was beginning to change, and it was beginning to be more spread around, Germany was becoming more important. The other thing was this trend that was observable in Brussels as it was in Washington, and that was the rise and growth of advocacy organizations and business and trade associations and so forth. People were finding it easier to trade into Europe, but then there became some pushback on regulatory areas, and those became more and more important. There was always concerns about third party transfers of export controls, there were lots of issues. I think

the trends that changed the way we do business in the '90s in the States was also obvious in Europe. I wouldn't say obvious, but it was occurring in Europe, and we were there trying to make the most of it.

Q: Did GMOs end up becoming a major thing for you?

CENTER: Not me personally, but it was a big issue. That was the agriculture department that had to worry about that. The argument about science versus the traditional ways of farming. The French at that time were absorbing more of the EU budget on farm support programs than any other country. That was all politics, trading on German guilt and all that. But that was a long time ago, I don't think they take the same amount today.

Q: All right, so you had a very good time, you got promoted...

CENTER: Twice!

Q: Twice, you're an 02 officer.

CENTER: I went from 04 to 03 in my first year in France, and then I got promoted to 02 under Pete, and then my last SCO was Emilio Iodice, or "I-yo-di-chay," depending upon your pronunciation. I moved onto my next post in Shanghai, and when I got there I got promoted to 01, but that was based on what I was doing in France.

Q: That was rapid!

CENTER: Yeah, I wasn't yet 40, I would have been 38 or so at the time and I was already an 01. So that was pretty fast track, and they gave me a very important posting in Shanghai. It almost killed me.

Q: You moved to Shanghai in what year?

CENTER: '97.

Q: Ok, so it's still Clinton administration and it's still Shanghai being the big growth market in so many ways.

CENTER: In so many ways. We were adding...I was there for two years, and we were adding some impossible number of U.S. companies to the AmCham (American Chamber of Commerce) rolls, something like 60, 70, 80 a month, it was incredible. They went from having about 150-180 companies to, by the time I left, something like 2,000-2,500 companies were somehow on the AmCham rolls. It was just amazing. That was a very busy, stressful posting.

Q: Because?

CENTER: Because China. China was on everyone's radar. I had seen it in my first posting in Hong Kong, when everything went through Hong Kong into China because China hadn't fully opened up. This was later and all the taps were open, everyone wanted to be there. I can remember one time, I was the principal commercial officer, and I was counseling some businessmen in my office. I heard a little commotion up by my secretary's desk, and next thing I know some strange face pops in, and it's this guy. He says, "I'm sorry to barge in like this, but I have to talk to you because I'm going to catch a flight later today and I'm going to lose my job if I don't get something done." That was the kind of pressure American CEOs (chief executive officers) were putting on their regional guys, they were saying "you will go to China and you will sign a deal for me, and if not, don't bother coming back." It was absolutely crazy. It was "go-go" years, the Chinese built nine highways in Shanghai in five years. They were building new airports, new subway lines. This was quite the change from Shenyang where they all owned two pairs of clothes and a bicycle.

I can remember hosting some great times. I did the embassy event for Clinton when he was there. Albright (Secretary of State Albright) and Clinton was there, Jay Rockefeller, Dingle (Congressman John Dingle), they were all in my offices for the gathering of the families. I did Janet Yellen when she came through and was just a governor. I had a lot of high level visits like that, did some good advocacy work. I remember working with Senator (Diane) Feinstein, using her old connections as the former mayor of San Francisco--they had a city-to-city relationship with Shanghai--to try to get a Maryland company a design contract for a science museum that we were trying to build there. That doesn't sound like huge things, but the Japanese wanted that contract, and the French wanted that contract, and I purloined it from this well-meaning Frenchman who had been the beneficiary of some kindness from the Americans years ago, and he had invited me to meet with the vice mayor of Shanghai when I was still in Paris. I had been announced to go to Shanghai, and I had accepted his invitation, and I met the vice mayor of Shanghai, and she had that portfolio for the science museum. I just held onto her tight and we did the deal. It was high level advocacy, talking to the senator's chief of staff on the phone calling from Shanghai saying, 'this is really important for us as a symbol'.

But it was a stressful time. I was working all the time, I wasn't taking care of my physical health as best as I could, it was too much.

Q: During this period, had the troubles that are now becoming a bit more visible with China, namely the intellectual property issues, the requirement for 51% ownership by a Chinese "partner," had that begun to show itself.

CENTER: Oh, yeah, it was completely in the open. The tech transfer requirements were already in place in '89-'90. Companies were willing to take a chance, they were willing to put some of their current technology in and transfer that, but not their pipeline technology. That's kind of how a lot of them dealt with it. But then the Chinese basically said, 'we're not interested in anything but your best' and kept putting the pressure on. The problem was, these companies were growing quickly domestically in China, their businesses were doing well, they were reporting good numbers, but they weren't

repatriating a lot of those profits. A lot of that money was just staying in China, at least back in the mid '90s. They had a lot of problem with insurance licenses, only AIG had one but that was a legacy from when they got started in the 1920s in Shanghai. There was a lot of shenanigans. Jiang Zemin was the president, they do have a unified political structure, you got the feeling that the corruption was beginning to get out of control but it wasn't that bad, and I think that's the big issue that they're dealing with now. Where did all of these billionaires come from? They're not like Jack Ma, the head of Alibaba, who I think is a straight shooter, but a lot of party members in the cities and provinces profited mightily from the opening up to the West.

So it was very dirty, very crowded, the government was intrusive, it was not a great place to raise a family. I had three small kids at the time, it was stressful.

Q: Now you're an O1, theoretically you're going to have to open your window within a few years to compete for the senior foreign service. What was your thinking at that time, because you were still relatively young?

CENTER: I don't remember when I opened my window, I don't remember a strategy, I don't remember any of that stuff because I'm pretty sure, since you asked the question, that I opened it pretty early, because my personal strategy was 'enjoy the foreign service for all that it offers you and when you're done with it, you go into the private sector.' I didn't feel like I wanted to end up as undersecretary of State for political affairs or ambassador, that was never my goal. My last SCO in Paris was a little frustrated by that, Emilio Iodice. He said, "Will, on any given day there are 90 people with ambassadorial rank wandering the halls looking for an ambassadorship." So it never occurred to me.

I may have also mentioned this: my father was in the agency (Central Intelligence Agency), but he was old school, he was taught by Reischauer (Edwin O. Reischauer) at Harvard, and then Reischauer became his ambassador at one point in Japan. My father said, "Will, back in the '50s, we would start the year sitting around a conference table and we'd each have ideas about what we wanted to tell Washington." (*laughter*) And they would basically influence policy from the embassy and would send that stuff back. As you watch what's happened over time, with communications and everything, we're struggling now to find our value added contribution. I think there's enormous value added contribution for well-trained Foreign Service officers, but too much of what we're doing is turning into a concierge service. We take our instructions from Washington and just do what they say. A maverick like me is going to do what they say to the minimal amount and then do what he wants to do and not do anything to hurt the reputation of the Foreign Service.

So, opening the window, I probably did it early, and thought 'well, if they don't want me, they don't want me.' I approached burnout in Shanghai, it was too much work, and it was a difficult environment internally. The commerce operation was growing too fast, impossible burdens being placed on it. I got recruited to take the job in Joburg (Johannesburg, South Africa) and I didn't hesitate.

Q: That takes you then to 2000?

CENTER: I left in '99. Altogether I did nine years in China, if you include the three years in Taiwan before I joined the Foreign Service. I still consider myself a China hand. I watch the news, I'm a hardliner when it comes to what we should be doing and how we should be dealing with these guys.

Q: This is interesting, because given all your experience, how would you assess the current approach that is being taken?

CENTER: Overdue.

Q: OK!

CENTER: They understand strength. What the Trump administration is doing towards China is very similar to what the Koreans do to the Taiwanese and what the Japanese do to the Koreans and the Taiwanese do to the Japanese. I won't say they do it with China, because China is sort of a special category. The Taiwanese parliament will announce that they're going to put a 50% tariff on 1500 Japanese products, and there will be headlines for a couple of days. All it does is kick start the diplomats into negotiating, and then a month later they drop back to normal because they finally get the piece that they couldn't get through normal negotiations. And that's what I see happening, and it's about time.

Q: Do you think that there will be a reasonable amount of success?

CENTER: Yes, I do. I think there will be a reasonable amount of success because at the end of the day neither side wants a trade war. We'll pander, these guys are panderers, they're doing this to appeal to their base, but at the end of the day they generally pull back. This is what I've seen so far.

Q: What I mean is, will we get any significant in the intellectual property issue? I'm not so much worried about the trade imbalance as I am about the intellectual property issue.

CENTER: That's a tougher question. I think of Governor Huntsman. After he left his position (as ambassador to China) he co-authored a piece with someone else about how much they had stolen from us. I don't doubt it, I saw it in action, I've got my personal anecdotes about that and it infuriates me. The question is, when you're dealing with a great power, you've got so many equities, including their votes in the U.N. (United Nations), and North Korea.... The whole North Korea thing, it's only now beginning to be understood that it's all about the Chinese not wanting a U.S. ally on their border. That's what it's all about. Until we can convince them that they should exhale and we won't have nuclear weapons and we'll pull back, their posture is, "ok, fine, we'll be ok if you're there, but we're going to put our huge military presence in Cuba, are you ok with that?" That's kind of how they feel.

So, there's a lot of anecdotes about Shanghai, but it was not my favorite posting. It was just difficult on many fronts. I did a lot of work, the volume was high, but I wouldn't say it was my best effort. Actually, here's something for the archives, and I hope they can correct this: they gave me the job because I was doing a good job elsewhere and I came highly recommended, but nowhere along the way did I ever receive any management training. So I took what I'd always done, which was 'work hard, play hard, and lead by example' to a post where that approach was never going to work. It took until my next posting, and I got some mentorship from other commercial guys that I am really grateful for, that I changed my management style to creating an environment in which people look forward to coming to work. It was really different before, it was 'I'll come in before you, I'll stay later than you, I'll do all this great work, I'll share with you what I know and I'll tell you how I think it gets done.' Well, that gets old after a while, it gets really old.

Commerce never gave any management training, and I don't know if they even do it even now. I think this may even come up through State, State doesn't do enough management training either. And managing people is the hardest thing. If you like people, if you're like me and a lot of your peers and colleagues are "people persons," you think that getting along with people is enough. It's not. Managing people is the most important thing you're going to do, getting the most out of them and keeping them motivated, is a skill set. So I didn't feel, without going into all the difficulties that I faced in Shanghai, I did well in one area but in others I didn't, and I was fed up with it.

Q: Is there a particular kind--subsequently, looking back on it—is there a particular kind of management training that you think would be valuable for foreign commercial service officers in the future?

CENTER: I think the whole current system is broken...that's too cliché. I don't think it works. I think the current system would be improved if they hire at 05-04 levels and guarantee promotion up until 02, or through 03 as long as you don't have any demerits. Get rid of the competition, sail them through, let them get seasoned. After that, before you can go to the senior ranks, put in additional requirements such as a headquarters assignment, because some of these people are hiding out in the regions, they speak fluent languages, after a while you kind of start saying, 'hey, how come your English is so accented?' (*laughter*) That's probably not politically correct, but if you get my drift...Make people serve in headquarters positions before they can be eligible to be promoted at the senior ranks, and make mandatory management training a serious course, mandatory *before* you go into the senior ranks. I think those would be some suggestions that I would think about.

Q: It's interesting because I also hear regular State Department officers say similar things, that there's literally no point, once you're tenured, in requiring a great deal of these evaluations that take so much of everyone's time, until you get much further into the service and you've had quite a good deal of experience. It certainly sounds like a good way of doing it from a lot of points of view, not least the efficiency of not burdening a

DCM (deputy chief of mission) with an entire month out of the year writing evaluations, starting as far down as an O4 officer.

CENTER: Exactly, I agree.

Q: Anyway, ok...so you got pulled away to Johannesburg, go down in 1999, it's a new South Africa.

CENTER: I'd never been to Africa, never occurred to me to bid on Africa, I just wanted out of Shanghai. Johannesburg became my second favorite post after Paris. If you look at the dates, I roughly did two-three years everywhere except for Paris, where I stayed for five years, and Johannesburg, where I stayed for five years. Loved it, my family loved it, such brilliant sunshine, clean air, big skies, big country, wildlife, healthy pursuits. The kids grew like weeds, they just did great. It was a regional job with a lot of responsibility. I sort of came into it under strange circumstances. They don't generally recruit people, but the reason they recruited me was that I would be reporting to Commerce's sole political appointee in the system. We had exactly one, and I don't think we even use it anymore. So that guy was down there, and I don't think people wanted to work for him, in hindsight. The guy I worked for was the second iteration of that political position.

Q: So he is the head of the office?

CENTER: He is the head of the office for southern Africa, I am the seasoned officer brought in to run the trains on time so he can do his thing.

Q: You're number two in the section?

CENTER: I'm number two, but effectively running the office. What can I say, it's a small market, it's about the size of South Carolina, it's a long way away. Tremendous interest in South Africa by certain segments of our population because of the Nelson Mandela factor. There was political interest in covering up for past sins because we had been effectively supporting the apartheid government. This was the era when they passed something called the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, so we wanted to get the word out that we were opening the U.S. market to goods from South Africa with a unilateral move. I took an operation that had been very immature, meaning before Mandela came into power--he was released from prison in '92, I think it was, he didn't take office until '94. At that time there was a very small Commerce presence in South Africa, and then they quickly expanded to Cape Town and Durban and Johannesburg. People were just finding their legs, so I was there trying to help them, guiding them setting up the sort of programs I was successful doing in both Shanghai and Paris. In Shanghai they didn't have any of these things either. I created a trade promotion program from scratch and so forth.

It was a lot of that. The things I remember were convincing a golf buddy, who was a CEO of a defense firm, a South African person who had profited from running a Coca Cola franchise in the townships, to expand into a couple of other industries. He picked up

a couple of big defense firms, all the old firms were busy changing the shareholder structures and inviting black executives in to run them. Convincing him to admit to the proscribed exports to Libya and other places that the South Africans were doing on the sly. That was tricky, he was sweating bullets, he didn't really want to do that, but he was a good guy, he trusted me.

Then, I took the ambassador, leveraging my experience in the defense trade, we went to help some U.S. defense firms sell some guidance systems to some of the armaments that the South Africans were good at building. The ambassador was helping me with that. We did this big Coast Guard program. In that era, defense industries were trying to convince Congress that if they would appropriate the funds for them, they would lower their unit costs by selling a percentage of their products to international armies and navies and so forth. So there was this big program called Deep Water the Coast Guard was interested in, and I got involved in that, trying to sell some surplus stuff to Mozambique, arranging some visits by admirals and doing some outreach. And then, I took the ambassador to the Farnborough Air Show. I knew air shows and he liked it, I organized some Zulu dancers, things I liked to do. It was fun. That was a breakthrough, because the ANC (African National Congress) did not like the U.S. government. In the run-up to this we got a member, Walter Sisulu's son, one of the Sisulus, he was on the executive committee of the ANC. He came to the reception, and that was a strong signal that it was ok to talk to the Americans. When we got back to Joburg I was invited to speak to this defense group that they had never invited an American to speak to before. We were making some inroads there.

Then there was the big push, and I really ended up putting a lot of stress on the office for this. I deemphasized the exporters coming to South Africa, and started thinking in terms of the South Africans who could go to the U.S. and attract U.S. investment under the theory that U.S. investors would bring their own supply chains to any investments overseas. It ended up putting a lot of stress on the office but it actually was a huge success. We ended up taking about 20 African CEOs on a trip to New York and Chicago and Atlanta. We had letters from the mayors and governors of these regions to support our effort. Oprah Winfrey welcomed us in Chicago because she loves South Africa, and she treated us to breakfast and so forth. Bill Rhoads, who was a big deal at Citibank at the time, took us on a yacht around New York. The Coca Cola people couldn't have been nicer in Atlanta. We arranged all these media interviews, which was kind of a novel technique, to try to project an image that South Africa was not just about HIV/AIDS and violence, that it had a very rich economy and strong infrastructure and it was a very good place to do business. That was a very successful effort.

I did things with the IT (information technology) industry, where I did some big events in some hotels and so forth. I really needed to tap into my skill of convincing companies to shell out \$15,000, \$20,000, \$30,000 on things that had an impact on their budget. I remember Hewlett Packard was very supportive of this IT event that I had at this hotel. I'm trying to remember what the main thrust of it was, but there was an awful lot of matchmaking going on. South Africa was... 'join the Foreign Service and see the world',

and man, you'd love Africa. In Africa in the late '90s, early 2000s was just a gorgeous, gorgeous place.

I can't remember much more than that. My econ counterpart is now our ambassador to Kenya. That's always the fun part of this, watching your colleagues go up in ranks. I made good friends with my USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) colleagues...our sponsors when we arrived as a family are also dear friends who will be at our daughter's wedding. That's the nice thing about the Foreign Service, you make friendships and you tend to hold onto them.

Q: You mentioned USAID. The interesting thing about that moment in South Africa, I think, was that USAID also was working on transitioning to private sector, building employment-generating businesses and so on. Did you have much interaction that way with USAID?

CENTER: Actually I didn't. I'm aware that sort of phenomenon was the focus of many development experts who were being asked to help the transition of the majority African population into the mainstream. I was certainly aware of some of the groups that were involved with this, and I was trying to find ways to work with them. USAID was doing some interesting things in terms of subsidizing interest rates for low income housing projects. That was very interesting. They were ahead of their time on that for sure. I enjoyed learning about that. But AID and Commerce didn't mix much. It wasn't really a huge market, really. At the end of the day, if you're a successful U.S. company because your North American operations are healthy and growing and you've got people looking at international business. So then you've got to convince them to look beyond Canada and Mexico to some of the other big markets where it's a little bit easier to do business. Then you're saying, 'come to South Africa.' Why exactly? It's pretty far away, I don't want to get mugged when I'm down there. It's a challenge. That's why I started to take a deep interest in investment programs, because of what I said earlier. They'll pull in the exports.

Q: When you took the interest in investment, were there particular sectors or kinds of investments that were more interested in South Africa than others?

CENTER: Well, tourism is always a big one. Agricultural processing was promising. Some energy efficiency programs would be interesting. Financial services. There were things to look at. The level of sophistication was much higher than people were expecting when they went down there.

Q: Actually, I'm interviewing USAID officers.... (phone call)

Q: Okay, so, today is October 11th, and we are resuming our interview with Will Center in South Africa.

CENTER: So, I arrived there from Shanghai. We had a regional program where the Commercial Service was covering all of South Africa. Essentially, it was the Southern

African Development community. We had the... It was actually an unusual situation, because the Commerce Department had exactly one political appointee in the whole system, and that position moved. I can't remember where it was before, but at the time, I was recruited to go down to South Africa to be the experienced hand, to support the guy above me who was the political appointee. And that worked out... I think it was a nice arrangement. I had total freedom to run the programs, because that's not what this guy was interested in, and he brought some useful connections. We won a big Boeing deal with South African Airways, which I think he deserves the credit for.

Then, a lot of attention... This was during the Clinton administration, so there was still... It was just the end of it, so there was still a lot of interest in developing ties to Africa. It was the start of the effort to pass the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, which has been renewed a couple of times since then and which gives unilateral access to South African goods – or African goods, I should say – to the U.S. market. But the challenges of that assignment were that, although at the time South Africa's economy was the largest on the continent – I think it's been eclipsed by Nigeria now – it still was on par with South Carolina's economy. Our challenge, as Commercial officers, was to try to get U.S. exporters to see past Mexico, see past Canada, see past China and Japan, see past Europe, and come to Africa. Some would, but that was, ultimately, our challenge, and in the end, we had to have a pretty strategic approach.

I brushed up my background in aerospace and defense and took a group of South African companies to meet U.S. companies at European airshows like Farnborough. Then, at the end of my stay there, I was very much... This was where I began my experimenting with investment-led promotions. So, I took... I forget the exact number, but it was I think between 12 and 20 CEOs (Chief Executive Officer) of South African companies, and we went to New York, Chicago, and Atlanta. We were trying to overcome the image that Africa was all about HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) and violence. So, you know, we brought these very accomplished executives, and we organized a media program. So, they were actually interviewed by *Forbes* and *Bloomberg* and the big media outlets in New York. That was a major thrust there. When we got to Chicago, we did our Chamber of Commerce thing and did some business meetings, but Oprah Winfrey hosted us there. She has a soft spot for South Africa. Then we went to Atlanta, where the Coke people were very generous and took care of us.

Each of these... We went to places where there were receptive Chamber of Commerce and business types. The idea is that, when you can't get the exporters to fly all the way to the tip of Africa, you have to bring the companies to the U.S. and try to see if they can form some sort of collaborative partnerships. If the U.S. company invests in South Africa, then the likelihood is great that they would bring their supply chains with them. That's where the exports would come from.

Q: Now, was this group from South Africa looking for particular sectors?

CENTER: Not really. I was tapping into the desire to rebrand South Africa. So, I was sort of... And I was sort of successful at working at the National Executive Committee level, who were also behind this. So, it was really more of a... The people who are always partnering within South Africa to get this thing off the ground were more marketeers, branders, communications people. With them we went after some specific CEOs who we thought were telegenic and very impressive. So, we cut across different sectors. It wasn't an industry sector-themed activity.

Another interesting thing that I did when I was down there was, I met this guy. So, Black economic empowerment is a very powerful story, a very positive story. It's had some twists and turns, with people accusing some of these newly empowered executives of being opportunistic and so forth. But be that as it may, if you got an education and you were South African or African, you had a bright future to look at. You and your skills would be in demand. One of the guys I met, his name was Zoli Kunene. He was from a famous family of brothers who were raised by a strict Methodist mother in Soweto. I don't know exactly the whole story, but they got the Coca-Cola bottling franchise for Soweto and that region, and their careers took off. Then, when things started to change and the regimes changed in South Africa, the Kunene brothers were recruited to sit on all kinds of boards. Zoli was someone I had played golf with. I knew him pretty well at the time.

He had this problem. He became the CEO of a defense firm, and they had a checkered past. They had sold things that they shouldn't have to Libya, they had... They were involved in... This was the old regime... He bought the company, but it was the old regime that was doing all kinds of funny things with the defense trade. I convinced him that if he ever wanted to do business with the U.S. defense industry, he needed to come clean. This was not a case of him personally being involved in any of this stuff, but I can remember how nervous he was. I was very proud of this, because at the end, he gave us documentation saying, "We sold this to Libya on these dates," I can't remember what else. I'm not sure if his company was involved in the Angola business. But he did come forward, and he did it on the strength of my recommendation that if he wanted to do business with the largest defense industry in the world, he had to be right with the State Department and the arms control regimes.

So, that was good commercial work. It wasn't helping small and medium-sized firms meet distributors, which is our bread and butter, but it's the sort of thing you do, as a Commercial officer, in markets where you can't win the competition for the attention of U.S. exporters. You've got to get strategic; you've got to think about existing equities, for example, and then you make a big difference in approaching it that way.

Q: Interesting, because you were aware of more of the political ramifications of how to get them placed well for commercial activity, even when it wasn't necessarily related to your typical questions of trade.

CENTER: Yeah. Try as we might, we weren't going to move the needle that much on traditional trade shows and so forth. We tried, but the other thing is that the U.S. had... In

the changing of the regimes, the ANC was not fond of the Americans. We were on the other side. They suffered when we were supporting the other regime. So, you have to have an understanding of the country you're in and the politics and the history. We're all foreign service officers. We sit in the same country teams; we just look at things differently.

Q: While you were there, was there any effect on your work from 9/11?

CENTER: Well, 9/11 happened while I was there, but no, I don't remember any effect. It's one of those memories you'll never forget where you were at the time you found out. I was driving between Johannesburg and Pretoria when it was on the radio, and at first it just seemed like it was some commuter aircraft that had hit the tower. Then, when we got to the embassy, everyone was watching TVs (televisions), and it was tense.

Q: Then, the other thing is, you were there through the transition from Clinton to Bush. Did the goals for commercial work change?

CENTER: None. Not at all. Let's see... Who did we go from? We went... Ron Brown was Clinton's guy, and he died, tragically. There was a succession of secretaries. Micky Kantor was there for a very short time, then Bill Daley was there for a long time. I'm trying to remember who was secretary at the time I went down there; I think we may have had a vacancy. But Don Evans was Bush's guy, and he was the president's best friend. He came down to South Africa. The president came down to South Africa while I was there. An interesting anecdote about that is that while the president travels with a lot of his cabinet or his leading experts, he was the one who personally gave the brief on HIV/AIDS to the South Africans. Of course, he was the father of PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), and his commitment was obvious, even then.

Q: Very interesting, yeah. Was there growth in the period of time you were there in just the two-way trade between the U.S. and South Africa?

CENTER: Not appreciably. And that was mostly because the South African economy, which is blessed with so many riches, was struggling, and has been struggling for a long time. The whole time I was there, I don't think it grew more than a couple percent a year, so it never went through big growth spurts. We were just looking for the next thing to promote. I can't remember how our conversation went the time before, because some time has passed, but Shanghai in comparison was an absolute pressure cooker of a place to work.

Q: Yes, you definitely mentioned that.

CENTER: It was a killer. And when they said, "We need someone to go down there; would you consider it?" I had different reasons for... I mean, I had a lot of reasons, actually, but one of them was to get out of that pressure cooker. So, I arrived in South Africa. I was met at the airport by our sponsor, who to this day is one of my closest friends. His kids and my kids were about the same age; my eldest was... In '99, she

would have been eight years old. So, I had eight, six, and four that arrived. For us, it was a wonderful place to be to raise a family. So clean, so beautiful. It was very inexpensive to live there as well.

Q: Now, you were based in Pretoria?

CENTER: Johannesburg.

Q: Oh, okay.

CENTER: We did a little bit of traveling in the region, but not much. You only really need to go to Malawi once to figure out there's no business up there. Mauritius was interesting, but it was sort of like a tax haven sort of place, where you would establish your businesses but actually did business in other parts of Africa. Botswana was very prosperous, but it has a total population of two million people. They'd be the same thing: a stable country, but two million people, so nothing interesting there.

Q: And Zimbabwe was already mired in its...

CENTER: Yeah, Uncle Bob was in charge. I remember going to Vic Falls and refusing to go into Zimbabwe. There was no way I was going to contribute to his economy. But that's personal. Politically, we have our problems. I was just with a Zimbabwean yesterday whose husband is their ambassador to Washington, and they're trying. They're trying to get back to where they were. They were one of the most prosperous countries down there.

Q: Yeah, a very sad thing. Hyperinflation and just mismanagement...

CENTER: Yeah, and corruption. But something about... An economist at the World Bank told me that democracy in Africa is a mile wide and an inch deep. He said that it's very fragile, and to truly understand Africa, you've got to understand the tribes. In Zimbabwe you've got the Shona and you've got the Ndebele and you've got a few others. If you don't understand the jealousies and the rivalries that exist there, you're not ever going to understand the country.

Q: While you were in South Africa, had it already joined the WTO (World Trade Organization)?

CENTER: I don't know. We were after them to join the Procurement Code of the WTO, so I think the answer was no.

Q: I was curious, because it would have been difficult while it was under apartheid to join, and then immediately following, if it still needed to make various reforms before it could join. We would be, typically, advocating for the reforms so that they could join.

CENTER: Right. I think we wanted them to be part of the Procurement Code so that we could go after them when they were cheating. Because public procurement was another area that we were interested in. You know, selling locomotives to the transport authorities, trying to get involved in the aerospace industry that was still state-run. But I got my... I was promoted to the Senior Service when I was in South Africa, so I must have been doing something right.

Q: It's interesting, having just checked, they were formally a member since 1995, but...

CENTER: Not all the sections. They were not in the Procurement Code, or whatever they called it.

Q: I see. Interesting. So, subsidies for local producers or local companies were still...

CENTER: Well, I don't know what it was. There's probably a story... It wasn't an issue that I was aware of. I'm sure there was another reason. This was probably an Econ Section issue... Anything to do with the WTO or joining multilateral organizations would have been run out of Econ.

Q: Oh, I see. Okay. But you were saying you joined the Senior Foreign Service?

CENTER: Yes, I was promoted while I was in South Africa. So, that was kind of surprising for me. I wasn't expecting it. I was still pretty young. That would have been 2003 or '04. I would have been 44 or something like that.

Q: When you were promoted, what did it open up for you? What were the advantages for you?

CENTER: Well, none, really. I always... I'm pretty proud of this, and I maybe have mentioned it already, but I loved the work that we did, and that these guys continue to do. Especially because you can actually help a guy achieve something and do it within 12 to 18 months. Whereas, if you're trying to negotiate the law of the seas, good luck. So, I was always conscious of my peers who were jockeying for certain assignments. I was always aware of what was going on and who was kissing various rings. I didn't do any of that. I just went and had fun, and I always had this strong conviction that if I worked hard and if I had some success, then everything else would take care of itself. That's how I would explain my promotion. It was not expected. Someone else saw something in me and said, "Here you go."

And it was great. To be very honest, though, my personal career plans were to start looking to go and join the private sector. I don't think that was... I didn't have a goal of making the Senior Foreign Service. I would have left as a one, and that would have been fine by me. So, bidding on the World Bank position after South Africa was my strategy of getting into a halfway house so I could start experiencing the private sector without being in a 100% embassy or government environment.

Q: Before we leave South Africa, just a quick question: Did your wife work while you were there? How did your family like it?

CENTER: Well, the family absolutely adored it. My wife found work as a teacher. In Shanghai, she was working as a journalist, but she'd always been hovering around the schools. She had a background in teaching. She's Australian, and she got a degree from a teacher's college in Australia. So, teaching was something that she was going to come back to, and she did. She found that she was teaching lower elementary or middle elementary at the American International School of Johannesburg. So, she was enjoying that, and she was getting some professional development opportunities while I was working.

And you know, the housing in Africa was the best in the Service. We had this huge plot of land, with three building structures on it and 12 fruiting trees and this pool. It was just amazing, so, we had a very comfortable living situation. What we don't talk about much is that the security was really tough. The threats were very real. We found... I think the difference in our case was that we got this mean dog. When we were pony trekking in Lesotho, we found this puppy and he turned into this real monster. Everyone else around us in our neighborhood was carjacked or home invaded. People were shooting guns and stuff. But we were fortunately spared.

Q: The dog was a sufficient, perhaps, prevention.

CENTER: It was a deterrent, yeah. He was mean.

Q: Now, you were saying that your next tour was in the World Bank. How did that work? Was that a particular detail that the Foreign Commercial Service offered all officers, or was it unique?

CENTER: No, it's on the regular roster. It was a consequence of the 1988 OPIC (Overseas Private Investment Corporation) Reauthorization or Authorization Act. Congress, before authorizing or whatever they were doing appropriating funds for the World Bank, insisted that the Commerce Department set up positions in the World Bank to help the interests of U.S. business. So, we have... And this really stoked my interest in investment, in finance, and I really enjoyed my time at the World Bank. It's a multilateral environment, which means that in the morning you would compete directly with another country's interests, and in the afternoon, you would be working side by side to defeat someone else's interests. It was very complex, three-dimensional chess. But it was a good mission; you're helping to educate and feed and provide healthcare to the poor. It's just a good mission, generally speaking.

Q: Where were you situated specifically in the World Bank?

CENTER: I was an advisor to the U.S. executive director, which was a White House-appointed position. I went through a lot of them. Let's see... Carol Brookins was the first one there, then it was Bob Holland, who was a buddy of George W. Bush. Then Jenna

Dorne was acting, and Whitney Debevoise was there when I left. I was there when James Wolfensohn was the head of the World Bank, and he was succeeded by Paul Wolfowitz, who was very controversial.

Q: Sure, and left relatively early in his tenure.

CENTER: They ran him out of there, and it was not fair to him, to be honest. He got totally... He fell victim to the culture of a multilateral institution that didn't want him there. That's not to say he was pure as the driven snow; there were people who were uncomfortable about how he was trying to steer programs to Iraq. People were accusing him of trying to burnish his own legacy there. But he was never... And this is my own opinion. He fell afoul of some personnel rules. He was doing everything in his power to say, "I'll do whatever I'm supposed to do; just tell me what I'm supposed to do." And they basically gave him a document to sign which sealed his doom. Anyways, we could talk a long time about that.

After Wolfowitz left, Bob Zoellick came on board. All of these positions were appointed by or nominated by the U.S., which is the largest shareholder. There are some changes going on, and I think some machinations to try and move away from that system, but we'll see how that works. It's a Treasury environment, not a State Department environment. They don't understand the country team concept quite as well, so as a Commercial officer, they basically tolerated you and that was about it. I didn't really bring a lot of value to the Treasury guys. I was an extra pair of eyes and ears, and what I was picking up inside the Bank I would share with them if it was relevant.

But Treasury was working on their role of being the voice of the vote of the United States in these institutions, and they are really jealous of the State Department. They're always looking at it as if the State Department and AID (United States Agency for International Development) were encroaching on their turf. They were very protocol sensitive about who was sitting in the chair and who would get pins and buttons and all that. Commerce didn't really rank in their eyes, so I was an observer to all this. I got along with everybody, but... It was the perfect assignment for me to get ready to go into the private sector. I was out of the Commerce Department building, the metrics of success were totally different. No one understood what the banks were doing. I embraced the banks, and really enjoyed it. People at the Commerce Department really didn't know what to do with it. They periodically try to kill the positions because they don't have the budget to support the whole system.

Q: Now, it was a one-year detail?

CENTER: No, it wasn't a detail; it was an assignment. So, it was a full four-year assignment. No, it was a two-year assignment, and I think I re-upped. I can't remember what I did, but I was there for four years. I liked it.

Q: Interesting. Wow. Four years in the World Bank, you do really...

CENTER: You really know it. In fact, the job I have in the private sector now is based, to a large extent, on my knowledge of the World Bank and so forth. But what was really gratifying... The first year I was there, I was kind of just inundated with procurement disputes. Typically, what happens is, the World Bank boasts that it has transparent procurement guidelines and they level the playing field and allow everyone to come in and compete fairly. That sounds right but doesn't usually work out that way. One of the usual things is, some contractor would win a contract, and they would make three progress payments and then withhold the fourth.

So, my first year I was just helping all kinds of companies who just weren't getting paid by... I think the Dominican Republic comes to mind. Certainly, in Bangladesh; I really worked hard there, and in a few other places. You know, countries where they were just stiffing these guys. And I got tired of that. So, I started to pay close attention to what was happening at the private sector lending arm of the World Bank, called the IFC (International Finance Corporation). And that, I think, has enormous potential, because it basically provides financing in places where commercial banks won't go because there's too much risk. It's not ideal. The IFC can be a cumbersome institution to work with, but it has the right approach, and you don't have to worry about public procurement.

So, if you're a U.S. company, and you want to go to Botswana and invest in something, you're going to bring your own supply chain, and you don't have to compete for every procurement contract. You just bring your own suppliers. So, that, I thought, was a smart way to look at export promotion, to try to help... I'll give you one example. There was a company called Solar Turbines out of San Diego. It was a wholly owned subsidiary of Caterpillar. They came to us because they had never heard of the IFC, so we started to tell them about it. They came back to us and said, "Look, we have hard data on a couple hundred dirty industries in China that are either burning coal or whatever. We want to turn them into our clients and sell them clean gas turbines, which would have an immediate impact on the environment."

They couldn't get commercial financing for that. China, at that time, was not a good risk. So, we helped them arrange the financing, and that would be... To be perfectly candid about it, the U.S. office... When I left, the deal hadn't closed, and I think they let it drop, but that had the potential of bringing in hundreds of millions of U.S. exports. That's what the IFC is all about. So, while I was there, unfortunately, my personal life had a tumble. I went through a divorce. My plans to leave the World Bank and join the private sector... I had to put them on hold while I kind of got my life back together. So, I ended up accepting another assignment to Pakistan.

Q: And this would have been...

CENTER: That would have been 2008 to 2010.

Q: Right. Okay. Before you leave the World Bank, one other question: During the time you were there, the Millennium Challenge Corporation was established, and this new kind of approach to assistance that's much more private sector-oriented in tools and the

expectations. Did you have any interaction with it from the Bank, or did you hear voices in the Bank about how effective it was or whether it was a good way of doing work?

CENTER: Well, you're right; it was created by the Bush administration, and my memory of it, at that time, was all the jockeying around by the Treasury people to try to get plum jobs. When a new agency was created, it was an opportunity. It didn't impact my work. It was something to watch, something to study. You had to understand it. But we had our hands full. The World Bank was lending 60 to 80 billion dollars a year. There were something like 300 operations at play, and it was a small office. I went from having about 25 people reporting to me in South Africa to two people. Which was kind of nice, actually; personnel is hard. The hardest thing about any management position is the personnel.

Q: No question. I totally understand that. So, now, you make a decision as you're approaching the end of the tour in the World Bank to go to Pakistan in 2008. Wow.

CENTER: Well, let's put it this way: I was kind of... My son says I was going through a midlife crisis, but I don't think that's the case at all. But I didn't know what to do. My wife ran out on me with my ex-best friend. The kids stayed with me in the house. Poof! There went the idea of taking my annuity and getting another job and living happily ever after. I had to say, "How am I going to keep this..." My kids were approaching college age. Where was I going to get the money for college? So, it was another case where the head of our Office of International Operations, another guy I knew, called me and said he was looking for senior guys in three places. They were all sensitive places. He said, "We can't let junior officers go to Baghdad, Jeddah, and Islamabad." He said, "I need a senior guy to bid on these posts. Would you consider it?" So, you know how it works. I gave it good consideration... You could put eight choices for your bid list. I thought about each one of them, and I put them down, and I put Islamabad at number eight. I think they called me back three minutes later saying, "Congratulations, you're going to Islamabad."

Q: That's the way it works. You put it on there, and you're going.

CENTER: And the funny thing was, it turned out to be one of my most enjoyable and fulfilling and rewarding assignments. It was really dangerous, and I...

Q: Speaking of really dangerous, though: Before you go, did you get any training in anything at all to prepare you for Pakistan?

CENTER: I actually skipped out on the crash car course. I forget if I had something better I wanted to do or something. But I went through the area studies course here at FSI (Foreign Service Institute), and they're always of great value. Fantastic. I remember that we did some roleplaying. Dan Coates was on his way to be ambassador to Germany, and he was one of the guys there, along with a few others. You get to rub shoulders with some people who end up becoming pretty big deals. So, I got the area studies course, and I took some Urdu. I didn't need to use it, in the end; everyone spoke English that I was interacting with. The thing that helped my tour be a success was that I had just made up

my mind I was going to stay for two years. It was a one-year, unaccompanied hardship assignment.

Q: And where were your kids now?

CENTER: At that time, they... So, my... I don't think I was divorced quite yet. No, I was divorced. We were co-parenting, and the kids were living in the house that I still occupy. So, when I went, my ex... I think she moved back, but later on I learned she was a building a house somewhere. But anyways, that's what happened. The kids never left the house. Their routines were never changed. They didn't have to change schools or anything. Their problems were between their parents, and that was that.

Q: So, they were in high school?

CENTER: High school, and the youngest was... Oh, gosh. 2008... How old would Grace have been? She would have been 14.

Q: Okay. So, they're all by now in high school or just about to graduate.

CENTER: That's right. So, they were old enough. Ann Patterson was the ambassador when I got there, and I introduced myself kind of casually at the end of some function during my first week. I was like, "I'm the new Commercial officer." She was like, "Great. How long are you staying?" I said, "I'll stay here for two years." And from then on, she and I hit it off, because she wanted to run a good mission, and I just don't know how to do the job for one year. I hate to say it, but I have a little bit of contempt for some people who just go in, take the extra R&Rs (rest and recuperations) you get on those assignments, they sock away the money, and they don't give a damn, and then they demand a nice assignment afterwards because it was all a pre-cooked understanding for them to take the jobs in the first place. I just tried to... I didn't know how to do anything short of two years. It ended up being one of my most successful tours.

Q: Well, let's hear it.

CENTER: It was so darn dangerous. The first month I was there, I was the first car on the scene of the Marriott bombing. I was hauling bloodied embassy staff back to the clinic, and it was a hair-raising situation. To go to work every day, you went through eight military checkpoints. You would hear... You could hear explosions going off in the city from time to time. It was just a very dangerous place. There was no way... You couldn't get companies to come to Pakistan, so I had already practiced this in South Africa... I called up the guys who helped me do it when I was in South Africa, and I said, "I'm bringing CEOs to you." Basically, the mission... I was always conveying to the ambassador and the country team that we needed to reach out more to the Pakistan business community, because these people were globalists. They were all educated, and they needed rule of law, otherwise none of their business plans would make any sense. These were natural allies of ours. So, I kind of prioritized the 40 families that controlled

like 80% of the wealth. They were just so hospitable to me that we would try to help them.

Q: One question, before we go on with all of the more daily things: When you were on the country team in Islamabad, was there more of a sense for you of whole of government approach to things? How did that play out for you as a Commercial officer?

CENTER: Absolutely. So, by now, this was my seventh or eighth assignment, so I'd been around the block of the foreign service. I knew what the scif looked like. I walk in, and I was early – I'm a fairly punctual person – and I just grabbed a seat at the table. There was a table and there were chairs around the side. The guy sitting across from me was in military fatigues; I didn't pay much attention, just greeted him cordially. And then this guy, who ended up being a friend of mine who I used to play tennis with, but this was the first time I'd met him, and he said, "That's my seat."

I said, "Does it really matter?"

He goes, "It does matter." He was the head of the Consular Section. A good, really nice guy. So, I'd been thrown out of better places, so I said, "Okay," got up, and sat down against the wall. Then I took another look at the guy in the military fatigues and he had four stars on his uniform. He was the head of the... what do they call them? The JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command) for the whole United States.

Q: That's big.

CENTER: So, that sort of conveyed that whole of government approach. I didn't participate in them, but they had regular secure video conferences with the White House.

Q: So, actually, the physical presence of these others is good, but I was driving a little bit more at, in what way, if any, did other offices – Econ, Political, Consular – do anything to help the goals that you had? Because many of them see these same 40 families or these same high-ranking people...

CENTER: Actually, they should have but they didn't. So, remember, actually, it was a peculiar mission in that respect. I don't know how much I can say about it.

Q: Well, I'm not looking for anything classified.

CENTER: No, but it was a... The embassy in Islamabad was an integral player in the prosecution of the Afghan War. So, the Political section, and all of the other three letter agencies and everything else, that occupied most of the bandwidth. What we did was, I'm going to say, a fig leaf to try to make us look like a normal embassy. Even though we were doing our roles very openly – Agriculture was there, I was there, AID (United States Agency for International Development) was there. We were doing our things, but it was second. The mission of that mission was to help find Osama Bin Laden and prosecute that war in Afghanistan.

Q: Okay. So, now, once again, you identified 40 families, and you want to get them interested in the commercial goals that you've got.

CENTER: Well, it was the same pitch that I had started doing in South Africa. It was like... They're not going to come to you. You're going to have to come to them. And they all understood this. We just... I took the ambassador... Actually, I took the ambassador twice and the DCM (deputy chief of mission) once on these investment tours. We weaved the media into it. I have good partners in New York at BCIU (Business Council for International Understanding) – you may know them.

So, I developed a very close working relationship with them, and to this day we're all on a first name basis. I get along great with all of those guys. And it had its desired effect: the companies that would go on these trips appreciated that the ambassador would lend her influence and prestige and time to go with them. The ambassador was a newsmaker in her own right, and we leveraged that in different ways to get attention to these groups and get some good one on one meetings going. It was... We were trying to get halal meat operations going in the Sindh Province so that they could export to Dubai. That would be using U.S. technology and packaging to do it.

Q: Very interesting.

CENTER: It was. It was energy... There were a lot of sectors that were prominent or that they needed help in, so, yeah, it was interesting... When you weren't working, you were sitting in an armored house. Everywhere you went, you were in armored cars. You weren't supposed to walk anywhere. If you wanted to go three doors down, you were supposed to call the motor pool and they were supposed to come in an armored car and drive you three doors down.

Q: So, the principal threat was Taliban or other sympathizers, whatever, you name it?

CENTER: Yes. Kidnapping was a real industry. Tragically, we lost an AID worker, whose name will come to me in a minute. If you've served in a country like that, you'll recognize that there's industrial kidnapping, and there's a secondary market. So, the kidnapers kidnap a target and issue their demands. In the best of circumstances, there's negotiation and the money changes hands and the guy is set free. If they can't agree on the price or if the family doesn't have the money or if the kidnapers think they're holding out on them, they'll hold onto him for a while, and when they get sick of holding onto him, they'll sell him to another group at a discount. So, it's an industry.

Q: Yeah. Remarkable.

CENTER: We lost a guy in that kind of scenario. And then there was so much money coming into Pakistan from the U.S. government. Billions. We were trying to figure out ways to use it to boost the investment promotion. When you talk about foreign direct investment, you get an automatic ally with the host government.

Q: Of course, sure.

CENTER: They'll say, "You want to help us, great! Thanks." What's held us up in the U.S. for decades is the image that has been successfully conveyed that we're exporting jobs. That every time someone invests in a factory somewhere else, jobs get erased in the U.S. That's usually not the case. It may be the case if it's a textile mill. The people in New England lost their textile jobs to South Carolina and then those jobs went to Asia or whatever, and yes, that happens. There's truth to that. But if you're trying to grow your business and you've got a position in the U.S. market and you're producing there and you decide that you want to capture other markets, you're expanding.

You're not... It's not always a zero-sum game. It's a globalization game. So, properly handled, you're not losing any U.S. jobs. You're gaining jobs, because the supply chains are in the U.S. and those companies are getting more work. So, we haven't really... When I started my career in Asia in the 1980s. The Brits were doing this all the time, the French were doing this all the time, the Germans were doing this all the time. They were just out there, using finance to get their companies into these markets. We're just coming around to it in 2018; there's an act that's heading for Trump's desk, bipartisan, that's going to double the equity in OPIC (Overseas Private Investment Corporation). It's double the capital contribution to OPIC and give them more powers. It's about time.

Q: Well, there is a significant opposition to OPIC on free trade grounds, that the taxpayer money should not be used to support companies and companies should be doing that themselves.

CENTER: Yeah, tell that to the rest of the world. What do you think the Chinese are doing?

Q: I know. I'm just, you know...

CENTER: There is an argument that you shouldn't be using public funds to crowd out private funds if they're there, but if they aren't there, then the arguments moot.

Q: Well, move to many people. I think you know that there's still some for ideological reasons will never agree. But, anyway. So, did you, in the end, spend two years, or did you spend any longer?

CENTER: No, that would have been pushing my luck. I was trying to find... I was still angling to see if I could get another job on the outside. So, I joined in '85, so I was already more than 20 years into a career that I loved, and I'm very tickled to have a chance to talk about it, because I had so many wonderful experiences and I really enjoyed it.

Q: But before we leave Pakistan, were there any noteworthy victories in your efforts to get increased trade?

CENTER: There were some turbine contracts, there were some locomotive contracts.

Q: Turbine. The only reason I say that is that some people might hear turban.

CENTER: Yes. There was... You know, before I came over, I looked through some old efficiency reports... There's a list of things you end up working on. The problems, sometimes, in commercial work is that you're part of a team that's going after this business. Like, LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) ... We were trying to help ExxonMobil get an LNG contract signed with the government. That's billions of dollars of business over a seven-year term, and you can't plausibly say, "I did this." You were contributing to the process, helping out where you can. Were there some significant successes, yeah, but for the life of me, I can't remember what they were.

Q: Alright. A really harsh question is, was it even worthwhile to have a Commercial officer there?

CENTER: Yes. It was a large economy. I think that there was some business in the financial services industry that you could do without having a big footprint.

Q: Right, and of course, there's more business that can be then just over the Internet.

CENTER: Right. So, I would say... It's a good question, because I would say, without a doubt, that having an active Commercial section team there enhanced the significance of the overall mission. So, it helped the mission. In terms of, if you had to make a hard choice would you be there or Slovenia, I don't know. That comes down to, if you put a Commercial officer in Slovenia, he might win a municipal infrastructure project and help a clothing apparel line get a deal done. That would be okay. But we probably did something equally significant. GE (General Electric) was trying to sell 150 locomotives there, and we were fighting...

I remember this one. This was a... I had to take this to the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), and the route to the OECD was through the Treasury Department. There was an office in the Treasury Department that decided which way the U.S. would vote in certain OECD committees, and this was the committee that oversaw official subsidies for procurements. There was an OECD consensus about how much has to be grant versus a subsidized loan, and I went through this process and got the agreement on this to have the U.S. Ex-Im Bank (Export-Import Bank of the United States) match what the Chinese were offering for their product. So, this was commercial diplomacy, I think, at its best.

It was inter-departmental, and you had to basically advocate internally... The U.S. stayed away from that level of subsidies, but there was an exception when we felt we were being unfairly competed against by anyone, and in this case it was the Chinese. We could, on a one-time basis, declare that we would match their financing package. So, we did. But the dirty dealing between President Zardari and his administration and the Chinese... Money

had been passing hands. We were fighting a tough battle. I chased that for two years, and I can't remember who won that contract in the end. I think in the end they just let it... I think they split it in the end.

Q: Alright. So, as you approach the end of this tour, someone is going to replace you in Pakistan. What would you... What did you tell your successor in terms of advice?

CENTER: Well, you know, I told him that this was going to be a great assignment if he reached out and talked to the people who controlled the money. There were no trade shows. It was impossible. You went to the trade show; you were a sitting duck for an attack. I stayed out of the press. You couldn't do press stuff. I think I got photographed a couple of times cutting ribbons, but I wasn't comfortable. I didn't want anyone to know I was there, because it was dangerous. It was a scary kind of dangerous. So, I just told them to... I was telling him to beef up our presence in Karachi. Now, to give you an idea, the reason the commercial section was in Islamabad was because a few years before I arrived, someone fired a rocket-propelled grenade at the consulate in Karachi and it hit the Commercial section. So, no one was killed, fortunately, but we were out of there. But Karachi was where the stock market was. It was the largest city; it was the port city. It was where most of the banks were located. So, my advice to him was, go to Karachi and start talking to the banks.

Q: Okay.

CENTER: I know they started adding positions there, but I don't know if they moved... I mean, the two guys who followed me, they each stayed for a year. These were the guys that I denigrated a moment ago. I don't think there was any profit in them to do something strategic like that, because they needed to stay in Islamabad and curry favor with whoever the ambassador was for their efficiency reports. I mean, that's my cynicism coming through, but that's how I see it. You know, some guys are like that.

Q: Alright. What were you then thinking about what you were going to do next?

CENTER: Well, I had a couple of partners lined up to do some investment promotion back to Pakistan, because I had had a two-year head start and I knew the players and I knew the issues and I knew what would be attractive. I couldn't get the financing together at the very end, so, again, this was my attempt to try to leave a Foreign Service career and start a private sector one. It still wasn't... I turned 50 while I was in Pakistan. So, that didn't work out, so I put in some bids and I got London.

Q: Not too bad.

CENTER: Well, we've already been over this. I did five years in Paris, and I really liked Paris, but... I wanted to go home. I wanted to be in Chevy Chase, Maryland. That's where I wanted to be. But I went to London, and I finally pulled an insider's move and put all three of my kids on my travel orders. So, I got a four bedroom flat in the West End of London, which was great if I cared. But I just didn't care. The EBRD (European Bank

for Reconstruction and Development) was a more efficient version of the World Bank's IFC. Again, if I was interested in getting promoted to MC (Minister Counselor), I would have volunteered for Vietnam or some other big, booming assignment. I was interested in taking what I had learned at the World Bank and the IFC (International Finance Corporation) and then seeing if I could really get smart and learn something at the EBRD.

Q: Now, speaking of what you learned, is what you learned principally where to find the right people? Or is it simply making connections? Is it becoming known as a credible deal-maker? In other words, for somebody from the outside of this process, how would you explain it?

CENTER: Well, you know, I can only explain it from my point of view. My point of view is that in commercial work, there are infinite possibilities. I got promoted twice when I was in Paris. Now, a lot of people in our business will tell you that you can either get Paris or you can get promoted; you can't do both. But I managed that, because I enjoyed what I was doing, and I had a successful tour. But the possibilities are infinite. From my perspective, you either assume the job and sit there and try to make the trains run on time and tick all of the boxes that they throw at you, and then you'll be tired, because there are a lot of boxes to tick and a lot of clients. You're a public servant, so anyone who calls you has a right to reach you and ask for some services.

My approach was always, get there, look around, find something that you want to do that you think will make an impact, and get busy doing that and a couple of things that you want to do. So, when inevitably people come to you and say, "Can you help me with this?" you have a plausible way of saying, "I would if I could." Right? I would if I could, but I am currently doing this, this, and this. Reasonable people will take a step back and say, "I get it." You know, you have the staff in some places. You can delegate. You're organized to help people. The infrastructure of a Commercial section is designed to be responsive. So, we weren't slamming doors in people's faces, but they could only get a piece of me. They couldn't get all of me, because I was pursuing things that I liked to do. This is advice I've given many junior officers: I would say, go there and do what you want to do. It doesn't matter where you are. You could be in Mongolia, and you can do some really interesting things in Mongolia. And there are. The Mongolians... I don't know if you know this. Unfortunately, they're broke. But before they became broke, they were spending money and you could have won some contracts. So, it's just a very rewarding career for action-oriented people is my bottom line.

Q: But now, you were thinking about leaving. What sort of work would you be doing had you left at that moment?

CENTER: Right. Actually, I remember that early in my career – I think it was after my third assignment when I was in Washington – I was in the Commerce Department, and we still had the vestiges of the old International Trade Administration. I think it was called the Bureau of East-West Trade or something. There were these old... I shouldn't say curmudgeons, but these guys who had been around a long time. They were trade show guys. This was going back to the 1960s, when they would put on U.S. pavilions all

over the world. You know, I looked this over, and I kind of looked at them from one eye, and then from the other eye I took a glance at some of my colleagues, who had more of an intellectual bent. And I sort of thought, well, sometimes you guys make me think you would rather be in the State Department. But these guys who do the trade shows, they only wanted to be at the Commerce Department. That's our niche.

So, it was particularly in my... After my Washington assignment I went to France, and I worked with a guy named Pete Fredrick. He and I both liked trade promotion, and I got really good at it – or at least I worked at it pretty hard. Those were skills I could take outside. Those were skills that would be in demand, to do marketing and communications for somebody and to do trade shows. Now, if I wanted that type of a career, I would have had to leave the Commercial service a lot earlier, because you're never going to get hired at a senior level for something like that. It's always going to be a mid-level job. But that's the skillset Commerce guys have. They understand how to organize trade shows. It sounds trite, but there's an industry.

The other thing was investment promotion. I understood where finance fit in investment promotion, and I understood there was a market for those skills... You know, you would probably end up working for a foreign government, because they were the ones who needed the investment. It has a specialized vocabulary; it's its own sort of guild, if you will. Investment promotion was what I was angling to do, or maybe... You could always try to be a consultant and parley your knowledge of how to work with the World Bank. That was another opportunity. So, I was thinking about that before I took the EBRD job. But it was really... We had a really good team identified, with some senior guys. If we had gotten that financing, my life would have taken a slightly different tack and I would have been paid handsomely. So, EBRD came along, and it was during the Arab Spring.

Q: And EBRD is the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. At this point, what was its principal goal?

CENTER: Well, that's a great question. It's a question the United States kept asking, because it was created largely as a French initiative. It was Mitterrand and Jacques Attali thing... Those guys wanted to set up a European bank that would focus entirely on the countries of the former Soviet Union to help them transition to market economies. It was a very good mission. A sunset clause was never very clearly identified, and once you create a bank like that, good luck closing it. So now, they would just keep looking for a rationale to stay in business. Over time they were overly exposed to Russia. They had too many loans to Russia, they had too many loans in Ukraine, so they brought Turkey into the fold just to try to balance their portfolio, and then the Arab Spring happened. I forgot what rationale they had, other than the fact that a lot of European companies had legacy relationships in the Middle East and needed more subsidized financing to weather these storms.

So, we got busy trying to promote investment into Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco, and Tunisia, I think it was. Not as much in Tunisia. And then Libya fell apart while we were there, and we got involved in the effort to stabilize the economy. Libya was never an

EBRD country, but we got kind of pulled into doing things because we were in London and there would be international conferences in London. Like every post, there were always trade disputes. In Romania, there was a French construction firm that didn't meet its contractual obligations and the U.S. investor called on its performance bond and the French guys found a friendly judge in France to issue an injunction against that. So, you know, you fight those kinds of battles. There were waterworks in Romania. There were some interesting things going on.

Q: Oh, are you the only representative in your office or do you have a staff? How did that work?

CENTER: When I was at the World Bank, I had a couple people reporting to me, but there would be gaps and sometimes there wouldn't be those people. Then, in EBRD, I never had anyone on staff. It was actually... It was an impossible situation. What I don't think they could understand was the fact that I had been looking to kind of transition for a while. I wasn't one of these guys saying, "Oh, I need a promotion. What am I going to do? I'm losing sleep at night." As far as I was concerned, I was in London, working with EBRD. I was trying my best, and always trying to learn something. There was plenty of material to study there. When you sit in those bank jobs, you're part of the board of directors' structure. You're an advisor to the U.S. executive director who sits on the board.

As a result, every operation that's approved by the banks goes through your hands. You'll see the papers. It's fascinating stuff. We had pots of money that they were trying to use to help Chernobyl get cleaned up, because it was in Ukraine. There were contracts there to be won. So, we were... There were just all sorts of really interesting things going on at both bank positions. But I wasn't really interested. I tried to curtail, and no one understood. They said, "What do you mean? You're in London!" I said, "Yeah, I've been here before," you know? So what. I'd rather be in Chevy Chase.

Q: So, you tried to curtail, and they would not let you?

CENTER: They would not let me. I don't exactly know why. I think they didn't have the resources. Either they need the normal rotation to put someone they wanted in the position or, more likely, Commerce was so broke that anything that was off-cycle that would require 30,000 dollars for moving expenses, they just had a hard time finding that money.

Q: Remarkable. How long was the assignment expected to be?

CENTER: I think it was a four-year assignment.

Q: Oh, wow. Okay.

CENTER: And I stayed there for four years. Met my wife there and fell in love. I'll always have that. Originally I went over there with my 16-year-old daughter, and she finished her last two years of high school in London. It was just my daughter and me

then, and that was great. We grew very close, and it was really a magical time for both of us. But I was like... She was my entire social life. I was cooking her meals every night, and I was her personal banker, taking her shopping and to West End shows. We were just having a great time. And then when she left after two years, I think that's when I started agitating, saying, "Guys, I want to be gone." They said no, so I said, "Okay," and I started dating and that's when I met my lovely wife.

Q: You know, not the worst outcome.

CENTER: Of course not. She's with me here. She still kind of misses London, but you know...

Q: It's not quite as far away as Australia.

CENTER: True.

Q: Okay. Now you're approaching the end of this EBRD assignment.

CENTER: Right. In fact, I ended up curtailing by just a few months because I got recruited by Philips. Someone who knew me contacted me and said, "Hey, I know someone who's looking to hire somebody, and I thought of you. Would you mind if I send them your name?" And I said, "No, of course not."

Q: And that is actually, insofar as I know, not atypical. In other words, Foreign Commercial Service is relatively small, and you begin to become known to many corporations. If you make it known that you're kind of interested, getting to the point where you'd kind of like to leave, eventually somebody remembers you and you at least get the interview.

CENTER: Yeah. You certainly get the interview, that's for sure. If you're in the Foreign Commercial Service, it'll give you plenty of contacts in the private sector. What they want to use you for is typically your networks in the place that they found you. Once they've tapped into those networks, you have to be careful about whether they want you... If they really still want you. And there are a few examples of a few of my colleagues who have displayed superior executive abilities and have made the transition smoothly and have had very successful private sector careers. A lot of them... It would have been a lot easier before Google, because before Google, our networks had a lot more value. Now you just Google who's this, who's that, and bam. The names pop up. Everybody's on LinkedIn.

Q: That's a question I had forgotten to ask you, about how the information revolution changed the way you did business.

CENTER: It's immensely different. Yeah. It used to be that your knowledge was what people wanted, and you would brief people. There would always be these groups coming in and you'd sit there and you'd brief them and everyone would say, "Oh, that was

great.” But now, it’s more practical. It’s like, “I have all the information. I don’t really need you for an introduction. I need you to keep these people honest, or I need you advocate because I’m in a competitive environment.”

Q: Alright, let’s get you to that, but before that let’s get you through the end of the EBRD. So, you’re three and a half years or so in London with the EBRD. Were there any particular projects that really stand out before we close the door on EBRD?

CENTER: No. I would say, from the perspective of success stories, it was a real ho-hum job. There was no getting around it. I was by myself; I didn’t have a staff. When I had to do administrative tasks, I couldn’t do anything else.

Q: Do you think, at this point, looking back and still having some knowledge about what the EBRD does, is it an organization that will still have a mission over the coming years?

CENTER: That’s a good question. To answer that, you have to ask yourself what the financial services industry is going to look like in 10 years, because there’s a lot of innovation going on with mobile banking and online banking. The question is, what’s the threshold before you actually have to come in and see a banker? But those thresholds seem to be going higher and higher. So, I think that the EBRD is a bank that’s looking for a mission right now.

Q: That’s what I had the impression of.

CENTER: Yeah. But I think they do some good work; for instance, they’re working in conjunction with other donors, and they’ve been able to significantly reduce the cost to build infrastructure by innovative ways of subsidizing interest rates and structuring contracts to be more service contracts than capital equipment financed contracts. There’s a lot of innovation in the space. Some of the things they do with bonds to lower the borrowing cost is to inject capital into, let’s say, a corporate bond so that the ratings agency will give it a higher rating and make it cheaper to underwrite. There are some very interesting things going on. So, all of that experience, I’m trying to apply now in my current job with how to finance healthcare for people who exist on two dollars a day. That’s a tough puzzle.

Q: Well, I do want to get to that, but let’s... So, EBRD may reinvent itself or find itself more of a mission as time goes by. Okay. Where are you going from the EBRD?

CENTER: Well, I was recruited to join Philips. That was a pretty easy offer to accept, because they wanted someone in Washington D.C., and I’m from this area. They wanted someone who had experience with multilateral development banks, and I have experience with multilateral development banks. And they wanted someone who has a commercial background and has some experience in international affairs... Tick, tick, tick. I said, yeah, I’d be happy to do this. And on a very selfish level, it was a bridge to get back home. You hit the jackpot, because then you can cash in your annuity and get paid more than you were before you quit.

Q: Now, Philips is obviously a huge multinational. Where is their headquarters?

CENTER: Amsterdam.

Q: Okay. So, it still is...

CENTER: It's a Dutch-owned company that has been doing business in the States since the 1930s. The U.S. is its largest market. It has 19 manufacturing facilities in the U.S. It is a net exporter in the U.S. Its growth here has been largely through acquisitions, so it has been a big investor in the United States. In the time that I've been with them, they've invested at least two or three billion dollars into two or three companies here in the U.S. So, they are serious investors. We have over 20,000 U.S. employees, so, are we American? Yeah, we pay taxes in all 50 states. So, we are American if we need to be, but our heritage and culture is Dutch.

Q: Okay. And it's also a maker of things, and not... It has not sort of left the manufacturing zone and gone into anything else.

CENTER: Well, actually, the business over the past five or six years has changed considerably. We're trying to move away from being a manufacturer of products and to become a provider of solutions, which means we can work with other companies collaboratively and try to provide solutions. The reason is, we've developed a reputation for building innovative, high-tech products, but we've watched a succession of these products just get taken over by lower cost manufacturers in the Far East. So, if we stayed in that business, our margins would be whittled away, and we'd be out of business. We need to move into more sophisticated areas. So, they did something really significant two years ago: They sold the lighting business, which is how it began in 1890-something. They've doubled down on healthcare and wellbeing, so it's a healthcare company, at least for the time being.

Q: Interesting. So, now describe where they are in the healthcare market.

CENTER: Well, they're in the entire continuum. They're in prevention, trying to make healthy products, detection, treatment or diagnosis, homecare. We make most of our revenue selling sophisticated technology to large hospital networks. We're number one in the world in cardiology. We have a lot of radiology, MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) our MRI businesses headquartered here in the U.S. We have CAT (computed tomography) scan businesses here in the United States, but not headquartered here. We also have patient monitoring, and things you see in hospitals, basically. That's what we're best known for. But we're also moving much more into personal health. Increasingly the business is moving away from the providers and more to the consumers. For instance, there was an announcement today that the Justice Department approved the merger of CVS with Aetna.

That's the direction healthcare is going in. People are going to take better care of themselves, and there are going to be more ways for you and me to monitor our health in our homes and connect to doctors only when we really need to. That's all driving at trying to keep the costs down and so on and so forth. So, it's a very technical industry. I find it very complicated. You've got regulatory issues; you've got technology you have to understand. You need to understand the clinical dimensions of it. It's just very, very complex. And the beauty of the Commercial Service is that you spend a career learning about different industries. I knew nothing about healthcare before I joined Philips. The industries I specialized in during my career were oil and gas extraction in my early years, and then later on aerospace and defense. I mean, I can't even say this anymore, but up until six years ago I felt that I knew a lot about both of those industries, and a little bit about all of these others. But you're really ready to go when someone calls you and says, "Would you consider taking this job?" You say, "Sure, why not?"

Q: Now, where do you fit in the big Philips picture? What are you doing?

CENTER: I'm the director of International Funding Organizations for North America. That means I have three primary accounts: the World Bank, USAID, and the United Nations. Those agencies that are headquartered in New York, at least. In between... I keep tabs on all of the other relevant bilateral institutions, like the State Department, HHS (Health and Human Services), NIH (National Institutes for Health), and, to some extent. I haven't waded into DOD (Department of Defense), but they do a lot of healthcare. Some of the stuff that... Philips is developing some battlefield trauma solutions that would deal directly with DOD. The Veterans Administration is our biggest client. We're already doing a lot of stuff with the DOD.

But I don't worry about that. I just try to keep on top of the development communities, and I try to find funding opportunities for things we're pursuing like primary healthcare in Africa. Right now, I'm sort of getting organized to do a road show with one of our partners to try to raise funds for reproductive health and maternal and child health in Kenya and the Republic of Congo. Some pretty tough places. So, there, it's like... It's a process. You need to show your experience, your expertise. You need proof points. You need pipelines of opportunities, and you need a strategy about what kind of funding you need. Do you need early stage financing? Do you need later stage financing? What kind of profile are you looking for? You've got to adjust your pitch for each of these people. It's work. People aren't just handing out money because they feel like it. You've got to convince them that, by investing in these vehicles, they'll be making an impact.

Q: So, Philips is actually looking for financing, or is it looking more for finance guarantees?

CENTER: We're looking for more collaborative business models and financing models to support the business models to allow us to deliver healthcare in places where it doesn't currently exist. So, we're using our technology to start to close the gaps on service delivery, and typically, we have a great deal of resources. But those resources can only be tapped if we find a customer for some of our things or services. Sometimes we get ahead

of ourselves and we start promising things, and the business unit says, “I’m not going to do that unless they buy some stuff, or it shows up on my quarterly earnings.”

Q: What about sustainability?

CENTER: That’s the whole point. The point is that, right now, the space has been dominated by NGOs (non-governmental organizations) who have very high overhead, and they’re incentivized to administer a project well, and to get a good evaluation of that project. So, they’re incentivized to win funding for three to five-year projects, and the aim’s a good report. We’re incentivized to have a continuous revenue stream that will allow us to expand, if possible. But that, in and of itself, is the definition of sustainability, just the continuous revenue stream. People will pay for quality, even if they’re poor. The government may have to subsidize it somehow, through insurance or whatever...

Q: Okay. That’s what I was trying to get at, because you get into African countries, and as much as they might like to have the product, and as much as they might tell you, “Oh, yes, we have the money and certainly will be able to keep doing it,” that gets into your description of democracy being a mile wide and an inch thick, and the uncertainties of trusting governments that are heavily corrupt with money that you thought was there for your project or there for your contract... It doesn’t get respected and instead goes somewhere else.

CENTER: Yeah, it’s not easy. I’ve seen this with my own eyes, so I know what you’re saying. You basically end up placing your bets on enlightened political leadership that chooses to invest in healthcare. So, in a given country, it might be the president, it might be a governor, it might be someone else. You don’t know. But it doesn’t have to... You’ve got to know your partner. Then, the other revenue streams are... Basically, what you’re saying to other donors is that we can achieve greater impact with less of your money. That’s how we’re trying to appeal to them.

Q: Okay. Well, I mean, it’s certainly a good pitch. Are you having success?

CENTER: Some. Things are trending in the right way. As I said earlier, our main revenues come from large hospitals, so this is a new space. We have a social goal to touch the lives of three billion people by 2025, and that’s a... There’s a methodology behind that, and it’s audited every year by our international auditors. We’re at 2.2 billion, I think, and we feel that the missing gaps are largely in places like Africa, so this is kind of propelling to find solutions and to find meaningful innovations. We’ve designed things that operate off of the electric grid. That’s all part of our approach. Yeah, it’s fun.

Q: Where are you seeing the innovations? And here I mean not just necessarily particular companies, but do some of these huge non-profits like the billionaire investors and so on...

CENTER: Yeah, Gates and those guys. Well, what’s actually more interesting is to work via a couple of banks – UBS and Deutsche Bank and Bank of America. They have high

net worth individuals who are their clients, and they are finding out that if they can bring something like this, an impact investment vehicle, to their clients, the clients will be willing to invest in this stuff, especially if it's structured in a way that they can get a tax break. So, that's a very important part of our approach right now, to identify high net worth individuals.

The Gates Foundation is an institution, and it's really been very successful at basically taking over the leadership of some of these public institutions merely by having a shorter decision-making process. They can commit sizeable amounts of money to things, while public institutions are just so slow and inefficient by comparison. But foundations don't have quite the same risk appetite as high net worth individuals. There are a few values-based foundations you can find, Christians or faith-based groups you can appeal to. It's a question of... It's an entire industry. When you talk to some of these NGOs, they very blithely describe some of their operating costs, and fundraising is just a cost. It's like 12 percent of what they spend. There's a percentage, and they spend it. It's an industry. Raising funds is a business.

Q: Sure. Absolutely. And, you know, you get hired as a development individual, and you're hired for your knowledge of how to do it.

CENTER: And actually, if you have a track record and you've been around for a while, it's your relationships. I don't have those relationships, really – hardly any – but I would have to take a slower process and go through someone else to get our proposals vetted. Some people would just pick up the phone and say, “Can I come by next week and show you something?” They're already talking at the senior levels. That's a relationship. It's a relationship business, and that's true for most finance. Yes, you need technical knowledge and you need to know how to put together a financial model and how to read a balance sheet. All that is true. But ultimately, it's trust: If people trust you, they'll listen to you and they'll take you seriously.

Q: Today is December 4th, and we are concluding, today, our interview with Will Center as he transitions from the FCS (Foreign Commercial Service) to private industry.

CENTER: Okay, I hope that not a lot of this is going to be redundant, because we're picking up from a conversation I had before. I was recruited for this job. I was a, you could say, to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in London. That is an actual formal Commerce Department position. I guess I was accredited through the embassy and then sent over there. But never mind the technicalities; it was my second tour in a multi-lateral development bank, having served in the World Bank earlier. That was... Well, it was an interesting tour, but not a career tour, by any means. I had already made up my mind that I wanted to join the private sector at some point. I wasn't exactly sure how I would go about doing it. I had one plan sort of cooked up when I was leaving Pakistan, and that fell through at the last minute, and that's how I found myself in London at the EBRD.

But what was different about the EBRD was that it's a specialized institution that only provides private sector financing for projects in developing countries. They got their start to try to transform the countries of the former Soviet Union into market-based economies or companies or whatever. But since then, their mission has grown a little bit. At the time I was at the EBRD, the Arab Spring occurred, and they were looking for any help possible. So, the bank absorbed Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan into their orbit, which is a far cry from the former Soviet Union. But anyways, after a couple years of that...

I've always been fascinated by the intersection between finance and diplomacy, and Philips came looking for me. So, they were obviously interested in that. So, to describe what I'm doing right now: I'm the director of international funding organizations based in Washington, D.C. It's a very good fit, because I'm from this area originally, and they asked me if I would be interested in taking on a job that would be essentially liaising with Ex-Im Bank and USAID and the World Bank. It was very easy to say yes, because it was a way to come back home.

Q: And you had been at World Bank?

CENTER: I had been, from 2004 to 2008. The World Bank is sort of like the mothership. It was there before the other MDBs (multi-lateral development banks) were created, and it's much larger. They have a concessional financing arm in the regular sovereign lending space, and then they have a private sector branch called the International Finance Corporation, which is part of the World Bank Group. The EBRD was essentially a duplication of the IFC (International Finance Corporation), based out of London. The Europeans wanted the EBRD, I think, more than the Americans did. That made sense, because I remember that in all of the years I was contesting European competition for contracts overseas, we were always up against the fact that we usually had better products, but they had better financing.

For those of us who remember the Japanese in the '80s, the Japanese were going all over the world, buying their way into markets with finance. I think it took some time for the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) to tighten its rules on what could be offered in concessional financing, and they increased the amounts of grant money that was required in any of these concessional financing loans. So, I was always interested in how that was used.

So, today I'm now enjoying myself immensely. I have a very fascinating job, and it's a global position, so I'm able to fall back on all of the regions where I served and understand how the different institutions intersect. And again, the technology, although Philips is a world leader in a number of healthcare technologies, is not what gets us in the door, or which concludes the deal. What concludes the deal is how you make it affordable to the customer or the government, depending on whether it's public or private sector, and that's a finance question. So, that's, in a nutshell... Someone had put my name forward as a candidate to Philips. They contacted me, and within a few short months I found myself leaving London and coming back to D.C. to start this career.

Q: Now, principally, the projects that you put together have some aspect of medical technology or care involved. Can you talk a little bit about that market now, how it operates, what you need to do to put together a project or a deal?

CENTER: Right. Well, we need partners, so that's another area where diplomatic skills come in handy, because you really... The space we occupy is the technology or solution space, which can really close the gap in countries or markets that don't have enough clinical staff of doctors and nurses and so forth, and where you need to get creative on how you leverage technology to deliver healthcare to people who don't have it, for example. But we are only one component of a multi-stakeholder engagement.

The fun and games that I'm having now, of course, is with my former esteemed colleagues in the development community. There's a little bit of unintended competition for development money, and we would look at the fine work that the development agencies do but still take a step back and say, "But you could be much more efficient, and you could leverage the money differently if you used different business and financial models. You could scale up." That's a very commercial way of looking at it, and it sparks antibodies in the development community, who are really uncomfortable with that. But frankly, development doesn't have a great track record. Everyone likes to trot out South Korea, but there are not a lot of South Korea's out there. There are a lot of countries that have been on the development dole for a long time. We're trying to coexist in that environment, where we're not asking the development agencies to give us money directly. We just want them to fund the ecosystem.

So, for instance, we could be reasonably required to bring investments into this space. Then, we would require the government to put some of its own money into the project, and then we would go to the development finance institutions for guarantees. But then, at the end, you still need to have revenue into the model. There could be some out of pocket expenses, but you really count on the DFIDs (U.K. Department for International Development) and the USAIDs and the Global Funds and the PEPFARs (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) and the GAVIs (Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations) and all these people to go into this model. The problem is, they're not used to talking to the private sector. The private sector unashamedly has a self-interest. We put it out there and we make sure everyone understands what it is, but the difference is that we can bring a lot of resources into an equation that could shift a lot of operational and financial risk onto ourselves. So, the model requires less subsidy and can actually scale further than something that is being done traditionally.

Q: Is there an example you can use?

CENTER: Sure, there are examples right now that we're using in Kenya. Along the border of Somalia, we're operating a clinic. We're operating a clinic in the DR Congo (Democratic Republic of Congo). We've got a couple in some townships in South Africa, and one in the outskirts of Nairobi. We've got another six in the pipeline that will come on stream in about three to six months. Then, probably by this time next year, I think our

pipeline will be in the 20s or 30s of clinics that we're rolling out. But to be honest, each of those examples has been the product of a lot of hard work on our part. We need more understanding from the financing community. So, we need to find seed capital and we need to find impact investors who will not only work with us on a project right now, but would look at our full portfolio, which represents probably two or three hundred clinics that we can potentially roll out in the next two to three years, and work with us so that we can actually create a system that is less burdensome on government finances and delivers greater impact.

Q: Typically, what does a clinic offer?

CENTER: Well, now we're talking about development opportunities, which is not the only thing we do here at Philips. But in this conversation, we're talking about providing healthcare to people who don't have it, who are only getting by through traditional medicines and who come in contact with the health system when there's a catastrophic event. At that point, they travel great distances to go to the hospital when it's far more efficient to work on prevention and diagnosis at the primary care level, which doesn't really exist. So, some of the things we run across are... There are a few countries in Africa where the constitution stipulates that it's a basic right of the citizens to have access to free primary healthcare. That's a great thing, but what it means in reality is that they can go to a clinic that doesn't have any medicine or any staff and it's free. So, that's what we're working on.

Q: And when you put together your clinic, how do you determine what – I imagine you talk to the government and so on – sort of services or medical equipment you need to provide for whatever the population is?

CENTER: Exactly. Nothing works unless you start with the community and see what it is prioritizing. Then we go through a process of co-creating solutions with the local community. What's important about that is not the output of the solution, per se, but what's important is that when you go through that process, the community also owns that idea. You can't go anywhere unless the local government, local communities share the same vision. In that, we're sort of helped by the fact that we have a big consumer goods business, and we're very much focused on the patient.

I think when you look at the U.S. health system, by contrast, you'll find that it's very much focused on what the doctors and the providers want. We're beginning to shift and see more attention and more resources directed to staying healthy, preventing illnesses, and so forth. But still, it's not... There could be more focus on patients here in the U.S. than there currently is, and that's the interesting thing about working in Africa and Southeast Asia. I haven't heard anyone say that they want to replicate the U.S. system in Africa, but we have the opportunity to leap frog and use a lot of innovative approaches in an environment where the regulatory regimes are still immature. You have to work with the government, of course, but they're willing to experiment with you.

Q: Okay. Since you've joined Philips, is there a noteworthy success, something where everything came together and you can say, "Here's a model?"

CENTER: I mean, staying on the primary healthcare topic, I would say that we've been fortunate working with the Kenyans and our UN (United Nations) partners to establish something that's called the Sustainable Development Goals Platform in Kenya. This is a multi-stakeholder platform, including the private sector, that is jointly run by the Government and the UN. This platform has helped Philips to come up with a business model in one county in Kenya called Makueni, where our business model is partly dependent upon getting paid for signing up people to the National Health Insurance Fund. You're beginning to see things like that.

Part of the debate in this ecosystem is whether to implement insurance programs or raise taxes or put up excise taxes or whatever to fund healthcare. But it all starts with a political leader who wants to increase their investments in human capital. In Makueni, we don't think we need any subsidies. We think we can sustain the operation by tweaking the number and kinds of services that can be allowed at the primary level. It's a combination of getting permission to move some tasks that used to be the sole province of district hospitals down to the primary level. Let's say a mobile ultrasound, for example, and being allowed to charge a certain amount for that. That brings in a certain amount of revenue. Then we have this capitation model on insurance that brings us money. Then there are certain registration fees and so forth. This is all governed by national and local statutes and regulations.

Q: Are you able to staff adequately? How do you ensure you've got adequate staffing?

CENTER: Yeah, so, the contribution of an external player like Philips is principally on the areas where they need a lot of help, and that, for us, is in clinical management services. So, we can design pathways, we can design workflows. We're very good at that. We also will integrate a lot of the technology. I think one of the common misperceptions we're always up against is that this is a vehicle for moving all of Philips' goods. We have about 20% of our products in this thing. Where we make our profits is on the service contract. We don't make a lot of laboratory equipment, so we work with our partners there and so forth and we find a way to make it a profitable venture for us. So, we do the technology piece, we do the operational management piece, we take the burden on the finances because we're getting paid on the outputs and not on the up-front costs. So, that works well.

But I think I mentioned earlier that an important component is working with partners. So, one of our key stakeholders is the Flying Doctors of East Africa, who are now known as Amref. They're one of the largest NGOs in the world. They do the training of the nurses and the community health workers, and they work with the staff. We also partner with the county government. They are responsible for providing the staff. From a finance perspective, the biggest headache is that whatever budgets the government has, about 99% of it goes to paying salaries. They have no capital budgets. Then you have to work

around things like nurses' strikes, which we had in 2017, and industrial actions that are all just part of the stew.

Q: As you were talking about this, the training of the staff and all of that... Oh, how long is a typical project? When you design something and work with the government, etcetera, how long is Phillips' exposure? How long do you expect to be there?

CENTER: I think the ideal would be as long as the venture is growing. It's not a venture capital play where we exit. We would rather, in exchange for our taking some financial risk, have a longer contract. But then that kind of depends on where we are and what the risks are, etcetera. I would say that we typically look at a five-year contract and go for more if we can.

Q: This is just sort of an aside, but have you or Phillips learned things from working at that level of development that are applicable in the U.S.?

CENTER: Absolutely. So, to give you an example, I was just on a panel last week for the Federal Health Professional Society, which is mostly a DoD and Veterans Administration thing. The topic was telehealth, and how telehealth can be used both in the United States and internationally. So, there were three panelists, and one two of them talked about the U.S. and I was the one talking about international. But many of our veterans live in rural and remote places where it's not practical for them to get to the hospitals. So, in that instance, it's the same thing: it's leveraging technology. The thing that is the handicap in the U.S. is licensing. Doctors are typically licensed in one state, so they can't prescribe... If you're in Alaska and the best doctors are in Texas, they can't prescribe things in Alaska. The exception, I heard, and I'm not an expert on this, but I understand that in the Veterans Administration, you can. There is some kind of legal loophole that allows the doctors to do everything, which is great.

Q: Right. Incredible. So, as an employee at Phillips now, how do you see your future? Are you remaining in this field, or is Phillips beginning also to transition to other things and so on?

CENTER: Well, Philips, as a company, is not afraid of transforming itself. It's done so several times in its history. In fact, two years ago, they sold their lighting business, which is how we got started and was a huge decision. I don't know. Will it transform again? Probably. It has a very pragmatic culture. In terms of my own personal interest, I thoroughly enjoyed my foreign service career. I had a complete career. I went 25 plus years in it. This is a second career that's allowing me to use my knowledge of institutions to try to identify funding and partnerships that will help us succeed overseas, which is great. But we're a private company.

At the end of the day, we have a good mission, but I'm not a doctor. I don't know if... There are days when I sort of rub my chin and say, "Maybe I want to end my career working in the national interest with our U.S.-China bilateral issues." Because that's how I started my career. If I do that in the commercial context, fine, or maybe I'll go back to

government. You never know. But this has been a nice... On a very basic, practical basis, and retirees will appreciate this, the Foreign Service is generous in the sense that you can get an annuity, and not many organizations offer an annuity anymore. So, everything I'm earning from Philips is gravy on top of that. I've never had more money in my life, and that's been great. But it's the love of international affairs that has me working here, and we'll see what happens in the future.

Q: Perfect segue to the last question, which is, let's say you were to go back to the U.S. government and something related to the Foreign Commercial Service, maybe not exactly FCS. How would you organize the U.S. government's approach to advancing commerce now?

CENTER: Right. Well, that's a softball, Mark. I appreciate it. As you can imagine, we all carry opinions on how we would do things if they only gave us the chance. But this is a hobby horse of mine. I think Commerce and ITA (International Trade Administration) has missed the boat for a very long time in two principle areas. First, very weak congressional relations. They have been unsuccessful at explaining that our economic security is our national security. But I don't worry about that so much. The other area, though, which I find inexplicable, is why we don't take the existing network, no need to add a single body or a single dollar to the budget, and just train the existing workforce on the importance of finance as a way to leverage deals.

So, the way I would do that is, I would form an elite unit in ITA where there would be an understanding from the director general of the Commercial Service that people in this unit are going to stand a better chance of getting promoted or recognized than others. That's important, because the ITA or the Commercial Service since 1988 has had responsibility for running these offices in the multilateral development banks, but these positions have become backwaters. Anyone who goes in there is just not going to get promoted. I knew that when I took the jobs. I was interested in the substance, and it worked out for me. But anyone else who wanted to have another tour or posting was really taking a chance. So, that has to be sorted out, that you'd bring good people into that office, and that office, domestically, would be the natural liaison point for the U.S. Trade Development Agency, the U.S. Export-Import Bank, the new Development Finance Corporation, which has taken over from OPIC, and maybe some office in Treasury, too.

It is, to me, an astounding lapse on Commerce's part to not take credit for some of the successes that those agencies have achieved, many times with the help of Commercial service officers on the ground. So, I just think that it's there. You don't have to raise a lot of money and create a new agency or anything. Just teach the staff that they can get professional recognition if they start the conversation with, "Do you need some financing with that?" Because that's often what the customer is stuck with.

Q: Would you add or subtract anything with the State Department, given the old connections with State and the fact that State has economic officers? Is there any greater value to be had with more connection to State, less, or doing the same kind of training with State officers?

CENTER: That's a bigger question, I think, because I think the Commerce-State relationship ebbs and flows over the years. I worked under many ambassadors – in fact, I would say that today, in 2018, most, if not all, ambassadors are very sensitive to doing more work in the commercial space. That wasn't true when I started, but it certainly is now. So, what would I change or recommend? I'm not so sure. You're asking a pretty big question, because there are different views on that. For instance, could the Commercial Service operate outside of the country team? Not without diplomatic cover, but some other kind of cover. It's possible. You would then recruit a different type of person. You would take away the possibility, which I personally always thought was crazy...

Why would you want to join the Commercial Service and hope to be an ambassador? But I'm telling you, Mark, some of my dear friends have been ambassadors from the Commercial Service and they cared a lot about it and I'm glad they were fulfilled. But that was a long shot for most of us. So, I don't know. State-Commerce relations ebbs and flows. I am personally in favor of, if possible, reducing the chancellery to the core functions and spinning out the other, more public-facing ones. I think we've become too much of a target. I think we do a lot of good work. Unfortunately, the world is so dangerous these days that if you have any sort of official designation you could be in trouble. Maybe you have to be in the compound or behind the RSO (Regional Security Officer) and the Marine Guards because it's gotten to be too dangerous, but I think that overall, the diplomatic functions are critical, and I'm not sure how crucial the commercial function is to the core diplomatic functions.

Q: Okay. So, then, in conclusion, if you were to go back into government, where would you see yourself with the skills and talents you have now?

CENTER: Okay. I had nine tours in the Foreign Service. I had my 60th birthday in October. I'm at a point in my life where, if I went back to government, it wouldn't be for money and it wouldn't be for the career. It would be to have achieved something that I felt strongly about. Right now, I'm having too much fun with Philips to take that seriously, but it would be a totally different equation.

Q: Okay, to sum up, is there any other advice you would give someone who is now considering work in the U.S. government in the broad category of Commerce?

CENTER: Well, we've had a couple of conversations and I think I'm beginning to repeat myself, but I think the wonderful thing about the commercial work is that it's fun. If you start off with a fascination for international affairs and international cultures, if you want to travel and see the world, and if you want to make somebody very happy, I think you can achieve that in the Commercial Service. Under the right guidance and the right structure... The Commercial Service hasn't been properly funded for 20 years, at least. There were maybe a couple of good years, but it's been very hard to develop the younger officers properly, in my opinion.

But with the right mentorship, there could be a pathway where you start to take on more and increasingly significant transactions. Let's say, defense trade. It's a very sophisticated transaction. You could get a grounding in international business that you could then take somewhere else. That's kind of what happened to me. If the Foreign Service Act stays the same, you only have to give 20 years and turn 50 to get a pension, and then you've got something that a lot of people would give their eye teeth for. So, it's fun, and if you want to stay in... A State Department friend of mine who was a DCM, and we're still buddies here in town... I remember my first meeting with him. He looked at me – he was in the political cone – and he said, "Remember, Will. Political issues are commercial issues that become *interesting*."

Q: That is a very nice way to conclude. Thanks so much.

CENTER: Thanks.

End of Interview