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

AMBASSADOR HERMAN 'HANK' COHEN

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Initial interview date: March 13, 2022

INTERVIEW

Q: To begin our interview, let's take a moment for a brief description of your background.

COHEN: I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. I went to school there from elementary school, through Thomas Jefferson High School, and then City College of New York. I left New York in 1953 to begin service in the U.S. Army. At the time, there was still compulsory military service. I had done Reserve Officer Training at the school, so I entered as a second lieutenant. I was sent to West Germany, for my military service. I completed my service in 1955.

Q: Did you consider continuing in a military career?

COHEN: Well, they really tried to persuade the senior officers. They really liked the way I was as a junior officer. I said "no," I didn't like that type of life, so I declined. While I was in the Army, I took the Foreign Service written examination, which I passed. But I couldn't take the oral exam till I left the Army. I got out of the service in June of 1955 and went to Washington to take the oral exam in August of 1955. I passed and was accepted into the Foreign Service. At the same time, I had been accepted to Harvard Business School for the fall semester. The Foreign Service Personnel Office said, "Please take the master's degree, and your appointment will be waiting for you." I said, "Well, I think I'd rather not. I'd rather enter now." I entered the service in September or October of '55.

Q: How did the assignment process work back then? Were you consulted at all? Or were you simply sent to your posts?

COHEN: You were asked to provide a list of places where you would like to go. And they either sent you to one of them or really disregarded it — they couldn't do it.

Q: What was your first post?

COHEN: I went to Paris, France. I was assigned as Consular Officer, principally visa work.

Q: Did they train you in French? Or were you just expected to kind of get along and make it work for yourself?

COHEN: No. During the training prior to going overseas, we had morning language training, and afternoon academic training.

Q: Did you feel that the training prepared you adequately for France and your professional responsibilities?

COHEN: I thought it did. Although I couldn't get a passing grade on the French exam when I left for France, they said they would give me one year's probation to pass the exam. They figured since I'd be based in Paris, I should be able to pick it up. One year after I arrived in Paris, I took the exam again and I passed it. That gave me tenure.

Q: At that time, were you and colleagues aware that there was an organization –AFSA -- that represented Foreign Service Officers.

COHEN: Not representation in the sense of a union. It was generally considered to be strictly a professional organization that advocated for enhancing professional competence and not dealing with bread-and-butter issues.

Q: Did you have any interactions with AFSA representatives in these early years? Were their representatives at post?

COHEN: I don't remember anyone in Paris. But in issuing visas, because I saw a whole different variety of people going to the states, there were labor union leaders who were being invited by the American labor movement. The embassy had a labor attaché, sitting in the political section, his name was Murray Weiss. So shepherding these labor leaders through the visa process put me in touch with Murray and I learned what a labor attaché does through him. He encouraged me to go into that field. Anyway, at the same time, I was a bachelor when I went over there. In Paris, I met my future wife, Suzanne, and we decided to get married. But in those days, if you married a non-American citizen, you had to go through a very strict security check of the potential spouse. The requirement was that your next assignment would be in Washington because they wanted the foreign spouse to become Americanized – naturalized. So, I was assigned back to Washington in the cultural affairs division.

Q: At that time did they have an expedited process for acquiring citizenship for spouses of Foreign Service Officers?

COHEN: Yes, they did. A spouse of a regular American could be naturalized in three years. But this was expedited for my wife. During my three years in cultural affairs, she became a naturalized American citizen.

Q: On your return to Washington did you have an opportunity to meet with anyone from the Foreign Service Association?

COHEN: Not during that period. At the end of my three-year tour in cultural affairs, the assignments people said, “Well okay, what would you like next?" And I said that I can be assigned to Africa.

Q: Specifically French speaking Africa or anywhere?

COHEN: Anyplace. During my high school years, I did a special honors program and I studied economic development of underdeveloped countries. I thought going to Africa would be appropriate, so they assigned me to Uganda in 1962. But before I went, I applied for and was accepted in the Foreign Service Institute course on labor attaché work.

Q: The labor attaché specialty has now been eliminated. For those who don’t know about it, could you take a moment to explain the training and responsibilities of this position.

COHEN: It was quite varied. The training lasted for an academic year. It consisted of two parts. First, they assigned you to be on the staff of a labor union. In that time, I worked with the Meat Cutters in Chicago, and the state government workers in Boston. It is called the State, County and Municipal Workers Union. I spent three months with them. And the rest of the labor attaché training was academic classes at American University. There were three of us in the course. They gave a course just for the three of us [laughs]. The professor was an expert in labor, so it was a combination of academic and on-the-job training.

Q: That is really a wonderful opportunity not many foreign service officers get. At that time in the early 60s, what were your takeaways from that study and that exposure to what labor unions do?

COHEN: When you're overseas, and you want to know what's going on in that country, you want to get an in-depth analysis of the whole society. I saw the labor unions as a good window to what was going on in those societies. Especially if you're interested in political work. In virtually every country, the labor unions are heavily politicized. I figured that by establishing good contacts in the labor union movements I’d be able to tell my Ambassador and Political Counselor, "Hey, this is what's really going on."

Q: You mentioned that you had been in the honors program in high school regarding economic development. Did your studies in labor also address how labor unions affect development?

COHEN: Yes. And for that area, we had consultations in the Commerce Department and the Labor Department. At that time, the Labor Department had a Bureau of International Labor Affairs, which dealt with the ILO -- International Labor Organization – and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. They had people just full of knowledge about how labor unions interact with the political system.

Q: Before you left for Uganda, did you have preparation about Uganda itself and what the labor situation was?

COHEN: No, there wasn't an Africa training course at that time. After the labor attaché training, I went directly to Uganda. The reason, well, the reason they sent me to Uganda, there was no labor attaché position there. However, they made me, so I guess, they made me administrative Consular Officer, you issue visas. But the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions had set up their Africa office in Uganda.

Q: The OAU [Organization of African Unity] is in Addis Ababa, but I've forgotten where the headquarters of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions is located.

COHEN: In Brussels. On a street with a funny name. Something like the Street of Mountains or Candies or something like that [laughs] in Brussels. When I arrived in Uganda, they still wanted me to do visa work, but in addition, I was in charge of contacts with the local office of the ICFTU [International Confederation of Free Trade Unions]. So, I was able to have extensive contacts there. And that office also hosted visits from African leaders. As a result, I met several African leaders; for example, Tom Mboya, who was a big labor leader in Kenya. Given this opportunity, I was able to send a lot of interesting labor reports to Washington even though I was not a labor officer in a formal sense.

Q: You were in Uganda during the Cold War. At that time, some labor unions were associated with the AFL-CIO and its sister unions throughout the world. But others were affiliated with socialist parties and communist parties. Were you involved in promoting the free trade union movement?

COHEN: Yes, I was involved because we got some grant money to bring African labor union officials to the U.S. for training. In addition, we could bring some American labor leaders over to Uganda for public speaking tours. Uganda the University of Makerere, which was one of the first universities in East Africa. They had courses. I wasn't directly involved in trying to keep African labor leaders within the pro-democracy camp. Let's put it that way.

Q: How would you characterize the office of the International Labor Organization in Uganda. Was it more democratic in character, or more controlled by communists?

COHEN: I thought they were very effective. They had someone from Sweden to head the office. I was a frequent visitor and thought he did a good job. There was also an American there who was just a dynamo. He was with the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations]. His name was Irving Brown. He's an icon in international labor. He was a frequent visitor. He just was in tight with these African leaders, you know, it was great. They loved him.

Q: Now, you're there for two years, until 1964?

COHEN: Yes. Then, I was transferred to a white minority ruled country called Southern Rhodesia. It wasn't as bad as the apartheid regime in South Africa, but minority rule was bad enough. Fifteen percent of the population ruled everything. Unlike in South Africa, though, we were able to check in at the Jamison Hotel, which was multiracial. We stayed there for a couple of months until our permanent quarters were available.

In Southern Rhodesia I finally had a labor attaché position. And this one was responsible for a region. I should note that the three countries in my region were still British colonies. Southern Rhodesia became Zambia, Northern Rhodesia became Zimbabwe, and Nyasaland became Malawi. I would travel among them just to talk to the labor people in all three and of course, the embassies supported me.

Q: It gave you a much broader view of the labor movements there. To what extent were the labor movements involved in the movements for independence and the end of segregation?

COHEN: There were significant groups of workers on the railways, and others working in mines. These had segregated unions – black and white. And, of course, they never talked to each other. However, I achieved a wonderful thing. I gave a reception, and I invited both of them there. And they were thrilled. That started something. But, to answer more directly, yes, in Rhodesia, Zambia, and Malawi, unions were very active in pro-independence. Well, at least as pro-independence as they could be when political parties were still authorized by the British. But in Zimbabwe, the movement for black majority rule included active support from the black unions. They were pushing for that. And there was a turning point in 1965. The white people suddenly said, "Okay, Malawi is independent, Zambia is apparently, how about us in Southern Rhodesia.

The British said that they would not grant independence until you reform and bring about black majority rule. They would not give independence to a white minority regime. But then the whites did not accept that. They declared themselves independent unilaterally. They even had initials -- UDI, Unilateral Declaration of Independence. The British reply was that this is illegal and they placed sanctions on the minority government. So what they did was, they blocked the only independent port available to the whites, which was Mozambique.

They blockaded it with naval ships. The only way the whites could get in and out and get food and everything was through South Africa. The whites there were sympathetic. Okay, and then to punish them, we cut down on our diplomatic presence. And I was, so they left only about two foreign service officers. That's it. The rest of us were sent out. But I was assigned, since I was a regional labor attaché, they sent me to one of my other embassies, which was Zambia. So my family and I got in the car and we drove up to Zambia, where I resumed my labor attaché work in the US Embassy in Zambia. And we had a problem there because all the automobile gasoline came from Rhodesia through that port. We were rationed, I couldn't drive my car to the embassy. I had to take an embassy bus. And there was about a year of that. For a while, even the Americans airlifted gasoline, it was crazy. But anyway, I did continue my labor work. In addition, like in Rhodesia, I was a labor attaché. But in Zambia, I had to be the Commercial Officer as well as labor officer.

Q: Were there any additional insights from the regional nature of this tour?

COHEN: Yes. First, the mine workers in Zambia's extracted copper. It's sort of like oil is to Saudi Arabia; copper was the most important national resource. I think they were the second largest copper producers in the world after Chile. The Chileans had an ambassador there because they wanted to keep an eye on the growth of Zambia's copper exports. I got to know the copper minor labor leaders. The Africans in the copper mines were very militant labor people. I could use my investigation and analysis to explain other social phenomena like the literacy rate in Zambia. My labor training work there helped me very much. On the economic side, I got to know a lot of companies and their management and labor relations policies.

Q: As this tour comes to an end, are you going back to Washington?

COHEN: Before that, the post had a visit from the Office of the Inspector General. Every post gets inspected once every five years. They have inspectors who are senior people that will go and see, you know, how things are working at your embassy, how the relations are among personnel, and so I had an inspection. And what they do is they talk to every foreign service individual and go into depth, you know, what did you learn? How are you feeling? What are your ambitions? What do you want to do now? It was a very deep survey, they interviewed me, of course, and they said, "What do you want to do? Remain as a labor attaché or go into something else." So I

said, I'd like to remain in the labor field. They wanted to send me to another African country as an economic officer or to the Congo as a labor attaché. So I talked to them. They said, well, we think Congo is a big country that has a lot of labor unions that are very active, and we recommend that you go there and that will be career enhancing for you.

I accepted that. We went to Congo. And I became the labor attaché there. Congo had truly very big labor unions. There were three major unions, and they didn't agree with each other all the time. Sometimes they did. So, what happened? We had an important development.

To begin with, Congo was ruled by a guy named Mobutu. He was a dictator. He had a very big ego. And he felt he was very friendly with the U.S. because the U.S. helped bring him to power. He had been a very important contact of the CIA. The CIA had been a strong supporter of Mobutu since he was a colonel in the army. He becomes president. There was a U.S. Ambassador named William Garvelink. He didn't like Mobutu's dictatorial way of governing. He was always criticizing him. He was telling him you know; you're doing this wrong you're doing that wrong. Mobutu couldn't stand it, so he declared him persona non grata; he kicked him out.

Next in line is the DCM, who then became Chargé d'affaires. His name was Robert Blake. He served there for a while. But the embassy did not have a Political Counselor. While waiting for a political counselor, Blake calls me and he says, I want you to be political counselor. I want you to leave the attaché job and become Political Counselor now. I accepted it. And then they had to send in another labor attaché. Now I was boss of the new labor attaché. With Ambassador Garvelink gone, a successor Ambassador would be available, under normal circumstances, within six months. Eventually a new Ambassador arrived named Robert McBride. He had been Deputy Chief of Mission in Paris. Very fluent in French, he developed a very good relationship with Mobutu.

But the embassy personnel shake up was not over. Any new ambassador has the right to choose his own DCM, and this ambassador chose Robert Blake. But, after a short stay, Robert Blake goes off and, temporarily, there's no Deputy Chief of Mission. Then Ambassador McBride goes off to Washington for consultations, and he comes back and says to me, I'm not going to choose a Deputy Chief of Mission, because I'm being transferred to Mexico. This was a curtailment because he didn't want to be in Africa. He told me that since he wasn't going to stay very long there was no sense in choosing a new DCM. Instead, he made me DCM.

This is 1969 in Congo. I started as Labor Attaché, then moved up to be Political Counselor, and now I'm Deputy Chief of Mission. Then, Ambassador McBride left for Mexico and I became Chargé d'affaires for nine months.

Q. Wow. That's quite a meteoric rise. At this point you're responsible for the whole embassy. How big was it?

COHEN: It was quite big because we had a very big USAID [United States Agency for International Development] program, so I'd say the most was about 300 people. There were about 50 Americans. Finally, a new Ambassador arrives. This was his first chief of mission post. His name was Sheldon Vance. He'd been Deputy Chief of Mission in Belgium. Also, he had long experience in Africa. He was an ideal selection. Just as he arrived, we had a tempest in a teapot. President Mobutu, whose ego stretched across the entire national territory of Zaire, insisted that the U.S. ambassador wear striped pants and a morning coat with tails to present his credentials.

At most times in Africa, given the heat, the custom usually is to wear slacks with a collared shirt. In any case, Ambassador Vance did not have the required uniform. After some investigating, we found that the Danish ambassador was about the height of the U.S. ambassador. So, we pleaded with him to allow Ambassador Vance to borrow the formal wear. The Danish ambassador understood our dilemma, he was very nice, and he loaned it to Ambassador Vance [laughter]. Vance presented his credentials and began work as ambassador.

Where did this leave me? Not infrequently, once a new ambassador arrives, the Chargé d'affaires departs because it was like having an ambassador. And you can't have two ambassadors vying for the attention of top officials. To address this, the State Department Personnel Office decided to send me to Washington, to the Bureau of African Affairs where I would oversee the central part of Africa. It was a good assignment. In those days, the Congo was called Zaire, it changed its name later. So being director of Central Africa, where Zaire was the most important country, was a nice segue.

Q: Aside from your duties in the Central Africa office, how do you become involved with the American Foreign Service Association (AFSA)?

COHEN: When I was in the Congo, there was a colleague who was with me, he wasn't at the embassy, he was in our Consulate General in Lubumbashi which used to be called Elizabeth. His name was Bill Harrop. He would go on to a stellar career, and we got to know each other very well. And in 1969, he was elected President of the Foreign Service Association, completing the term of Phil Habib who had left for greener pastures.

Harrop tells me that I had to get involved with AFSA. The organization was starting to get letters from people asking us to intervene in cases regarding basic benefits. Let me just give you one good example. A guy gets transferred to Paris from Fairfax, Virginia. In his letter, he complains, "In Fairfax, Virginia, my child was going to kindergarten. In Paris, he is going to the American

School and he's in kindergarten. But the education allowance does not cover kindergarten. How come?" Because he knew I was Labor Attaché through our work in Congo, he calls me and says, "Hey, could you do me a favor? Could you take care of these letters? You know, as a sort of extracurricular activity."

That was my first contact with AFSA as a labor representative. I started replying to all these letters, all sorts of things. On the one I just mentioned, about a stipend for kindergarten, I went to see the education allowance people in the State Department. They were very nice. They said: "Our rule is you can't give more than is available in the United States. And our studies show that only a minority of US states have free kindergarten." I replied, "I can't believe this." I'm taking on complaints that are not related to professional development – AFSA's traditional wheelhouse -- but on issues of benefits that management must provide to all Foreign Service Officers. So, I call up HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare] and I said "Look, can you tell me how many states currently have free kindergarten?" And they say, "Didn't you see our study?" Our latest study says that out of the 50 states, 35 states have free kindergarten." It's majority! So, I go back to the education people, and I say there are 35 states. You should be checking every year! So, the education allowance was suddenly authorized.

Q: Wow, that is remarkable. It was so easy.

COHEN: We had a lot of things like that. So, I kept following up and then, President Nixon, during his time, signed the law authorizing labor unions for federal employees. Up to that time, labor unions were not forbidden, but not formally recognized either. So, I called up to talk to Bill Harrop. "Bill, you've got to become a labor union leader now because, as a result of this new law, management will be required to negotiate with you before they do anything regarding benefits. But before we could formally become a union, we had to have an election of AFSA members to get approval for this change in status. The majority chose to become a union.

Q: Just a quick question about the establishment of the AFSA union. Was there something about the establishment of a labor union for the State Department that differentiated it from other Cabinet departments?

COHEN: No, it was more-or-less the same. The leaders of the newly established union came to me and said, you've been dealing with member benefit issues, why don't you become chairman for these bread-and-butter issues that are playing a larger role in our work. I said, okay. That gave my work more formality.

Q: Does this change in your role, and in the union status of AFSA, bring a larger workload of requests?

COHEN: Yes, because it didn't just involve answering complaints. We had the right to make proposals that arose from our own considerations based on common problems that many Foreign Service Officers alerted us to. Management couldn't just say no. They at least had to consider our request and give a reasoned reply. Time went by as we learned of more needs to be addressed. Tom Boyatt, who was now on the board of AFSA (Thomas Boyatt would later become Ambassador to Burkina Faso) said, okay, you can make proposals. And based on all these letters I had received, I made 18 proposals.

Q: What were the major proposals?

COHEN: I can't remember all of them, but a number dealt with stipends for child education and care. Anyway, Thomas Boyatt said that coming out with all these proposals was shock and awe for State Department management. We also began to deal with the question of grievances.

Q: Was there an established grievance mechanism up until that point?

COHEN: No, it had to be established. And it went through the personnel office. But to return to my postings, I completed three years as director for Central Africa. Then I became Deputy Director General of the Foreign Service. This position made me Chief of Personnel.

Q: Do you recall how that came about? That's quite a step up from being a Central Africa office director.

COHEN: I had been promoted to the Senior Foreign Service, and this position required someone who had both the rank and the skills. Since I had been dealing with personnel issues from the employee side, there was a certain logic to moving into the management side. But that also meant that I could no longer hold a position in AFSA. But to get back to your question of grievance, it was then, from the Director General's officer, that I began to deal with the grievance question.

I had on my staff, a grievance officer. Every grievance came to that person, who then decided whether we accepted the grievance and make a settlement, or we reject the grievance. It came to me to see if I wanted to maintain the rejection. I remember one case, a guy had a grievance. They wanted them to send him to an African country. He said, "I can't go there." Why can't you go there? "If I go there my wife will divorce me." So that came to me. I said, look, if this wasn't right, let's try to find someone else for that job. Personnel said that we absolutely cannot find anyone. He's the one who has the qualifications. There's no one else available.

I said to him, "Look, I'm terribly sorry. You have to go." Also, as Director of Personnel, I traveled a lot. I went to embassies and made myself available to people who wanted to speak to

me personally on issues in that embassy. Two years later, I went to an African post. And there was this guy who had told me that his wife would divorce if he went to Africa. So, I asked him. "Did your wife divorce you?" "Yeah, she did" [laughter].

Anyway, That was interesting, too. And I got to see a lot of places in the world, outside of Africa. Once, when I went to Seoul, Korea. I got off the plane. The embassy handlers meet me and say, "What do you want to do now? Go to your hotel? Or get your suit made?" The Koreans are masters at making suits rapidly. Of course, I want to get a suit made. I went to get measured and four days later I left with the new one.

Q: Now, you mentioned that you had experience with the grievance process as it was. How did it change in discussions with AFSA?

COHEN: I can't claim that I was involved with AFSA during that negotiation. That was developed outside of my competence by experts. My role was to get the grievances that were going to be refused. They all came to me. I had to make a judgment on them.

Q: Regarding the example of the officer who did not want to go to Africa for family reasons, did AFSA begin to affect changes in the way the Department addressed the needs of families and spouses in this early period when it took on union responsibilities?

COHEN: Yeah, I think they became more and more reasonable. I'll give you another example. This was a Foreign Service secretary. She had been in the Service for 20 years. Very senior, she worked for ambassadors. And she came and said, "My shipping allowance is lower than the newly entering Foreign Service Officers. So, the Foreign Service Officer, because he entered at a grade higher than the secretary, who had far more years of service, had an advantage that should be available to all. So, I said, this is unacceptable, shipping allowances should have nothing to do with your rank. When you're in the service 20 years, you accumulate stuff, or pounds of furniture, sometimes non-perishable food and hygiene products needed for remote or developing countries where little was available on the local market So, we changed that. By listening to people's grievances and complaints, the personnel system and allowances became more rational, more employee friendly.

Q: You watched AFSA's development during this period from 1969 to 1974?

COHEN: It was '74 when I became Deputy Director of Personnel.

Q: How did AFSA grow and change to the best of your recollection during that time?

COHEN: Well, they had to hire people to do some higher grievance and they had to hire somebody dealing with negotiations on bread-and-butter issues. If you look at the AFSA personnel chart, it becomes a labor management bureaucracy in a sense.

Q: The election of officers, I imagine that was done by balloting?

COHEN: Yes.

Q: And were you able to get ballots out and back in a timely way, particularly from far-flung posts in remote areas?

COHEN: Yes, We had access to the diplomatic pouch which delivered mail and small packages. Although we didn't have email, we did have access to sending telegrams.

Q: At this point, did AFSA have vice presidents for all the constituent agencies – State, USAID, USIA, Foreign Agricultural Service?

COHEN: I think by 1970, they had Vice Presidents for agriculture and Vice Presidents for commerce. I think a couple of agencies outside of the Foreign Service, too.

Q: At that time, were there any major retiree issues that had to be dealt with?

COHEN: No, I don't think so. I didn't see any. There may have been. I don't remember.

Q: By 1980 there is new legislation modernizing the Foreign Service and separating the commercial function from State and nesting it in the Commerce Department. Was AFSA's leadership beginning to discuss this?

COHEN: No, in this early period AFSA was mainly interested in negotiation, not legislation. However, we were beginning to discuss the "up-or-out" system in which an officer had to be promoted within a certain number of years or had to accept retirement. There was a lot of discussion over whether that period should be eight or 10 years. You only got one chance of promotion or maybe two.

Q: You've spent several years at the founding of the labor union aspects of AFSA [American Foreign Service Association]? Looking back on that period, are there any other reflections or insights that you want to share that carry forward into AFSA's subsequent work?

COHEN: Kissinger was National Security Advisor from 1969 to 1975 and Secretary of State from 1973 to 1975.

COHEN: So, his aides tell him that there is this labor union in the State Department. You should know what they do. So, he said "I'm going to talk to them. Give me a meeting." Tom Boyatt was AFSA president at the time and since I had experience from both the union side and the management side, I went with him.

We found Secretary of State Designate Kissinger to be somewhat on edge. He was expecting his Senate confirmation hearing to be difficult. He told us, "Every kook in the United States is trying to get me" (laughter). We explained to him what the American Foreign Service Association does. We explained that State Department management is not allowed to make unilateral decisions on employee bread and butter issues without first consulting with AFSA. Kissinger did not seem to like that. He responded:" Yes, Mr. Boyatt, but I can assign you to Chad without consulting with AFSA" (laughter).

Q: Did Kissinger actually involve himself in any negotiations with AFSA?

COHEN: No, no. It was the Undersecretary for Management.

But there is an experience I had subsequently that called on all my accumulated knowledge of how to negotiate that I acquired during my time at AFSA.

In 1987, I got a call from Frank Carlucci who had just been named National Security Advisor. He was replacing Admiral Poindexter who had been involved in the Iran-Contra affair violating the Boland Amendment by sending aid to the Contras in Nicaragua and sending money and weapons to Iran to secure American hostages from Lebanon. This became known as the Iran-Contra affair.

So, Carlucci asked me to come over to the NSC staff. He says, "I'm firing the whole National Security Council staff. 100%. Even those people had nothing to do with Iran-Contra. The Africa director had nothing to do with it, but I'm firing everybody. He says, "I want you to take over the African position since you've had a lot of experience there. So, I became Senior Director for Africa on the National Security Council, and they assigned a veteran USAID (Agency for International Development) officer, Alison Rosenberg to my staff.

In that position, I frequently consulted with members of Congress. I was always being called to testify before Africa subcommittees. I got to know members and staff pretty well. During the period immediately after the Iran-Contra scandal, President Reagan stayed out of public view for some four months. After this, Carlucci lets me know that Reagan is ready to conduct public

events again, and you are the one who's going to do the first event with him, which will be public. I mean, we'll get a lot of press stuff. And he wants a briefing on Angola. So, I go there.

I introduced myself to Reagan and his new Chief of Staff, Howard Baker, who had just taken over the job. Baker says to me, “Do you have a Son named Marc?” So I said yes. Baker tells me, “I was flying up from Florida yesterday and Marc was sitting next to me. We had a great conversation, very intelligent.” And you know Reagan was just watching this. He didn’t mind that we had a short introduction among ourselves. Then Reagan addresses us both. He said he had all these friends in Orange County, California. And he says there is a rebel group in Mozambique that is anti-communist, and he wanted us to support this rebel group. So, can we do that?

I replied, Mr. President, I advise against that. My recommendation is you're already supporting the anti-communist group UNITA in Angola and that already has some political opposition on human rights grounds. There are Cuban troops in Angola, and you want to get them out of it. So, I advise against funding another group. Reagan says, okay, I accept your recommendation. But I want you to make peace in Mozambique. I want you to start a peace process there. So, I say, “Okay, Mr. President.” That was the end of the conversation.

After I left, I got in touch with the Ambassador for Mozambique. Then went to see the president of Mozambique, Joaquim Chissano. We said we'd like to help you make peace. So Chissano said I agree with you, but I’ve got this Politburo (Political Bureau of the Central Committee of FRELIMO briefly assumed power from October 1986- November 1986 after President Machel died in a fatal plane crash). They're hardliners. They're not letting me do anything.

How to move all the stakeholders in the direction we wanted to go took some negotiating. What leverage did we have? So, then we went to do some brainstorming and I said, “Okay, let's do this. President Reagan wants this very badly. Let's invite the Politburo to visit with Reagan.” [laughter] Imagine, we could do it in those days. So, President Chissano was with us on this scheme. He brings them all over to Washington and they go to see Reagan. The head of the rebel group in Mozambique is Afonso Dhlakama (Note: Afonso Dhlakama was the leader of RENAMO, an anti-communist guerilla movement that fought President Chissano’s FRELIMO during the Mozambican Civil War). So, Reagan says, “How are you expecting to make peace?” Chissano says, “The South African whites, they're the ones keeping Dhlakama armed, they’re feeding him arms. It’s up to you to get them to stop.” So, Reagan says “No, that's not the way to do it. Is he a Mozambican or isn’t he, this rebel?” Chissano admits, yeah, he's a Mozambican. “Why don't you negotiate with him? Reagan replied.”

We successfully used the political capital of a visit with the President of the United State to persuade them to begin negotiations with Dhlakama. But then it was up to me. It was up to the

State Department to find him. He didn't go out very much. After a great deal of searching, I found him, and I started working with him in Malawi, in neutral territory. Eventually, the General Peace Agreement (GPA) was signed in 1992 in Rome by President Chissano and RENAMO guerrilla leader Afonso Dhlakama.

Q: That must have taken a great deal of work because there are details about how the rebel forces enter regular political society, disarming and so on.

COHEN: Yeah, there was a lot of that. By the time these negotiations got going, I was named Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs under George H.W. Bush. James Baker was the Secretary of State. I asked him, "Why did you select a career officer like me for this top post when previously it was always given to a political appointee." Baker replied, "Well, Bush is very serious about Africa. We did a real professional search all over the Republican Party. We couldn't find a single person who had better experience than you."

Q: From this position, of course you're in management, and can't take a position in AFSA, but do you have subsequent dealings with any of these higher-level positions?

COHEN: No, no, I didn't. It was all done at a lower level. Every Bureau has an executive director, and they take care of all personnel issues that might involve AFSA.

Q: Looking back from today on the development of AFSA as an organization, are there outcomes that you would highlight as being particularly important or valuable?

COHEN: Well, I think they've become a full-fledged labor organization. I think one of my problems is that they probably overshadow the professional side. They've become probably 80% on the advocacy side and only 20% on the professional side, which I don't like.

Q: On the professional side, if you were giving them advice, what changes or improvements would you make?

COHEN: Well, I would say that they should get involved more with how foreign policy is made. What the policy is? That's up to the President, Secretary of State. How is it made? The National Security Council relationship with the State Department. You know, you find some National Security Council directors, they want to ignore State Department. When I was a director, I went to see the US Secretary of State once a week. He briefed me and I briefed him. We agreed to cooperate. But that doesn't happen. And sometimes I see people at the NSC who think, "Well, I'm in charge here, to hell with the State Department." Retaining relationships with policy makers is very important.

Q: And in terms of the way AFSA works internally, are there any other thoughts you have about any changes?

COHEN: No, but there is one other policy process I'd like to mention that calls on my ability to negotiate that goes back to skills I learned from my labor union experience. This is the Policy Coordinating Committee process, or PPC. The chairman or chairwoman is always an Assistant Secretary of State or Assistant Secretary of Defense. So that gives the assistant secretary of state a lot of power over the NSC because the State Department chair sets the agenda. For example, I remember one of the times when Somalia was in very bad shape with food availability and distribution. There was a drought and a present danger of starvation. The warlords who were in control were not allowing food to get to the many areas that needed it. We were delivering food through USAID, but we were having trouble getting the food to the neediest. So, I had a PCC and I talked about that. The Defense Department and all the agencies attended this PCC meeting. I said to Defense, "Do you think we can get an airlift and get some food there? Get it directly to starving people? The NSC rep at the meeting got the word to President Bush who said we're going to have an airlift. In negotiations, you have to consider all your potential leverage, even outside your own organization.

Certainly, the NSC as an organization has grown exponentially over the years, and is, in some ways, a miniature State Department, but much closer to the President and, you know, capable of doing things I suspect from the west wing's point of view, more rapidly than the State Department, and bypassing other agencies as well.

Q: At this point we'll conclude our interview, but I do want to take the opportunity to suggest that readers go to Ambassador Cohen's full oral history at ADST.com. In addition, Ambassador Cohen authored three books that provide a trenchant analysis of 40 years of U.S.-Africa relations and foreign policy.

- *The Mind of the African Strongman.* New Academia. 2015. *ISBN 978-0-986-43530-0.*
- *Intervening in Africa: Conflict Resolution in a Troubled Continent.* Palgrave Macmillan. 2000. *ISBN 978-0-312-23221-4.*
- *US Policy Toward Africa: Eight Decades of Realpolitik.* Lynne Rienner. 2020. *ISBN 9781626378704.*

End of interview