

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

**JEREMY CURTIN**

*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: Today is Monday, April 24, 2023. We're beginning our interview with Jeremy Curtin. Jeremy. Where and when were you born?*

CURTIN: I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania June 14, 1944, during the Second World War. That's where my family is from. My parents lived somewhere else when I was born. They lived in a little town, Canton, New York, up near the Canadian border, but it didn't have a hospital. So, my mother went to Pittsburgh where her parents were, and that's where I was born.

*Q: How did your parents meet?*

CURTIN: They met in the '30s at the University of Pittsburgh, where they both taught. My mother had an MA (Master's Degree) from Pitt; my father got a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) from Chicago.

*Q: Do you recall what your mother taught?*

CURTIN: She taught English. She even edited a book of Catholic writers, called *Pilgrims All*. After my parents were married, they moved to Canton, where my father eventually became the head of the English Department at St. Lawrence University, and my mother taught an introductory course in English.

*Q: What about brothers and sisters?*

CURTIN: I have two brothers, one older, Daniel, and one younger, Hugh, and a sister, Elizabeth, the youngest of us. Daniel is a lawyer, retired, and Hugh is a radiologist, halfway retired. Hugh was the head of radiology at Massachusetts Eye and Ear, part of Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. He's quite well-known because he wrote the book on head and neck radiology. My sister, Elizabeth, just retired as a professor of English at Salisbury University in Maryland. So we're all basically retired now.

*Q: Have you done any ancestry research about your family? Is that something you'd like to relate now?*

CURTIN: I know from family discussions a good deal about my mother's family, which was Irish and German. And especially the Irish side. Her maiden name was McKenna; her mother's maiden name was Heyl. And I just know the standard things from after they came to this country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I know very little about my father's family. His father had died before I was born, his mother too, and he had a close relationship with his sister, who was sixteen years older. His father had remarried, and when I was in grade school, the caregiver died, and my step-grandmother came to live with us in Canton for a few years before she died. But I didn't know until after she died that she was not my father's mother. I didn't resent that, but it was a little unusual.

*Q: Going back to Pittsburgh, did your mother continue working during your childhood and adolescence?*

CURTIN: Not Pittsburgh, but Canton, New York, which is where we grew up. I think she took some time off, but she was teaching while I was still in school. She had four children in her thirties. And fairly quickly, every two years she'd have another one. I don't think she was teaching during the heyday of her child rearing.

I often think of what it must have been like for my mother to move from Pittsburgh and a fairly well-off family to Canton, a very small town with very cold winters. She raised four children under pretty basic conditions. My parents didn't have a car until 1950. You can imagine what that was like in winter. It sounds like a joke, but the temperature would hit minus 40 at least once every winter.

*Q: In that case, how was it decided where you would go? Pittsburgh and even its suburbs had lots of schools, did you go to a private school?*

CURTIN: No. My older brother and I were born in Pittsburgh, and both my parents were from there. But we lived in Canton. There was a centralized public school district, though I went to a Catholic school through eighth grade before going to the Canton public high school. Because the public school system was centralized, kids came from farms and villages around the area; so we had a mix of backgrounds at the school, not just town and college faculty kids.

*Q: Were there recollections from your school days about your studies and extracurricular activities?*

CURTIN: Well, Canton was a small town. Still is. It's the same size it was fifty years or more ago. We were outside all the time. There were no drugs and no safety concerns. One of my primary memories is playing sports, especially through high school. That was an important element of growing up there. In the summer we'd play outside, baseball or whatever it might be. In the winters, hockey in the fields as well as in an arena.

The community was very active with organized sports like Little League baseball and peewee hockey, as well as school sports for older kids.

*Q: Was there anything else during this time that began to spark your interest in international affairs?*

CURTIN: Not particularly. We were interested in the news but in a general way. My parents were always encouraging us to read more than we would read otherwise. But my impression of my growing up is less academic. When I think of school, I think of sports. We went to class, of course, and it was a good school, the public high school. They had an excellent math team, for example. I wasn't on it, but my older brother was. Very high-quality teaching. And then we'd take these New York State Regents Exams and ace them because of the way the teachers taught to the exam.

*Q: Did your family travel much?*

CURTIN: No. My mother's family had a summer place, which we still have, on Lake Erie, that her grandfather built in 1901. But her family was very big, six brothers and a sister, so in her generation we had to share the "cottage." We would go up for two weeks every two years. But that was almost the only travel we did. I think we went to Quebec City once, and one time, when I was in high school, we went to Washington, DC. But we didn't travel very much at all.

*Q: Okay. Once you start public school, was it a more diverse student body? Were there any exposures to international students or anything like that?*

CURTIN: There was one French student there on an American Field Service program for one year. I don't remember his name, but I remember our history teacher insulted him one time. Maybe not intentionally, but just talking about how small French men were because they had lost the cream of the crop in World War I. That's always stuck with me.

"Diversity" came from a mix of farm kids and faculty kids, but I don't think we were particularly aware of distinctions, perhaps until late high school, when some headed to college, and some didn't. (I recall a comment in our yearbook from a farm friend who wrote: "Don't forget the little guy.") Canton had a lot of churches, all Christian, as I recall. No synagogue. The high school had clubs based on the various religions, the Catholic Club, the Presbyterian Club, etc. Looking at the old high school yearbooks, those religious clubs seem to have disappeared, for whatever reason, by 1962, when I graduated.

There were no African Americans in Canton. So I had little awareness of Jim Crow and the discrimination African Americans faced.

*Q: During the time you were growing up, from the late 40s, early 50s, television came into homes around that time. Did you have one and did that make a change in how you received information, how you learned about the wider world?*

CURTIN: Probably. I remember it because in 1954 my father went on a Ford Foundation Fellowship to Yale. That is when we got a black and white TV. Back in Canton, we had a TV. There was one station, Channel 7, coming from Watertown, New York, which is sixty miles away. Channel 7 carried Walter Cronkite on CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) news, and programs from other networks. So, we would listen to the news, but that wasn't a primary interest. My father always got a daily newspaper, also from Watertown, New York. And on Sundays he would get *The New York Times*. And I always thought later on that reading *The New York Times* every Sunday through school is what got me through the Foreign Service exam. I would read it, especially in graduate school, every Sunday. So, I knew what was going on in the world from *The New York Times*.

*Q: In public school, were your extracurricular activities principally sport, or did you begin getting involved in speech and debate or scouting or anything like that?*

CURTIN: I was in the Boy Scouts. I'm not sure how long I stayed there, but into high school. I was in the chorus for one year at least because the chorus master wanted some boys to be there, so I did that for a year or two. Then when I got to university, I tried out for the Hart House Glee Club, which was the University of Toronto glee club. Very prestigious, and they suggested I do something else, so I did. I played football for my college. But I wasn't part of the speech or debate team. I practiced the trumpet for one summer but couldn't make any noise or anything but noise, so I didn't keep that up. It was mainly sports in high school.

*Q: And then in high school, were you beginning to have an interest in the kind of topics that would be useful for you in the Foreign Service? Politics, government, economics, anything like that?*

CURTIN: I think the one that stands out, for several reasons, was history and civics education, kind of mixed in together. That was of interest, and it has remained an interest, naturally, since I've been in the Foreign Service, but it always has been an interest. We paid attention to politics, too. My parents were Democrats in a heavily Republican area, and I remember one time I wanted to put up a Stevenson sticker on my house, and my parents said "Maybe not." But my mother was active in the League of Women Voters, and I was very aware of that. And I helped with somebody's campaign for district attorney in the county.

*Q: What about foreign languages?*

CURTIN: I studied Latin. Latin was the only foreign language, as I remember—I'm probably wrong—that was taught in our high school. And shortly afterwards they started teaching other languages, especially French, but I memorized the Latin texts. I never really learned Latin. When I got to university, they didn't offer starting courses in what I considered normal foreign languages. I could start Arabic. But I think one result of all of this was I had a kind of aversion to language, which hurt me throughout my career.

When I joined the Foreign Service I said, send me anywhere, but not a hard-language post. So, they sent me to Poland. I had six months of Polish. And it was interesting, but I never mastered it. Then they sent me to Finland, which is harder. And I learned Finnish apparently because my wife was in that class and then we lived in Finland for eight years. But I'm not super fluent in anything. And then when I was in my fifties, I had two years of Korean. Studying Korean in my fifties was not very sensible, but personnel wanted me to go to Korea. So, I learned Korean, but I am not very fluent.

*Q: Then as you're completing high school, did your parents talk to you about college? What were your goals as you were thinking about college?*

CURTIN: It was assumed that all of us would go to college. And I looked at a few schools, but I applied to only one, and that was the University of Toronto. My older brother had gone there; I went there, and my younger brother, and my sister all went there. And a couple of cousins did, too. My father knew the president, Claude Bissell. They had taught together earlier. It was very inexpensive, and a good school, and it worked out very well.

*Q: Is the curriculum and the style of teaching different in Toronto, or is it more or less the same as the U.S.?*

CURTIN: Well, the University of Toronto is based on the Oxbridge college system, so there was that difference. And I went to a Catholic college, St. Michael's, in this non-sectarian university. Philosophy was a very big thing there, and I studied philosophy, especially in the first years. I wound up majoring in English, but I started in philosophy, history, and English. Saint Michael's College had a very strong tradition in philosophy. Some of their teachers were Jesuits or ex-Jesuits. They had a big impact. One impact on me was that I stopped going to church. It was intellectually challenging and important for that reason. One reason I didn't go to some other college—Cornell was another one on my mind because my father had taught there briefly---was that I didn't want a school that had a reputation for partying supported by a fraternity system. Toronto had enough parties, but the fraternities were not important; so it just worked very well for us.

*Q: Did any of your Catholic school education have an effect on your studies or the direction that your life took?*

CURTIN: Well, especially through high school the Catholic connection, which was all through my mother, because my father was a Methodist. When they got married, they couldn't get married in a church building because he wasn't Catholic; they were married by a priest but not in church. My brothers and I were very much into being altar boys and went to church all the time. During Lent one year we went every day. It was a very important part of our lives and my life until I got to university. And then I had an ex-Jesuit philosophy professor who seemed determined to make us question everything. We did, and one of the things we questioned was Catholic beliefs.

*Q: You're in Toronto during the flowering of the counterculture movement, the period of the Vietnam War and all of the turmoil that occurred in the U.S. How did you see it or how did it affect you in college?*

CURTIN: Since we were in Canada, we didn't have big demonstrations about the Vietnam War, but obviously we were aware of it. We would have discussions and debate about it. And I knew a few draft dodgers who had come up there to escape, including the son of one of the Supreme Court clerks whose father came up to find him and somehow found me. I'm not quite sure how that all worked out. I was eligible for the draft, and I had deferments, although at one point I had to go before the draft board. And I took the exam that became required for a student deferment, and I passed. Then after I was out of graduate school, I was teaching at William and Mary, and I was eligible for the first lottery. I got something like 360 as the number. But my older brother went into the Navy.

*Q: And just as a quick aside, the higher the number, the less likely you would be called for duty.*

CURTIN: Right. So, I wasn't really vulnerable. But my brother was. He was in law school at that point. He joined the Navy, and they let him finish law school. They made him an engineering officer on a cruiser. He was on the president's command ship, the North Hampton. And they would go out, sail around in circles for a couple of weeks, and come back. He never had to go into a combat zone.

*Q: Now, to go back to college for a moment, since you majored in English, did you also work for the school paper or any other activities related to your major?*

CURTIN: No. I got an MA there, too, at Toronto. And at that time, I taught low-level English to some undergraduates. But I wasn't on the school paper.

*Q: I imagine you were considering an academic career?*

CURTIN: I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but I liked talking about literature. And my parents were teaching, so that's what I thought I'd do. When I finished my MA, the university said I wasn't ready for a PhD. So, I went to William and Mary and taught for two years, still thinking I wanted to be a teacher. And then I went to UVA (University of Virginia) and got a PhD. I think I was a much better Foreign Service officer than I was a teacher.

*Q: You mentioned in the notes you sent me that going to UVA was a very different experience from the other academic locations you were in. Could you explain that a bit?*

CURTIN: It was different from Toronto. I was a graduate student, not an undergraduate. I had kind of broken free from things. I did live in a freshman dorm for three years as a resident advisor. And I guess that was the closest to unrestricted party time that I had in my school years. But I got through it. And then really the turning point, the key, was that I met Elaine in my third year.

*Q: This is your wife?*

CURTIN: Yes. She graduated with her BA from Rice in 1972 and went up to UVA. I guess I met her the next year, and we started dating. As soon as I finished my degree in 1975, we got married. She was still doing her dissertation, completing it remotely from Warsaw, our first tour. Keep in mind, this was before email, and from Warsaw, even phone calls were difficult. On top of the usual challenges of writing a PhD dissertation, Elaine faced niggling logistical challenges, like getting the right kind of paper. But she did it. She successfully defended her dissertation when we were on home leave from Warsaw in 1978.

But going back to my own work on my PhD, I arrived at UVA with a master's degree, and the English Department there had a system called "permission to proceed." After your first year when you took courses, they had to approve you for the PhD. And that was a period of uncertainty. At that point I thought, well if they don't give it to me, what will I do? I thought maybe I would be a policeman or something. Seriously. But I did get permission to proceed and continued. I finally wrote my dissertation just through inspiration. I don't know how it worked, but it has worked throughout my career. My first few drafts of my dissertation were junk. But then I had a brainstorm to look at Virginia Woolf in the context of philosophical writing by leading thinkers she was aware of as she wrote her novels, people like Henri Bergson. And the dissertation turned out to be acceptable. With my PhD, I applied for college teaching jobs, and nothing really good came my way. Something temporary came up. So Elaine said, "Why don't you take the Foreign Service Exam?" So, I did.

*Q: How did Elaine learn about it? Many people are not aware until someone says, oh you know about the Foreign Service and it's a free exam and so on.*

CURTIN: I don't know that she knew anybody in the Foreign Service, but she grew up in Washington. So, she had a much better sense of the federal world than I did. She went to Rice University in Houston as a math and English major; I'm not quite sure how she became so aware of the Foreign Service except that she's aware of everything.

*Q: Other than your teaching as you go through undergraduate and graduate work, were there other jobs or other activities you undertook?*

CURTIN: Summer jobs really. But otherwise, no. I did the usual American boy growing up things. I was a lifeguard; I worked on a farm, which was a very good summer job. I worked as a carpenter one summer and as a short-order cook in a dairy bar. And then later on, I guess when I was in college, I worked as a bellhop at a resort in the Adirondacks for three years. And that was nice too. My brothers worked there at one point; my sister worked there as a telephone operator. But I didn't take time off driving a taxi.

*Q: Or travel during that time?*

CURTIN: Just before I went to UVA I went to Europe as a tourist, but that was basically it.

*Q: All right then. Your wife mentions the Foreign Service exam. What year is that?*

CURTIN: That was in 1974. I guess I took the exam late in '74, maybe December. Because I had been an English major, I took the cultural part of the exam, which is how I wound up in USIA (United States Information Agency) rather than in the State Department. I didn't really know the difference. I passed the written portion and then oral exams. I remember there was a timing question. I did have a job offer from UVA for a couple years. But the Foreign Service, specifically, USIA, said that I'd gotten in but did not give me anything in writing. Finally, USIA gave me something in writing, and I could tell UVA I wasn't coming back. Between the time I finished my degree and when I joined the Foreign Service in November 1975, I worked at Woodward & Lothrop, the department store, selling calculators for some months. Just something to do.

*Q: Now, since your wife knew about the exam and mentioned it to you, what was her view about you joining?*

CURTIN: She suggested it. To say she was supportive is an understatement.

*Q: Even though she knew that her future in the Foreign Service meant following you around and so on, she was ready for that?*

CURTIN: Yes. That wasn't long after the time when, if you were a woman officer and got married you had to leave the Foreign Service. It was a time of changing attitudes. When we got to Warsaw, my first post, Elaine would get it from both sides. Some women would say, why are you getting your PhD, you're just going to follow him around the world. And others would say, since you have a PhD, why are you following him around? But she did then and continues to say that she has no regrets. She did volunteer work and different things here and there and in different places. She taught at the University of Helsinki; when we were back here, she taught at American University. During our second tour in Helsinki, she was on the board and then the chair of the International School. So, she didn't just sit around.

*Q: Once you join the Foreign Service and you begin in USIA, what was your initial experience? Was there an internship, an introduction to USIA and how it fit into the foreign affairs community in Washington? What value did you get from that experience?*

CURTIN: Yes. I was totally ignorant. I spent several months in Washington. USIA had a program for our class—I think there were eleven people in all—and part of that was to take the A-100 course at FSI (Foreign Service Institute). And we got to know USIA and learned about the State Department, foreign affairs, and the Foreign Service. USIA taught us some things that weren't really useful like how to use a 35-millimeter camera. They did teach us how to thread a movie projector though, and that was very helpful in Warsaw



especially because the Marines would get movies, and we were the ones who knew how to work the projector. We were always popular for that.

*Q: How is it that they selected you for Poland?*

CURTIN: I don't know. They offered me a choice between Poland and Romania. And I said Poland for no particular reason. I'm glad I did. It was a very good tour for a number of reasons. I don't know how they did it. They had a team of Foreign Service people who worked with the incoming class; Jeff Light was the head of the program. I'm not quite sure what the process was for sending me there and somebody else somewhere else.

*Q: I understand that, when you entered USIA, new officers rotated through all of the different skill sets of an embassy or of USIA. Did that happen to you as well?*

CURTIN: It did. Not particularly formally and not comprehensively, but the first year overseas I was just a junior officer in training. I sat with some of the local staff and did some rotation through the embassy, but my job was to learn what was going on. And that was where the PAO at the time, Jim Bradshaw, took me under his wing, although that's the wrong way to put it. But he was extremely influential in getting my career started and very positive. I was supposed to become the assistant cultural attaché, but then someone in that job left early and so they filled it before I got there, and I became assistant information officer, which suited me better. I stayed on the press side throughout my career. It was just sort of again serendipitous, but it worked out well.

*Q: You arrive in Poland in 1976. Were there already rumblings of human rights organizations and so on?*

CURTIN: I think there were some. There were dissidents writing *Samizdat*, but it was pre-Solidarity. The big stuff really happened after I left. We did have the new pope, and there was definitely an intellectual undercurrent of dissent. I was tracking that pretty carefully, partly because Jim Bradshaw thought that was what we should do. But it wasn't a major impulse. Poland was still a communist shut-down state. We could deal with the civilians, but they were closely monitored and restricted. But we could travel all over the country, which was good.

*Q: Returning to your position as assistant information officer, you dealt with press and media. What do you recall about that position that gave you a little bit more understanding of where you might want to go in USIA?*

CURTIN: Well, I enjoyed dealing with the press and with policy issues. And during my time in Warsaw, I was sent to Geneva a couple times to help with presidential visits. Once the PAO (Public Affairs Officer) was on home leave, so I was sent to help the acting PAO. And I thoroughly enjoyed working with policy issues, talking about them and writing about them. I did a lot of writing as a JOT and as an AIO. A lot of memoranda of conversations (memcons) because I did have Polish contacts, and I'd write down what they told me and send it in. As we drove around the country, I'd write down what I saw. I

don't know how useful it was. It wasn't formal tasking, but that's what we did. Part of the excitement was being in this country, not exactly enemy territory, but very different politically and socially, and just exciting. Sometimes I think I did more reporting than they wanted me to.

*Q: Was there a relationship between the USIA office and the embassy? Did you interact with the embassy much?*

CURTIN: Yes. We were in the same building. We were called the Press and Cultural Section of the embassy, because the Poles didn't want USIS (United States Information Service) operating there. I dealt a lot with the political section and the economic section and with the consular section somewhat. There were a number of young couples there, young political officers with their spouses. Our best friends were a married couple. The husband was a political officer, and the wife was the assistant cultural attaché; so we socialized a lot.

*Q: So, at that time before Solidarity, what were your major conclusions about Poland? What did you learn about it that stuck with you?*

CURTIN: Well, I had this sense, not of a country in turmoil about to break free, but of a country with a strong intellectual undercurrent of dissent. And I read the *Samizdat* as much as I could. I also had the job as AIO of monitoring Polish Language Voice of America and giving feedback about how I thought that it would go down with the Poles. I didn't talk to Poles about how they felt about VOA. But I think I had a sense of this other system but with people living under it who were like me. Later in my career I dealt with the Warsaw Pact in negotiations, and my sense of Poles, diplomats in this case, was different from when we were in Poland because the situation was different. Diplomats can seem to be defined by their governments and our relationship to that government more than ordinary people might be.

I would note that ordinary Poles were quietly pro-American. American jazz was popular, and Willis Conover's "Jazz Hour" on VOA was very popular. To celebrate the bicentennial of the United States, the embassy sponsored a major exhibit at the Polish National Museum, "200 Years of American Painting" and a visit by the Los Angeles philharmonic orchestra, both very big events.

*Q: As you approach the end of this assignment, what were you thinking about as a follow-on?*

CURTIN: I followed the listings of openings. I wanted to go to Moscow, but somebody else got that job. Then I think Jim Bradshaw just arranged for me to be assigned to Helsinki. I wanted to stay in East-West relations and stay involved with political affairs in press, media, and think tanks, that sort of thing. And the Information Officer job in Helsinki came open, and I think Jim wrangled it for me. So, off I went, and after a year of language training with Elaine, we arrived in 1980 and stayed there for four years.

We traveled to Helsinki by way of Copenhagen and a two-day boat trip across the Baltic. Helsinki is a very pretty city from the sea. Arriving by sea was the perfect introduction. I don't think the system allows that kind of travel now.

*Q: Did you find that the language training gave you some confidence that you would at least be able to use the language?*

CURTIN: Yes. It did. Finland, though, is one of those countries where two-year-old babies speak English. But yes, that helped. And our best friend there was a nuclear physicist who became the head of research for the Finnish defense department. He spoke very good English, but his wife didn't speak it. She became one of Elaine's best buddies. So, they could manage in Finnish. There was an overnight ferry from Helsinki to Stockholm, and they would go over for a day in Stockholm and come back. And they did it a number of times, and one time Elaine was in the restaurant with her friend, and the waiter remembered her—Elaine—as this American who speaks Finnish. The language helped when we were making friends. And it's easier if they don't have to translate in their mind. We had very good friends in Finland, and when we went back there in '91, right at the breakup of the Soviet Union those people had risen to senior positions. They stayed friends, and they were very important to my work.

*Q: You become the information officer. How many people in your section did you supervise? What was the section like?*

CURTIN: I was the only American. There were five or six Finns in the section. There was an audio-visual guy and somebody monitored VOA (Voice of America) and RFE/RL (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty) as they were broadcasting into Eastern Europe. We had a monitoring office in Helsinki. And the senior press assistant also had a local hire assistant, so there were a number of people. And one of the things we did was translate materials used to brief the ambassador. We had a couple translators on my staff, plus a secretary. I'm still in touch with some of the staff.

*Q: Now, as it's 1980, and the Soviet Union is still quite powerful, what were the key activities you undertook as information officer? Did you have a lot of public speaking, did you bring in experts for talking to Finnish audiences? What did you focus on back then?*

CURTIN: We did the whole range of things, really. There was the Fulbright program, for example. That came under the cultural attaché. On my side we would bring in speakers, sometimes U.S. Government, sometimes others, on issues like arms control, security issues. It was during the Cold War. The Finns were in a particular situation of neutrality. They were open to what we were doing, but very sensitive about the Soviets. We also ran NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) tours. We would take journalists and think tank people—and I don't think government people—touring NATO bases around Europe and also to Washington for briefings by the NSC (National Security Council) and the Pentagon. So, there was a full information program, pretty traditional.

*Q: When the Finnish exchange students and teachers under the Fulbright Program returned, did they also become part of your network? Were you able to use their expertise in part of your work?*

CURTIN: We kept up relationships. The way I would describe it is if Fulbrighters came back, say, from studying in the United States, we'd try to keep track of them, and then they would become targets for outreach. So, they wouldn't come and give speeches for us, but we would say, we have a speaker coming in, how would you like to host him? And that's generally the way it worked. But we would bring over people to talk just on our own and take them around the country to different universities, usually.

*Q: When you dealt with the press and media, did you have difficulties in defending U.S. foreign policies when the Finns published critical stories?*

CURTIN: Yes, we did.. There was a communist newspaper, for example. But most of the Finnish media were pretty balanced. There were a couple of big newspapers. *Helsingin Sanomat* was the biggest one in Helsinki, but *Aamulehti*, the morning paper in Tampere, was important, and there were several others. *Tiedonantaja* was a communist newspaper, and we did deal with them. They were easy to deal with in a way because we knew they were hostile. But we had to be careful. I remember one time I went up to Tampere to meet with one of the papers there, not *Aamulehti*. the Finnish prime minister at the time had just made some negative remarks about Reagan. As I was walking down the hall with the editor, chatting off the record, I thought, he asked whether we were going to do something in response, and I said, "Yes, probably so." And it headlined the next day. Nothing too bad came of it. The PAO didn't fire me. But I learned a lesson.

*Q: Oh yeah. The typical advice that any Foreign Service officer gets is to say nothing in public that you wouldn't want to see on the front page of the newspaper.*

CURTIN: Yes, well when it comes to journalists, don't say anything in private either.

*Q: Right.*

CURTIN: But that was the only time I had a problem really. I had very good relations with the press, and with TV, too. I knew a lot of the journalists. They were at two main stations, YLE (Yleisradio Oy) in Helsinki and YLE 2 in Tampere. I knew them well. I could talk to them if something came up, as it did occasionally. I could call them, and we could talk it through. One example is when Vice President Bush visited Europe—I can't remember exactly the year, but it was when we were in Helsinki the first time—but he made a statement saying, "Yes, I'm coming to visit the neutral countries in Europe and Finland," as if Finland weren't neutral. That caused some late-night phone calls with the press, but it worked out. So, I can't complain.

*Q: You were there for four years; I imagine your Finnish improved over time as you used it and had Finnish contacts. But what stood out in your mind in terms of the skills and talents that you acquired in Finland that were useful for you as your career went on?*

CURTIN: Well, one thing stands out: the importance of personal relationships, especially based on entertaining and doing things that are not directly job related. And we very quickly got into that. Elaine's a good cook; she's a very good hostess. I can't emphasize enough how important that is in our work. It was particularly strong in Helsinki. It was also important in Stockholm during the negotiations dealing with diplomats. And so, that was one thing. Just understanding, listening to people, trying to understand their point of view and then articulating ours because that was my job. Making sure they knew where we stood.

*Q: Since you mentioned Elaine and the fact that she had at least one Finnish friend and had the freedom to travel around Finland, did you learn things about Finnish culture from her that were helpful for you?*

CURTIN: I don't think that's quite the way I would put it, but we traveled a lot. We really learned a huge amount about Finland and their literature, their myths, their history. I think just being there you get it and absorb it. We traveled a lot, we both had friends, and we listened and absorbed things. And Elaine's ties to the University of Helsinki from early in our first tour and her own ties to the Finnish community exposed us to a very wide range of things Finnish. Elaine formed relationships with wives of our contacts and others that went beyond my own relationships.

*Q: Now, you mentioned you did NATO trips and so on, were these other outside activities in Europe also helpful? Did they give you a broader understanding of U.S. foreign policy?*

CURTIN: Yes, it also gave me a real sense of—it's part of foreign policy, of course—but just how extensive our military presence was. Everywhere. And Germany was one of the main focuses. We'd go to Ramstein or we'd go to Grafenwöhr, various NATO bases. Aviano in Italy. Just everywhere. And there was London, where U.S. Navy Europe headquarters (at the time) gave excellent briefings. My impression of our presence in Europe was heavily military. That was my interest. I had a lot of interest in security affairs and East-West security affairs in particular. And the NATO tours were all about our stance in East-West relations.

*Q: You mentioned the vice president visiting—were there any other activities of that nature that also took place that you supported?*

CURTIN: Well, I know I mentioned this, the status of Finland as a neutral country wasn't recognized by the United States when we got to Finland. But later on during that first tour, Finland had a presidential election, the first one in many years, and their new president, Mauno Koivisto, went to Washington. The embassy, as embassies usually do, sent in remarks for the U.S. president to deliver. And I wrote those for whatever reason.

And in those remarks, I had the president say, “The United States supports Finland's position of internationally recognized neutrality, and we value their perspective on world problems.” It was the first time we’d ever said that. And that changed our policy. Our policy position changed because of that statement. And President Reagan made that statement because I suggested it without knowing the implications, how significant it would be. It went through the whole policy process in Washington and debate and so on, and they decided the president should say it; so he did.

*Q: Interesting. Did you also give talks to the public? If so, what did the Finnish people ask you when you went out for that?*

CURTIN: I did. I’d go to schools sometimes. Usually I talked about America, but we would get into discussions about our policy towards the Soviets, and I knew what they were thinking because of the questions they’d ask. I got a lot of questions about what Americans think about Finland. Unfortunately, most Americans didn’t think about Finland at all. It was pretty basic public speaking, representing the embassy before student groups. With think tanks it was more small discussions rather than standing up on a platform and giving a speech, but I did give regular speeches. One national television interview, in connection with the 1980 presidential election, I think.

*Q: The Scandinavian countries, the four Scandinavians, often talk to each other, often organize things together. Was that any part of your work? The regional activities.*

CURTIN: Not really. Norway was a member of NATO. We went there with one of the NATO tours. Sweden was not. We were aware, but in the ‘80s we didn’t do much together as U.S. embassies. We just didn’t. We dealt more with Estonia, but that was in the ‘90s when they became independent. And we supported the new official U.S. presence in Estonia. The future president of Estonia used to come across to Helsinki and visit our library, the embassy library, before he was president.

*Q: And we’ll get to that during your later work. What have I missed about the four years that you spent in Helsinki that was particularly noteworthy?*

CURTIN: Well, it was kind of idyllic if you like winter, which we did. There were a lot of outdoor activities. The Finns are very athletic, sports-minded. One thing that stands out in a minor way is that when we got there in 1980, Finland was still—not a poor country—but it didn’t have everything. It was very seasonal. They could get certain kinds of food at some times and not at other times. Then when we went back in ’91 you could get anything at any time. But it was and is a modern country, very friendly, and it was just nice. Kind of winter land idyllic.

*Q: Alright. Now, four years...did you have children at this point?*

CURTIN: No, not quite. Our first, Alexandra, our oldest daughter, was born in 1984. We had just moved to Stockholm for the Stockholm Conference on Confidence-Building Measures and Disarmament in Europe (CDE). Ten days after we arrived in Stockholm

from home leave, Alexandra was born in a Swedish hospital. And in Sweden, you go to the hospital that's in your district, no matter what, regardless of where your doctor might be. So, she went to our designated one, and it was fine. Very good, especially care for the baby. Alexandra was born with a broken co

lla



rbone. And they took great care of her. Of course, her collarbone healed very quickly because she was just a baby

*Q: As the end of this tour was in 1984, and you have a newborn, did that affect your considerations for your next assignment?*

CURTIN: Well, the newborn came in Stockholm. But in Helsinki, as the end of my tour approached '84, we were thinking that we were going to go back to Washington because we had been out for a number of years, but the man who had been our first ambassador in Helsinki, Jim Goodby, came to Helsinki with the prepcon for what became the Stockholm Conference, and he asked me to be his spokesman. As the Information Officer in Helsinki, I had worked with Goodby when he was there previously, so I said "Yes." And when they opened the conference in Stockholm, I went over TDY (Temporary Duty). I went back and forth a little bit, and then when my Helsinki tour was up in '84, we moved to Stockholm. And we were one of two delegation families that were assigned to Stockholm. Everybody else went back and forth to Washington.

But the deputy delegation leader and I stayed in Stockholm. Which was interesting because when the negotiations were in session for nine weeks it was morning, noon, and night. But when the delegation went home, we had a lot of time on our hands. Alexandra was new; it was nice to have more time with her.

*Q: Before we get too far ahead, could you explain what the Stockholm Conference addressed and what your responsibilities were?*

CURTIN: Well, it was an interesting experience. It was a multilateral negotiation. The purpose was to develop military confidence-building measures, with a focus on military movement. We wanted to define military movements that would be notified. So, if I'm going to move my tanks from Germany to somewhere else or even within Germany, I would have to notify the members of the agreement. The issue was, how many tanks would have to be involved to trigger the requirement to notify? What size of military formation? We wanted a size larger than a division because neither the West nor the Warsaw Pact wanted to be constrained at all, and most regular movements were smaller than a division. And that's what we did, negotiated an agreement to build confidence by sharing information, but information at a level that did not affect our level of operations.

We had a deadline which was late 1986. The negotiations began with set-piece speeches. We knew at the end that the U.S. and the Soviets would reach some agreement. And that's what happened. Formally the negotiation was among European countries. It was the Warsaw Pact and NATO, but also neutrals. Finland was there, Sweden, and Malta. But it was really between the Warsaw Pact and NATO and more precisely the Soviet Union and us. The final agreement -- the Stockholm Document, addressed conventional weapons: groups of soldiers, tanks, armored equipment, and so on. And generally, we did end up using the division as the level of notification. One result of it was, even though it didn't capture very much, was to establish overflights, the Soviets could fly reconnaissance

flights over the U.S. and vice-a-versa for example. For the first time, we agreed to on-site inspection of one another's territory.

As for my job: I started out as spokesman. That was great. I met with the press all the time and talked policy. The press covering the conference, Swedish and international, including Americans, were well informed. So conversation was on a fairly high level. After the first session, the job of Executive Secretary for the delegation, basically chief of staff, came open. I volunteered for that job, too, which entailed basically running daily operations of the delegation, making sure reporting to Washington went smoothly. Also trying to help make sure the various parties on the delegation got along well. I like being at the center of things, so the Exec Sec job was also a good one.

*Q: Because the Stockholm Conference was part of the Helsinki Agreements, Congress had a role to play even in the negotiations. Do you recall that aspect of the talks?*

CURTIN: They had a representative, a staff member, on the delegation. And some members of Congress, especially Steny Hoyer, for example, were interested and involved. It wasn't hostile at all. It was very professional. But the delegation that came to Stockholm had representatives from every agency -- State Department, DOD (Department of Defense), the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (later absorbed by the State Department), the intelligence community, and so on. Although other kinds of talks went on -- some related to human rights, recognition of boundaries, etc. -- my job with Ambassador Goodby was strictly on the arms control aspects. The formal title was, "Conference on Confidence-Building Measures and Disarmament in Europe." We didn't talk about disarmament, really, but it was part of the title. At the end of the talks, once the document was completed, I transferred to Washington.

*Q: Now, at the same time the talks were going on, there were some external events occurring related to strategic arms, namely the deployment by the Soviets of middle-range nuclear missiles and the U.S. response with our middle-range missiles called "Pershings." Did that end up playing into what you were negotiating?*

CURTIN: Not in the negotiations, but it was very much part of a discussion in Helsinki between the U.S. and the Finns. These missiles would be aimed at the Soviet Union but would have to fly over Finnish territory to get there. At least theoretically. And we spent a long time saying, "No that won't happen." And of course, even if they did, everything would be gone, so who would care? But those missiles were very much part of the discussions between the Finns and the U.S. embassy in Helsinki. And the Finns were super sensitive about it.

*Q: In response to our deployment of the Pershings, there was a nuclear freeze movement in Europe that demonstrated against them. Did that affect your work as the Information Officer?*

CURTIN: Not really. The Swedes would talk about the nuclear-free zones, and so did the Finns somewhat, but nuclear weapons were not part of the discussion—overtly at

least—at Stockholm. Ultimately, an agreement was reached between the U.S. and the Soviet Union to remove the middle-range missiles. It was the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty). But that was concluded after Stockholm.

*Q: Once again, since you were Jim Goodby's spokesperson, did you also get to observe some of the informal talks that led to the conclusion? Did that help your understanding of the overall negotiations and the role you played?*

CURTIN: Yes. I would go to the NATO Caucus meetings because as spokesman I had to know what was going on. So, I went to all of those. And I'd go to some of the smaller meetings, although some of the meetings between the Warsaw Pact and NATO or between us and the Soviets were very small informal discussions between our ambassadors and their deputies. And I generally did not go to those. But we did have dinner parties with delegates from all sides, and we got to know their thinking in that way, through these dinners. And that was just the basic representational stuff that we do.

*Q: Did you gain any insights about negotiating and about the nature of the work that was useful for you later?*

CURTIN: I think just the constantly deeper understanding of what people were thinking. What they want, what the Soviets want, and also what we want. And we had a kind of semi-hostile relationship with DOD because they didn't believe in negotiations. This was during the Reagan time, and think of who was in the Pentagon. I got into trouble one time. Between sessions Gorbachev said something, and I wrote one of these official informal cables saying essentially, "Why don't we listen to him and respond?" And I sent it. And that got out, and the Pentagon did not like it. But the State Department stuck with me, and nothing bad happened.

*Q: The other thing about these multilateral discussions, and having a U.S. delegation with representatives from all these different executive agencies, is that often they could report directly to their home offices sooner than you could to the State Department. Did that muddy things up for you?*

CURTIN: Well, they were on the phone a lot. I was the spokesman, but after the first session I also became the chief of staff, as I mentioned. In this position, one of my jobs was to make sure I knew what these other agencies were thinking and informing our backstop officers at the Department. And that worked well. I had good relationships with colleagues. In particular, about halfway through or so, there was a young woman named Suzanne Perry, who worked for the Office of the Secretary of Defense. She was very smart and also very open. And we got along well, and that smoothed relationships. I also knew what the intelligence community was thinking, though I didn't read their mail. And part of the job was just juggling, making sure the State Department political reporting was right and fast.

Jim Goodby was there for a couple of sessions, but then he stopped, and Bob Barry came in. He was also a State Department career officer. He had been an ambassador to

Bulgaria. He made sure we added a secure hotline for immediate communication, which made things even more interesting. He kept me on as chief of staff as well as spokesman, and we worked well together. He was very effective but very subdued because his son had just died in a fishing boat accident in Alaska. It was awful. But he soldiered on. His wife Peggy came to Stockholm with him, and she was wonderful. I worked with Bob again later on.

*Q: Now, when you mentioned talking to the representative from the Office of Secretary of Defense, one of the things that happens at military negotiations for the U.S. is you have the Office of the Secretary of Defense represented, but you also have the Pentagon represented. And sometimes they're not all together in accord. Did you find that?*

CURTIN: When Suzanne was representing OSD (Office of the Secretary of Defense) it was fine. The Joint Chiefs representatives pretty much focused on hardware and numbers. But back here, OSD was trying to gum everything up. But they were more interested in the nuclear side than conventional at that point. And of course, Schultz was the secretary of state for this time. He was supportive, and that helped. So, it worked out pretty well. And at the end before the deadline, we had an agreement. It was not a treaty, so it didn't have to go to the Senate.

*Q: And then given how much you worked behind the scenes; did it inspire you to continue in multilateral negotiations or had you had enough?*

CURTIN: I'd had enough of that. I became an expert at doodling during plenary sessions. But I did want to continue with security affairs and East-West relations. I had the bug from Warsaw really, and now, with Helsinki. That just really struck me as where the action was, and I wanted to continue with it.

*Q: And when you say security affairs, you mean both conventional and nuclear?*

CURTIN: Well, nuclear tangentially. From Warsaw, as a JOT, I went to Geneva briefly, as I mentioned, and supported the press operation for SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks). I wasn't negotiating, but I went to the meetings, and I dealt with the press, though less actively than I did later in Stockholm as a spokesman for the U.S. delegation.

*Q: Now, the other conventional negotiations, the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions, MBFR, were still going on. Did you have any contact with that?*

CURTIN: Not much beyond knowing that they were going on. But as I mentioned earlier, I worked with Bob Barry. He became the coordinator for Eastern European Assistance after the Berlin Wall came down. And he asked me to come and work for him. Just before that he had been named the delegation chief for the Open Skies negotiations in Ottawa. And he asked me to join him for that. I did go to that negotiation, but before he got there, he was pulled off to do this Eastern Europe thing. So, I went to Ottawa for one session and then handed it off to somebody else.

*Q: Alright. So, in 1986, your tour in Stockholm is coming to an end. How do you determine where you're going as a follow-on?*

CURTIN: It was time to come back to Washington. Bob Barry suggested I go to Belgrade where Warren Zimmerman was ambassador. But I didn't want to go at that point. It was time to come back to Washington. I took a policy officer job in USIA dealing with NATO and Europe. I did that for a year or so before an assignment on the staff at the National Security Council. Then I returned to the State Department to work for Bob Barry on Eastern European democracy programs. Then I went back to Helsinki. We'll get to the details of those activities later because I'm getting a little ahead of myself in timing. I was in Washington from late 1986 to the summer of 1991. During that time, I had four different jobs, at USIA, NSC, USIA again, and State.

*Q: Take a moment to describe what your experience was with the NSC. What were your responsibilities there?*

CURTIN: I was Charlie Wick's man on the NSC. Wick was Reagan's appointee to head USIA. He wanted somebody on the NSC, and he cooked a deal. He took a guy from the NSC who had had some problems, not of his own making, and in exchange, NSC said he could put one of his people there. They tried one guy, and he didn't like it; USIA then asked me to do it. It was fascinating. I guess the main thing I brought to it was I could read material, understand it, and write about it. So, here I came out of USIA embassy work, plus arms control, and my portfolio was the UN, very different. Mainly budget work. Just tracking budget. But I was there at the time when South Africa was breaking free from apartheid and there was a lot of UN activity on that issue. I got to write some of that up, and I got to witness it, with Chet Crocker and all those superstars, at a UN ceremony celebrating the end of apartheid. So, that was a job where my ability to write really made a big difference.

I arrived at the NSC right after the Iran-Contra scandal. My first introduction to working at the NSC was a lecture about not free-lancing, like Ollie North. I didn't.

Colin Powell was National Security Adviser. Not much I can add except working directly for him was as inspiring as you might imagine.

At NSC, I also had some human rights work. All this background served me well because when President Reagan went to Moscow for talks with Gorbachev, I went to Moscow with Reagan. That was a fascinating experience. It was particularly nice because on the way we overnighted in Helsinki, where I got to give a speech on behalf of the President in the famous Helsinki Church in the Rock.

This reminds me that this trip with President Reagan wasn't the first time I went to Moscow. I went there as a tourist during our first tour in Helsinki. We and colleagues from the embassy and two Fulbrighters went to Moscow as tourists. Elaine and I walked around Red Square and did the touristy sort of thing. Our hotel was in the middle of the city, within walking distance of everything. Then in the evening we tried to get tickets to

the Bolshoi, but we could only get two. So, we gave them to the Fulbrighters. They went off, and we went off and did something else on our own. When we came back to the hotel, we were told we couldn't stay there that night. We were shuffled off to another hotel further out, near the economic exhibition, a big event space just outside of town. At the moment, we didn't know why, but we weren't given a choice.

We went out there and learned that the whole center of the city was being cleared. They moved thousands of people out, and everybody was trying to check into these hotels at the same time. I had to pull my diplomatic passport routine and go ahead of the line or else we'd still be there. And next morning we discovered that Brezhnev had died. So, all our plans to see things failed. We had a tour guide whom we convinced to take us to various spots where we could see down into the center. And we could go to some museums and to places outside the city. In the end it worked out. Moment of history; you never know.

*Q: Of course. And the death of Brezhnev would then set off that period of one-year successors, ending with Gorbachev.*

CURTIN: Yes. A number of KGB (Committee for State Security) people rotated into a leadership role. But that was interesting. And it was kind of not representative. In 1982, the Cold War was going strong, and everything was affected by it. We were in Moscow for a couple of days and then went back. When we cleared Soviet airspace, everybody clapped, and we got back safely. That was fun.

Returning to my visit with President Reagan's delegation, we were in full summit mode. Since I was there as part of my human rights portfolio, I accompanied Ambassador Richard Schifter, head of the State Department Office on Human Rights, to the Soviet foreign ministry. The ambassador pulled out this list of political prisoners and people being harassed for political beliefs, and he just read through the list. And what about this one? What's happening? And the Soviets sat there and answered, truthfully or not, and took it. It was really fascinating. Human rights are one of the biggest points of interest in the Helsinki process. We used it to beat up the Soviets all the time, and they would use other things to beat us up. And then here we are in the center of Moscow having the Soviets listen to what we are saying and our complaints. I don't know that it succeeded in the release of political prisoners, but it was interesting. I wrote up the notes and the basic reporting content for that part of the meeting.

One thing I would mention about the summit. The Dave Brubeck Quartet was there for this event. Russians love jazz, so this visit was a bit of good publicity. In the evening after the official events were over, some of the quartet, including Brubeck's son, came back to the hotel where the American staff were staying, and we had a little party, and they played. It was really fun. Those are the sorts of things I remember. Just the personal excitement of being involved in that kind of event. Flying on Air Force 2, and going on these events that were historic and fun to be there. After the summit, I came back and continued my general NSC work.

In '88 we had the election. George Bush won. I was willing to stay at the NSC, but Brent Scowcroft came in as national security advisor, and they just wanted their own new team.

After my tour at the NSC, I became the assistant to the Counselor of USIA, Mike Pister. I think the heady experience of being so close to the White House on the NSC might have gone to my head a little. While working for Pister, I brainstormed about how to improve the running of some of the USIA offices. The office directors didn't like some of the ideas.

In 1989, after George H.W. Bush was sworn in, I was asked to assist at the start of the Open Skies negotiations. The first session was in Ottawa, and I was asked to come to that as chief of staff and spokesman. I agreed partly because Bob Barry, whom I'd worked with in Stockholm, asked me to do it. But before he got out there, the Soviet Union was falling apart. This was 1990-1991. State wanted Bob to run the Assistance to Eastern Europe program; so instead of going to Ottawa he did that. I went to Ottawa and stayed there for one session and then came back, and Bob asked me to work with him on the Eastern European project.

*Q: Before we go on, could you take a moment to explain what this treaty was supposed to be, or the Open Skies Agreement, what was that supposed to accomplish?*

CURTIN: That was an agreement among basically the CSCE (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe) countries to allow overflights of one another's territory. And it was amazing that anyone allowed it. You're allowing military aircraft to fly across your territory. It's related to the Stockholm Conference concept of onsite inspections of military formations. You have people in the territory looking at what's happening. And so, that did lead to an agreement and went into effect and lasted until the Trump administration, when that collapsed along with other things. I don't know if it was formally repudiated, but it stopped, as far as I remember.

But all of these billets in Ottawa, with Bob on East European assistance and so on were relatively short. I was looking for a full assignment. This search actually began when I was in the NSC. I thought, here I am on NSC staff and it should be easy to find a full-tour follow-on assignment, but I had to push for it. I think actually it was Mike Pister who got me my second tour in Helsinki. And the system could give it to me because I knew the language, which gave me something on paper that could allow the system to say they weren't showing favoritism.

An important event for us at this time was that our second daughter was born in January 1991 in Washington, DC. We all arrived for our second tour in Helsinki in the summer of 1991.

At this point, the U.S.-Finnish relationship had changed significantly. With Soviet influence waning and then the Soviet Union going away, the Finns decided to buy an American fighter aircraft, which they did after an open procurement competition. They bought the F-18. And the embassy was heavily involved, supporting the American side.

There were a couple of American bidders. We didn't pick between them, but we did favor the Americans. The French were in there, but the Finns chose the F-18. The F-18 is the same as the F/A-18, with "A" standing for "Attack." The Finns asked us to drop the "A" so that they wouldn't seem to be a ground threat to the Soviets. We did, and they bought the F-18.

*Q: I would speculate that part of the reason they bought the American aircraft is they wanted to have some interoperability with U.S. forces given the turmoil and uncertainty in the Soviet Union and the possibility that there might be some kind of incursion into Finland and that the other aircraft of the other NATO members might be good, but connection to the U.S. and training from the U.S. may have come into their decision making.*

CURTIN: There was a lot of uncertainty at that point, as you can imagine. And I had a lot of discussions with very influential people on the media side and the think tanks, and my understanding is that it was mainly political. They wanted to show that they had this other element of independence. I don't think they were thinking of war or the Soviets coming in. The Soviet Union was in turmoil, and the hope was that they would loosen up and become more democratic and move towards the West and be less of a military threat. But the Finns certainly wanted to indicate what camp they were in. Not necessarily a military camp, but politically, culturally they were a Western country. And this was a very dramatic example of that decision.

It was part of an overall decision within the Finnish political class to open up to the world. Later on, I'll talk about the International School of Helsinki, which the Finns expanded into a new building because they wanted to build up their credentials as an international city. And the aircraft deal was part of a move away from the Soviet Union and the Russians. The Finns were showing that they were free from even the shadow of the Soviet Union, making their own decisions and buying U.S. aircraft. So, they bought the F-18.

*Q: Did this decision by Finland also mean more work for the Public Affairs from increased citizen exchanges with the U.S.*

CURTIN: No, they didn't increase. They had been pretty strong already. We had a good Fulbright program, and the international business program was pretty strong. In fact, over the four years I was there, the impact of change in the Soviet Union was sort of the other direction. That is, the USIA and Congress felt the Cold War is over, so we don't need to invest in this kind of East-West relationship. The most immediate and most striking impact was that the U.S. started to cut support for the information centers and cultural centers all over the world. And Finland was under threat from that because we had a downtown information cultural center where the USIS offices were, and it was expensive. It cost thousands of dollars in rent. We had just negotiated a new lease. It was a good agreement, but it was expensive. And I thought that USIA was going to close the center and related programs. In fact, it was on the list. So, that led us to negotiate a new deal with USIA and the University of Helsinki where we would continue but in a new location



in Helsinki. That happened over a couple of years after I got there. We decided we should try that, and we did. And it worked.

*Q: Were there also effects on your work by the increasing use of internet, cell phones, and so on? A greater flow of information?*

CURTIN: It was just beginning. Not so much the Internet, although that was beginning to develop, but CNN (Cable News Network) was out there. So, when things happened in the United States—leaving aside the Super Bowl, which we could not get—people would pick up CNN and know what was going on pretty quickly. And it helped us because it was easier for us to track what was going on too. Before when, for example, in the 1980 election we had at the information center an early morning party because we could get the results and put them up on the board and journalists would come and others would come, and we'd track what was happening. Well, the next time we didn't have to do that because everyone had access to instant results on CNN. I guess it was the '92 election. A few people came for the pastries and coffee, but they didn't need the information because they had it quickly from CNN. The Internet was emerging. I had a cell phone in my car, but I didn't have one on my person. I didn't really get one for work until we were back here in the U.S. in the late 90s, early 2000s when we started to get Blackberries. The State Department was a little behind the times on some of it.

*Q: Now, one of the other reasons I asked about internet and cell phones is that Finland begins its manufacture of Nokia. At least in the early days of cellphones Nokia phones became very popular. Did that have any effect as you were watching the development of information flow or even in the commerce between the U.S. and Finland?*

CURTIN: I don't think it did. As you say, Nokia and Finland developed a new industry, and that affected relations in the way any new trade development would, but it wasn't a big part of our awareness in Helsinki. We had a commercial attaché, but technology wasn't a big issue. The Finns are proud of Nokia, which has a long history in Finland going back to rubber boots, which is how they started. They were proud of their development into high-tech. But I don't recall it being particularly significant for our operations in the embassy.

*Q: Now, you mentioned the birth of your second daughter. Once she was settled in, did your wife also begin working?*

CURTIN: The first time we were in Helsinki, Elaine taught at the University of Helsinki. The second time she entertained, but the big thing she did was to become the chair of the international school. The school rented space from a Finnish school just outside of town, and the space wasn't that good. The international community was growing; so the school thought they should build a new building—or Elaine thought they should. And the Finnish leadership favored the idea because they wanted to support a strong international community. So, that was what Elaine spent her time on, other than the family and representational work and entertaining. And she organized the proposal for a new building and won school board buy-in, which was a fight in itself. You'd think that

anybody would favor it, but a couple of board members had reservations. With board final approval, Elaine led a committee that went out to the city and parliament and the Finnish business community to talk about the idea for a new school, got support for it, and got funding for it. They got land in the city and got funding—a lot of it was from the city itself—to build this new building. Which is out there now with a library dedicated to Elaine, which is nice.

The embassy helped a lot. We'd meet with Finnish leaders and talk because we saw it as our interests as an embassy and the interests of the embassy community. So, we could get involved as an embassy. We talked to the political people, the media, and lobbied for it. Elaine testified before parliament. And it got pretty intense. One of the issues was whether we would be forgiven the VAT (Value Added Tax) because the Finns put VAT on everything, including construction. If we had had to pay the VAT, it would have taken away much of the benefit of the funding we got from the city government. So, we put a full court press on, especially on the woman who decided this kind of tax issue. She finally was convinced. Everything worked out; they broke ground for the school before we left in 2000. She finally was convinced. Everything worked out; they broke ground for the school before we left in 2000. For her leadership of the new school, Elaine was "knighted" by the Finnish government as a member of the Order of the Lion of Finland (*Suomen Leijonan ritarikunta*). Elaine and I went back to Finland some years later to see friends and saw the nice new building with her name on the library.

*Q: The benefits of a new international school certainly were useful for Americans, but did other international groups, other Europeans even, the Finns send students there?*

CURTIN: Certainly the international community did. It was an international school; it wasn't the American school. So, it was in English, but there were students from all over. And there were some Finnish kids. I don't remember the percentage, but there were Finns on the school board, for example. So, they helped us develop this. It was truly an international school and still is.

*Q: So, during this period of turmoil and the end of communism, did your employees begin to train into different fields. Did the needs of USIA change?*

CURTIN: No, I don't think so. It's not like what it must have been like in, for example, Poland, where they had gone through martial law and then this awakening and opening up. Because Finland had always been open for us. There were restraints and some kinds of self-censorship, I guess, but we kept doing what we wanted to do. I think over time it had an impact, and I didn't see it coming as you mentioned, the Internet and different forms of information. Did we need to have a library and an information center of that sort when people were getting their information in different ways? And I noticed that although our biggest audience were university students—we were close to the university—not many were actually coming into the building. So, that was one of my motivations for getting out of there, saving the money, and continuing to get the support from USIA to maintain the function and our staff—because I didn't want to lose our staff—and move to space in the university proper. And that's what we did. And it ticked

over, and they went through the whole Internet revolution and different sources of information.

*Q: Now you said that during this period there were considerations from Washington of downsizing, downscaling the USIA footprint, and the presence in Helsinki. Did that continue? What effect did that have on you during your tour?*

CURTIN: Well, the biggest one was closing the America Center, which was the whole process of moving out of there. They did not cut exchanges. They had cut staff before I got there. In my first tour there had been a PAO and a CAO (Cultural Affairs Officer) and ACAO (Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer) and an IO but no AIO, but it was a fairly good medium-sized American staff. And then just before I went back, they cut an American position so there was a PAO and an APAO (Assistant Public Affairs Officer), and that was it. And they continued cutting staff, including FSNs (Foreign Service National) as I left. We had two or three Finnish press assistants and lost one. That's hard on staff, and that's hard on everybody.

That was also when they moved the public diplomacy operation into the embassy proper, which really didn't hurt our mission very much because the public weren't really coming to the USIS center much anyway.

*Q: This was also the period when discussions were underway between the executive and congress about merging USIA into the State Department. Did that reach you?*

CURTIN: It affected me in Korea later, a follow-on assignment from Helsinki. For us in Helsinki, from 1991-1995, the concern was money and how much Washington was going to cut our budget and staff. I thought we needed all the staff we had. For example, one of our positions was to monitor Voice of American and Radio for Europe Radio Liberty as broadcasts into denied areas. Well, the denied areas were no longer denied in the same way. So, do we cut that position? The position had other functions, but a lot of the work of that position was monitoring. And so, we lost staff, although the worst hits were probably after I left in '95.

*Q: Did these cuts have an effect on your own career planning?*

CURTIN: After Helsinki I bid on overseas jobs. And at that time, we didn't see a threat to USIA itself. That came later, 1998, '99, but by that time I was already in Korea. And I liked the idea of being part of the State Department, because I thought, being in information, the closer you are to policy the better. But there are advantages to being an independent agency head overseas as opposed to being a section leader. For example, I had my own car. My funding for my housing was paid for by the agency, not the State Department. So, we had more flexibility and we really benefitted. And we had—and this was important later—I had my own representation budget. And I had to pay attention. I couldn't show off in front of my colleagues. But it gave me a lot more freedom, and I had a good deal of money more than I would have had otherwise. And that lasted throughout

most of Seoul, most of the Korean assignment. But then the change actually happened, and there were superficial impacts, at least.

*Q: Yeah. Let me go back just a moment. How was it decided you would go to Korea? Was that more your decision, theirs? How did you determine that you were going there?*

CURTIN: Our system was we had to bid on a certain number of places, including hardship, but also including out of area. I had spent my whole career in Europe, and I'm not sure there was anything particularly appealing in Europe. I mean, if Germany had come up, I would have gone like a flash, but the German club was pretty well set in USIA. And for a while, going back a bit, the PAO in Germany was swapped with the PAO in London and the senior mucky-mucks would get the best job. So, for my out of area place I bid on Korea. I didn't think I'd get it; I didn't know the language. I was below grade. But I had done a lot of work in security affairs, and this was a different kind of security affairs. I think that was part of their thinking. And the guy they really wanted for the job said "No." He was a Korea expert, he knew Korean, and he said "no" apparently, for whatever reason. So they gave it to me. They didn't say, "Now you've got Korea on your list, you sure you want to go?" They just said "Congratulations," and the next thing I know, I'm going. And it worked out. I spent two years in language training, which was not sensible, and it was very hard on the family, but it worked out well. I got promoted, the other fellow did not, and I went on for years with my career. It's just one of those things, again, serendipity. It was a good assignment, and I learned a lot. That's how that happened.

*Q: Alright. So, did you receive training in Korean before you went?*

CURTIN: Yes. Two years. And can you imagine? I was in my fifties. And I had studied languages before, but I'm not a scholar. And every word I have to learn and learn and learn, unlike Elaine who just absorbs it. Also, a two-year investment for a three-year assignment. The second year of training was in Seoul, so all that was cost to the Agency. And I don't think the language really helped me there. Nevertheless, even though I was the oldest guy in the class, I was the only one who got a 3/3, deference to seniors perhaps. The greatest value of the training was that I could read the newspapers. I didn't make speeches, but I'd use Korean at dinner parties. Our DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) had been in the Peace Corps in Korea. (His wife was one of our Korean teachers.) He liked to have dinner parties at which he'd ask everyone at the table to introduce himself (almost always men) in Korean. I could do that, though I'm not sure how coherent I was.

*Q: Well, once again this period in Korea, the late 90s, is also a period of turmoil in Asia and a lot of turmoil in Northeast Asia where Korea is situated. How large a section did you supervise at that time?*

CURTIN: It was large. I had an APAO, CAO, ACAO, IO, AIO, and about fifty Korean staff, including a large information center staff. So, it was all fairly large, and they were busy. We had active exchange programs. We were very busy with media, and we had a very active and close working relationship with the military, the American military, and

therefore with the Korean military. Our partners were the American military, primarily Eighth Army, which was headquartered in Seoul. And we had other bases, including Osan air base, in Korea. So, there was always some kind of churning. There were policy issues, and then there were also community liaison issues. The Army would take the lead if something involved U.S. military personnel, but the embassy was always involved because of broader community impact when something came up. I had a good working relationship with the U.S. Army and UN command press people. I enjoyed it. It was important. North Korea was developing nuclear weapons at that time; so there were discussions back and forth on nuclear issues. Wendy Sherman and other senior officials came over for discussions. Clinton visited as president and went up to the border, of course.

A detail: in the embassy I was a minister counselor. The military saw that as two-star rank. So when I went to official events, like change of command, they gave me a two-star license plate, saluted, and passed me through.

Korea was a good change culturally after all our time in Europe. We found ourselves in a very different culture. Even though Seoul was a super modern city, it still had elements of the old city. It was very interesting.

*Q: Now, although the U.S. and Korea are allies, there are times when they have plenty of criticisms of various aspects of the U.S. presence and all kinds of demonstrations in the street and so on. How did you have to interact in those periods of criticism and so on?*

CURTIN: The biggest demonstrations and turmoil were just ending when we got there. The first day our girls went to school—they went to an international school, the Seoul Foreign School—there was a big demonstration at the Yonsei University, which is next to the school. The police came in with tear gas. Tear gas came over to the school. Police in riot gear chased university students onto the school grounds. That was our introduction to Seoul, but that was the last big demonstration of the kind that had been common during the transition to democracy in the late 80s.

But the U.S. still faced a lot of criticism in the press and at universities for things we had done in the past, or they said we had done in the past. The Americans were blamed for the violent suppression of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising protesting military rule. We were also still blamed for massacres during the Korean war.

One prominent issue was No Gun Ri, where U.S. forces were accused of killing hundreds of South Korean refugees. The U.S. tended to downplay the incident even while I was there, but it seems pretty clear that we were responsible for atrocities. Don Oberdorfer with *The Washington Post* came through Seoul, and he was clearly skeptical of the U.S. view. His *The Two Koreas* is excellent. But generally, there was always a low level of criticism from the past, and we tried to deal with it. Sometimes denying it, but a lot of the bad, like No Gun Ri, was really true, so we could only say, “Sorry.”

But we didn't see riot police in the streets very much. And we always felt safe walking around Seoul even though it was a big city. Our older daughter, who was in her early teens, went around on the subway with her friends. We thought it was safe, and it was.

*Q: There were financial problems in that era. Did that also affect how your work went?*

CURTIN: Yes, absolutely. In fact, of all the issue areas we dealt with, that was the biggest, the economic crisis. The Koreans called it the IMF (International Monetary Fund) Crisis because the IMF came in to help them out. Our ambassador at the time was Stephen Bosworth, who had been ambassador to the Philippines when democracy came to the Philippines. He was very good. He understood the economics of what was going on. He was the main interlocutor with the U.S. Treasury Department. The people we dealt with mainly in Washington were Treasury, not State Department. We were constantly engaged with the Koreans on this. We had various high-level officials visit. Larry Summers was one who stood out. We would arrange briefings, meetings with the press, with think tanks, and there was very heavy involvement from the beginning through all the time I was there. And the whole embassy was involved, the political section as well as the economic and commercial section, as well as our section. So, yes, the financial crisis was very important.

I was liaison with the Blue House, which is the president's house, and I helped arrange a videotaping with Kim Dae-jung, who was the democratically elected president. We were doing something with the UN, who wanted videos of democratic leaders. So, I arranged for a taping session. And it was that kind of nitty-gritty operational stuff that depended on good working-level contacts. But it was not as in Finland where I actually changed U.S. policy towards Finnish neutrality, or at least the expression of our policy. It was basic embassy work.

I think that the embassy as a whole—and I was part of the team, but I credit Bosworth primarily—really were instrumental in getting the Koreans to understand how important it was to accept the IMF proposals and make the reforms that they had to make so they could get assistance and pull out of the crisis, which they did.

*Q: One other area of bilateral friction can be, where U.S. bases are located, are relations between the U.S. command or soldiers and the local government. Was that something you had to address with public diplomacy?*

CURTIN: Not so much. I mean, it wasn't like Japan where it had some real serious incidents of rape among other things. There was one—this is typical sort of. We had a drill, a bomb threat, in one of our bases. Not in Seoul, but outside of Seoul. And we—the military—alerted the American community and evacuated part of the area, and they didn't tell the Koreans. So, that night, I went into the military headquarters and met with the Koreans and we worked out what we would say, "This is wrong or sorry it happened." One thing that sticks in my mind was that we should have just said to them, "We're sorry this happened, and it won't happen again" or something like that. But the embassy

insisted on going back to Washington for clearance to say it. That delayed everything for some hours, and it didn't help. It was too cautious.

*Q: Did your wife want to work while you were there, and did the embassy help her find satisfactory employment?*

CURTIN: Not so much. We would entertain, but that was one of the restraints. The Koreans didn't entertain as couples so much. We had built our career doing that. So, we would entertain in Korea but not as much as in other posts.

Elaine did have some good friends among Korean women, one of whom was particularly influential. She was hard-charging. She became a member of parliament. Her husband was a political leader, but it was his wife who was elected. Elaine no, she took care of the girls and volunteered at school, and we traveled, but she didn't work. She did some editing. Koreans would translate some of their cultural works, for example, a book on Korean handcraft or Korean art, and then have her proof the English.

*Q: Were there big cultural events you had to plan or for which you had to manage the front office participation?*

CURTIN: It was more on a personal level. We went to various sites, but not many big formal ceremonies other than the military. If we had a change of command, then it would be a joint U.S.-Korean military ceremony. I would go to those, but a memorial for some historic event not so much. On a personal level, though, if somebody on my staff got married, we'd go to the wedding, or if somebody died, we'd go to the funeral. A lot of that was with our staff, and we had close relationships in a kind of Korean-American way with our Korean staff. So, we'd go to weddings and, fortunately not many, funerals.

And one thing, Korea exemplified it, but it was true of everywhere, we put a lot of energy into supporting our staff and showing them that we respected them and honored them. And this came from Mimi Bradshaw, the wife of our first PAO in Warsaw. It was the way she treated the staff and doing things that meant a lot to them, like inviting the staff and their families to our house, which we did twice a year. We did that in Korea as we had in Finland and Warsaw, though we had very little staff in Warsaw. We did it everywhere. And that made a big difference in the way we operated with the staff.

Koreans are very hierarchical and formal. I'd walk into my office, and to get to my office suite I had to walk by everyone else. That was fine, but everybody stood up and waited for me to go by, which felt kind of odd. And of course, they would never use my name, it was always *seonsaengnim* (teacher) or *kongboewonjeongnim* (information center director) which was my title, basically counselor for information. That's who I was. I was never Jeremy, heaven forbid. And I had a good friend on the staff whom I'm still in touch with; Kim Su Nam is her name. She refuses to call me Jeremy; she always calls me Dr. Curtin. And even after twenty-five years. There was a joke that when Madeleine Albright came to Korea as secretary of state, she referred to Kim Dae-jung as Dae-jung, which is his first name. The joke was there were now two people in Korea who refer to him as

Dae-jung: his mother—not his wife, his mother—and Madeleine Albright. You just don't do it. It's always last name and then the honorific.

*Q: Were there other aspects of U.S.-Korean trade that required your assistance in public diplomacy?*

CURTIN: Not really. We supported the American Chamber of Commerce, which had a branch there, and we supported the commercial attaché by organizing briefings. We'd invite the relevant press to our houses and serve them refreshments and brief them on our economic and trade policy. But I don't recall, for example, that my office was directly involved in automobile talks, for example. We wanted the Koreans to open their market to American cars, and we supported our commercial office as needed. But we didn't take a very public role in that area of relations.

*Q: Sure. You've alluded to some of these, but I wonder if there were other anecdotes that were particularly salient during your experience there?*

CURTIN: I mean, it was kind of an ongoing issue. Seoul was actually a hardship post. I think partly because of the threat of North Korea. We did drills where some volunteers from the embassy would run through the process of being evacuated to Japan. And we were distributed gas masks at one point because the North Koreans were being particularly rambunctious, but it never came to an active threat. We would brief Congress in the embassy sitting around a conference table. And I'd say, "We always put visitors on the north side of the conference table because that's within range of the North Korean artillery (which is true), and here I am on the south side, which is not" (not true). They liked that, but North Korea wasn't a real threat at the time. Visitors did like to go up to the border and step across the line into North Korea.

It is a little scary to have to practice the communication exercises so if things did go really wrong, you'd know what to do. We never got all the equipment that we thought we needed, satellite phones and other things, but we had other communications. And we did have our gas masks and practiced with them. We always knew what we would do if something happened and our children were at school, for example. We weren't to go to get them. They were to come to a central point.

*Q: At this point did consultation with any other regional embassies also play a role in your work?*

CURTIN: We had PAO conferences, and some other sections had conferences where we'd get together and talk about what's going on. We had one in Beijing and one in Seoul. I guess later on in Sri Lanka, but that was when I was in Washington at a different job. So, there was some of that. But it wasn't as in Finland where, for example, we would consult with other embassies—NATO embassies especially—cross-fertilizing what they were doing so that the Finns would understand our security policy better. And I was more active, in a regional sense, there than in Korea. But certainly, we wanted Korean-Japanese relations to be better, and we did some exchanges that way with



journalists. But not a lot of policy coordination there. We made sure that the other embassies knew what was happening on North Korean nuclear talks or discussions, but otherwise not so much. (On Finland, we did consult with other embassies in Europe but not as much with our embassies in Scandinavia, which was a question asked earlier.)

*Q: Now, at this point, as PAO in South Korea you've taken on one of the largest public diplomacy operations in the world. I've neglected to ask you up to now, but I imagine you've been promoted to the Senior Foreign Service.*

CURTIN: Yes, I had been promoted to minister counselor. PAO Korea was a minister counselor position. Somewhere in there I was promoted to that grade. And talking about career patterns, I always thought I got promoted because of the job I was in as opposed to how wonderful I was, and it's true really. It didn't always work. I thought I'd get promoted out of the NSC, but I didn't. I got promoted from Stockholm to FS-01. Thereafter, I was promoted into the Senior Foreign Service, but I can't remember exactly when I reached the first level of OC (Counselor). But by Seoul I did have the next rank above---minister counselor.

*Q: At this point were you being considered for becoming a DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) or other high-ranking positions?*

CURTIN: Coming out of Seoul we wanted to go back to the States, and so I was looking at an office director job. At that point USIA had been subsumed into State. So, what's reasonable? I tried to get the position of Director of Public Diplomacy for East Asia. But I didn't get it. I was competing against a man named Paul Blackburn, who was an East Asia hand and very experienced. So, he was the front liner for it. And they asked me to take on a job which had been the head of Foreign Service personnel in USIA. And after the merger it was a deputy director in HR (Human Resources) career development and assignments (HR/CDA).

It seemed like a good place. It was a senior position. I didn't know much about the State Department personnel system, or the USIA personnel system, for that matter, or how the two were reconciled in the integration of the two agencies. Nevertheless, it really worked out very well for me. The change from USIA to State had a minor effect overseas at first. The people who stayed there after me felt it more. Without the role as a head of agency, you lose some of the perks such as car and driver, representation budget, and other things. And I think the Korean staff felt it because USIA had functioned in Korea for fifty years as USIS. Even before USIA existed, USIS had functioned in Korea. The end of USIS was a blow to them. And when we were discussing all of this with the embassy, they said we could keep the car, keep this and that, which turned out not to be the case. I argued that we should keep the name "USIS" because Koreans knew that name, and it meant something. It doesn't mean you're a god, but it means you're an institution. But the DCM at the time didn't think we should do that, so we didn't. It became another embassy section, the Public Affairs Section. In Korea, status is important. We lost status for the institution. It didn't affect me directly because I was there maybe a year, but it did affect the staff. And I would argue it affected the embassy.

*Q: So, you were looking for your next position and you ended up in human resources as a top office, essentially helping other USIA officers find positions, putting round pegs into round slots and so on?*

CURTIN: Well, it turned out that the position wasn't particularly USIA-centered. It had been, but the deputy position in the human resources office that I occupied hadn't existed before. It was a very large section that helped manage all the State Department assignments, including specialists as well as officers. I'm not sure how well it worked. Our system—the State Department system—like USIA, was pretty much individual-driven. You're given choices and then lobby for the next assignment. Lobbying was even worse in State, I think, than USIA. But HR/CDA helped manage the process, especially when people had trouble getting jobs, we'd help direct them to something. Or if someone wanted to be a DCM but wasn't really qualified to be anything except lower. But it was interesting for me because I learned a lot, and just how it all worked and how influences worked. How people lobbied for jobs. I worked with Ruth Whiteside, who was the deputy director general at the time. She became the head of FSI later. But she knew everything. She had been a Foreign Service officer, and then she became Civil Service and SES (Senior Executive Service). She knew how everything worked. She knew how influence worked, and she was very helpful for me with advice and all. So, working with her for two years was eye-opening and very positive.

At that point, USIA was still transitioning into State. I was in those discussions. There was a lot of discussion about whether office directors in the regional bureaus, public diplomacy office directors, should be deputy assistant secretaries or what. State always resisted giving higher titles to the USIA people coming in. So that didn't happen on my watch, and I don't think it ever did. That was another story, maybe for a different time or project because it's still going on. That is the place of public diplomacy, programs, staff and operations, in the State Department is still unsettled.

*Q: Now, the other major personnel issue in this was filling slots in Iraq and Afghanistan. How did that play with the role you had?*

CURTIN: Initially, while I was in HR, I didn't have much contact with that process. But I was aware, and I knew what was happening—just a general discussion about what to do with staff in Iraq. Not Afghanistan. But all the pressure that some people felt to go there, I never felt it particularly. I think they needed certain kinds of people more than me, especially admin. But it affected the whole service, and some people felt that in order to get ahead they had to serve in Iraq. That was probably true at the senior levels.

The reason I didn't have much to do with Iraq staffing was that in 2002 I moved to become the director for Public Diplomacy for East Asia. But shortly after that, Ruth Whiteside and her staff in HR were trying to sort out the staffing of the Office of the Undersecretary for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy. Its office designator is "R." They wanted me to go there to help with liaison to all the regional bureaus because that

was all very unsettled. So, I did. And in that job, I was involved in discussions about staffing Iraq, about how to get people to go there.

But that period was also unsettled because the incumbents in the undersecretary position changed so often. Charlotte Beers was the first undersecretary there that I worked for, and it was a time when everybody was asking why the State Department was unprepared for dealing with the Arab world. But Charlotte Beers could never actually figure out what I was doing there. And it was kind of mutual, I wasn't quite sure what my role was. Before any action could be taken on my actual portfolio, Beers left. I don't know if she would have fired me, but we weren't getting along well. It wasn't hostility, just uncertainty about my role.

Charlotte Beers was replaced for quite a while by Pat Harrison, who was the assistant secretary for education and cultural affairs (ECA). She became acting undersecretary. I worked for her as chief of staff and senior advisor. She wanted to energize regional bureau press operations, and I knew how to connect her with those bureaus. And when she left, Margaret Tutwiler took over. Margaret kept me on, which was fine with me because I wanted to stay. And I liked Margaret Tutwiler, and enjoyed working for her. But as was kind of typical of that position, she didn't know what to do with the undersecretary job. So, she created an English-teaching program for North African school children. It was useful, but they didn't need an undersecretary to do that.

After a few more acting undersecretaries, George W. Bush was reelected in 2004 and Karen Hughes became undersecretary with Dina Powell as her deputy. Dina was the head of ECA, but also deputy undersecretary. After she left State, she went to work for Goldman Sachs, starting a multi-billion-dollar project to support women around the world.

Anyway, I worked for Karen for a little while, and she wanted her own team in R, and she brought in Gretchen Welch, who was the wife of David Welch, who was the assistant secretary for East Asia. Gretchen was a senior admin officer. Karen had her doing budgets and related responsibilities for the public diplomacy role. Karen brought in as her senior advisor in my place, Dan Smith, who went from there to be the assistant secretary for INR (Bureau of Intelligence and Research)—Ambassador to Greece then INR, and he became a career ambassador. He's a terrific guy, a wonderful officer, very senior. A funny coincidence, when Alexandra was born in Stockholm, 1984, Dan was the vice counsel, and he signed the papers giving Alexandra U.S. citizenship. And we still have those papers. And Dan and I are still in touch thirty-some years later. Karen wanted her own team, so she sent me over to International Information Programs as deputy, which was a deputy assistant secretary level position.

*Q: The head of IIP (Bureau of International Information Programs) at that time was a Coordinator.*

CURTIN: That's right. And I tried to get State to make the position an assistant secretary. There's another story there, which I'll get to. But I was deputy in IIP for a year, I think,

and they wanted me to be coordinator. So, they moved the other guy out and made me coordinator. And at that point or shortly afterwards IIP officially became a Bureau. And so, I thought coordinator should be an assistant secretary, it made sense. And I campaigned for that and finally got it at the end of Bush's term, near the end of it. They had lined up some political to take the job. They got the title for the bureau. But the State Department—whoever was supposed to do it—didn't work with the White House, so White House liaison had never formally approved the change. And then by the time they did it, it was too late to get the appointment through the Senate, and it never happened. And because the job hadn't been filled, it didn't exist. They had to start all over again when Obama came in, and it never happened.

*Q: So, I just want to dig a little deeper with you on the role and importance and activities of the Bureau of International Information Programs. The Office of the Undersecretary for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy had three divisions. One was the office of the spokesman and media, one was the exchange programs—ECA (Educational and Cultural Affairs), which runs the International Visitor programs, Fulbright and so on—and the third was International Information Programs, which was kind of a catch-all of a variety of things. At the time you became deputy to the coordinator, what were the main things that IIP was doing?*

CURTIN: That actually became a time of considerable change. IIP would supply information in various forms to our embassies abroad. That's the short-hand. IIP writers would write articles about policies that the embassies could then print or translate or do whatever they wanted. We had some translators on the IIP staff. IIP would produce booklets, pamphlets; help staff or provide information to libraries; they'd send out speakers, the speaker program came under IIP; and generally help with information flow. Basic information about U.S. policy and American life. And so, that's what we did. And during my time there we were moving into the Internet age and providing information suitable for the digital world, and also providing advice to our embassies on how to run digital programs. That was the big transition, and they're still doing it, I assume.

We started a program called the Digital Outreach Team (DOT), in Arabic and Farsi. The goal was to get on foreign websites and engage in dialogue with audiences in Arabic- and Farsi- speaking countries. And we'd identify ourselves as State Department spokespeople, we represented U.S. policy and views, but we engaged freely based on policy. We didn't make policy, but we tried to engage.

We also sent out other kinds of digital material. When Obama was inaugurated or he would travel to Africa, we would support embassies getting online information about the trip and related issues. And that was a big focus of what we did, trying to use emerging media to grow engagement. We had one program called Democracy Now, a contest where we invited embassies to recruit local producers of TV shows—small, individual online items—little programs about what democracy meant to them. Whoever won the contest we brought to the U.S. for a big function with the American Academy of Motion Pictures up in New York. That worked somewhat, although I don't know at the end of the

day that our embassies felt it was worth the effort. But we experimented wherever we could with how to use the new media. And that was a big focus.

The emergence of new media also raised the question of the value of having writers produce written articles for embassies to repurpose. I tried to de-emphasize traditional written articles on the thinking that embassies and their audiences had so many other sources, often our own digital sources. Downgrading our own written material caused some turmoil, but I think it was the right direction to go, a necessary direction.

*Q: But now, one of the other things as Karen Hughes comes in, she's trusted by President George W. Bush, she had been a communications official with him, she went on a tour in the context of the War on Terror. She went to many Arab countries and various other places. What was your role during that time?*

CURTIN: I was involved in discussions with her. After I left R for IIP, we would provide information support. I was not liaison with the regional bureaus anymore, but I would be part of the team that talked with her about what to say and do on her trips. And I didn't tell her what to say, but I advised her on conditions on the ground and about embassy programs. She was very realistic. She knew that she wasn't going to be able to go out and defend Guantanamo or any of these counter-terrorist activities which we were taking part in, and she was on the right side of things. I was involved in a lot of discussions, including with the Department spokesman, about the futility of trying to shove our views down foreign throats to make them come around and recognize why our invading them is good for them. And Karen knew that that wasn't going to work. She went early on on a "listening tour." She knew she was never going to convince them. She said that the best we could do was to find areas where we could agree. And the U.S. was doing a lot of good things, whether it was the Mercy Ships or just providing other aid. USAID (United States Agency for International Development) used to be just AID (Agency for International Development), but she thought people should know where it was coming from; so she pushed to have it called USAID. Makes sense. I don't know if the idea started with her, but she certainly pushed it.

So, she was constructive. I think where she—went off the rails is the wrong way to put it—but I think she was too much in the weeds for an undersecretary. She loved doing talking points. And so, when something happened, Karen would draft our message in response. State and the interagency has a whole infrastructure for developing that kind of thing, including the spokesman's office. The role of the undersecretary wasn't clear.

The spokesman really had or should have had the lead. Richard Boucher was almost the permanent spokesman and very good at his job. One secret to his success was that he had very good relations with the undersecretaries. He recognized his role and respected leadership positions of the undersecretaries. But the role of the undersecretaries wasn't clear. Karen kept falling back on the talking points because she didn't know what else to do. She was close to the White House; she knew what they wanted to say. So, she went ahead and drafted talking points.

I went to a lot of NSC White House meetings on the war of ideas and how to fight the War on Terror through information, and it was through those meetings that the Digital Outreach Team idea developed. Juan Zarate was the contact at NSC. Juan wanted to know, “What are you going to do for us now?” So we, IIP, came up with three things to do to support the war of ideas and took them to Karen and asked her to choose. Karen supported the Digital Outreach Team, and the NSC loved it. Over time the DOT became the beginning of what is now the Global Engagement Center (GEC), which is very different from the DOT; it’s now a big interagency operation. But the DOT started in IIP. And at least we could tell the White House we are engaged, we’re there, we are being heard even if we’re not winning the argument.

Because IIP was so involved in war ideas, especially in the digital realm, and could point to initiatives like the DOT, we were able to boost IIP’s budget very substantially.

Although I worked for Karen Hughes, Dina Powell had a bigger impact on me. When I retired, Dina pointed me to several opportunities and then followed up. Some of what she introduced me to, I’m still involved in. She was important and very helpful in my post-retirement career.

*Q: You went through several undersecretaries for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Looking back, how would you say that function changed during the time you were there?*

CURTIN: Well, I think the big change was that, when USIA was brought into the State Department, USIA’s resources and authority were scattered around the Department. What had been the agency director lost basically all power and authority. The regional bureau public diplomacy programs had people out in the field, but the undersecretary didn’t control them. And she—usually a she—really didn’t have a role, unlike Charlie Wick, who, as head of USIA, did. And even at lower levels associate directors and area directors in USIA had real influence over staff and resources, including exchange programs. That all went away. And the undersecretary never established her role. When I was briefly in EAP as director for Public Diplomacy, I was there for a staffing cycle, trying to staff our positions, and one particularly good position, the PAO in Bangkok came up. I talked to the assistant secretary of EAP and his deputy, and we had somebody I wanted, and the assistant secretary said fine. And then somebody else in State said, “No. We want this other person,” who wasn’t qualified for the job. But for politics and ambassadorial influence and what not, they gave the position to the wrong person. And that kind of loss of control of personnel as well as other resources was very significant, and I think is the reason R has never really been a force in the State Department.

*Q: Yeah. Certainly. Alright. Now, as you’re going along in Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, are you thinking about trying to get an ambassadorship? Was that an aspiration?*

CURTIN: I thought about it because that’s what you do. You go through a Foreign Service career and you might say, “I’m coming near the end, I’ll try to be ambassador.” Hopefully someplace else other than Mali. But when it came up and I had the possibility of becoming ambassador, my family situation was such that I couldn’t do it. My family

couldn't go overseas at that point. Elaine's mother was elderly and came to live with us, and she wasn't portable. And I was in jobs where the 6/8 rule through which I would have had to go overseas didn't apply. So, I said no at a point early on before the process went to the White House. And that was our decision. But as it turned out, because I was head of IIP and because Pat Kennedy was undersecretary for administration and for a couple of other reasons, I got promoted to CM (Career Minister). Nobody knows what that means in the outside world, I have no regrets about staying where we stayed.

*Q: Now, just as an aside, as career minister there are very few people promoted to that level because there's only one level above that, which is career ambassador and there are only a few hundred of those that were named since World War Two. So, you were at nearly the highest level you could be in the State Department and would typically be considered for an ambassadorship, but for your own reasons you mentioned you preferred not to go back. What then were people talking to you about as a follow-on or were you thinking about retirement? And what year was this since we've lost track a bit of the years you were there?*

CURTIN: Karen Hughes had left; Jim Glassman was undersecretary for a while. I retired at the end of '09, having stayed with IIP as the new administration, with Hillary Clinton as secretary, came in. I'd turned sixty-five in June but stayed on until the new people found a new head of IIP. Judith McHale was undersecretary at that point, and she asked me to stay until she could find a replacement. So, I did until December 2009. So, I had almost a year working for Hillary Clinton, which was nice. I liked her, and she was good to work with. I liked her people a lot. So, that was fun. I liked Condoleezza Rice's people, too. And one of the benefits of being in a senior position in Washington is that you get to work with these interesting people. Some of them aren't that nice, but the ones I worked with were.

*Q: Now, since you were there through the transition into the Obama administration, what were the significant changes for the undersecretary office and function of Public Diplomacy.*

CURTIN: I don't think the new group knew what Public Diplomacy did. I made the pitch about getting the assistant secretary position for IIP to the transition team, for example, but that didn't work. But I don't think that there were particular changes. They appointed Judith McHale, who had headed the Discovery Channel, to be the head of public diplomacy. Everybody understands what the exchanges function is, and everybody knows what the spokesperson does. That stayed pretty much the same regardless. So, IIP had to continue to help people understand what we did. But I don't think there were particular changes. We did try to use Internet and digital information resources to get Obama's engagement message out. It fit in well with what IIP does, but I don't think there were particular changes because of the new Obama administration.

*Q: Okay. The one thing about these social media platforms in this period, '08 and on, is that they begin to multiply, and some become more used, others kind of fall by the wayside. Was that a concern or did that have visibility where you were working?*

CURTIN: Yes. Not so much on Instagram, but we had our ambassadors blogging, which is the language that we used. I never used Facebook or Instagram or Twitter at that time. We had people out there who did, and we would support them. IIP had technical staff who could talk to embassy tech people. At that point the embassies were developing their own tech capacity. We created a generic website called “America.gov,” which turned out to be a mistake because Latin American embassies didn’t want to be called “America.gov,” they wanted “USA.gov.” But live and learn. The idea of a generic website with digital material embassies could tailor was a good one. We presented embassies with resources that they could use. And as they went on to media platforms in their countries, we would help them with advice and material that would fit in their local needs.

*Q: One other sort of evolution that took place during this period is the eventual closure of most of the USIA cultural centers, most of the libraries, and they were essentially replaced with what became called American Corners. Much smaller, much more agile, but also sort of outposts in provinces where we had never had even a small presence before. Was there a strategy going on with their use or how would you describe that?*

CURTIN: There was an IIP office that supported American Corners, and IIP did support them. I think they just sort of grew up as the individual posts wanted them to replace their cultural centers. A lot of it was budget driven. I’ve been told that what we did in Helsinki when we closed our center and opened up a facility in the University of Helsinki became the model. But it wasn’t really the model because we took our staff from the center—a big staff—and moved them to a big operation in the university. I think most of the new ones, the American Corners, tended to be small with some local staff. Now they’ve closed the one in Helsinki, but it lasted for twenty-five years. That’s not bad.

*Q: Sure. Alright then, as you’re then approaching retirement, what are you thinking about as perhaps a follow-on or other activities or just enjoying your time off?*

CURTIN: Well, I wanted to keep working so I explored a number of different things. This is where Dina Powell was so helpful because she introduced me to a number of people, including at the University of Southern California (USC). The Annenberg School has a center there called the Center on Communication Leadership and Policy. Geoff Cowan was the head there. And he had been the director of VOA, and he was a buddy of Dina’s, of course, and also a friend of Derek Shearer, who had been my ambassador in Helsinki. Through Dina, I got in touch with Geoff, and he made me a senior fellow at the Annenberg. I started developing projects with him and with their center focused on ways to use technology to support U.S. foreign policy objectives. And Elaine would laugh because she would say I’m the least technologically advanced person, certainly in my family. In any case, we started projects looking at ways to use technology to combat human trafficking. I had somebody working for me, a professor at University of California San Diego, named Mark Latonero. He is still involved in the field, although now he’s working for the White House in a related field.



So, we started projects and raised money. Got some money from USAID, and it turned into a multimillion-dollar project that's still going on. So, I'm pleased about that, and through the center at USC, I went to a number of conferences and explored the think tank world. I don't really enjoy that world though I met a lot of good and interesting people. I don't particularly like sitting in a room and listening to people talk, even if I'm sometimes one of them. At one point I got a project with the Stimson Center drafting a report for Stimson and the American Association for Diplomacy on training and education in the Foreign Service. And that's one of those projects where they tell you what their conclusions are and ask you to write a report that supports the conclusions. So, I did that. Then I started doing some WAE (Reemployed Annuitant) work for the State Department. And eventually that turned into the maximum I could do with them. You can only work half-time. But it brought me back to HR to help with the QDDR (Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review). You remember that?

*Q: Yeah. Diplomacy and Development Review.*

CURTIN: Under Clinton. And I was heavily involved with that, helping to write a lot, organizing parts of conferences for the QDDR. So, I enjoyed it. I like that sort of work. I like writing. I like developing ideas. Of course, when Clinton left, the QDDR left. But it brought me to the WAE world. Working for an NGO (Non-government Organization) like the Stimson Center pays little, and other non-profits pay little. For example, I taught a course at GW (George Washington University) on public diplomacy and foreign policy, and it paid basically nothing. I don't know how these adjunct professors survive. So, I taught one course, but I didn't go back even though I enjoyed it and apparently I did well.

The WAE arrangement pays very well, and it's half-time work. I could do other things. And then there was one of these other happy circumstances, QDDR was coming along. I was in HR, and they asked me to work on LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) issues. Hillary Clinton had decided to give certain benefits to the same-sex spouses of our people serving overseas, and they needed somebody to help make that work. The big issue, immediately, was the question of what to do when a gay employee comes back here with a partner who is not an American citizen. How could the non-American partner come to the United States and reside here? So, we developed with L (the legal office) an existing visa category of educational and cultural exchange. L said it was legal, so we did it. And we brought people back on J visas, and it worked.

In the meantime, we started working on getting accreditation for our regular LGBT diplomats. There were cases where somebody would have a visa and let it slip that the employee was gay. The host government would deny entry to the diplomat. Leave aside his spouse or his partner. So, we started a global campaign with our embassies to get accreditation for our LGBT employees. It went from a handful—you know, whom you'd expect, much of Europe but not all—to 70% or more, I think, now accredited, or that was the case a couple of years ago. I'd assume they're still working on it. And now, of course, we have same-sex marriage here; so the rights and privileges of our LGBT employees are pretty well settled here. I worked on that for several years, and it was very satisfying.

*Q: Just a quick question here on this particular development, did you have to work with Congressional staff? Was there involvement in Congress for this?*

CURTIN: There was. We kept them informed, but we didn't ask permission. And we tried to keep it under the radar because if somebody had really looked at this visa program, a J visa, they would have gone bananas. But it worked. And I was pleased with the result. At first, we were going to have to farm out the J visa process to handle the paperwork, but it turned out that we could just do it ourselves. So, we did it and we saved thousands of dollars that way. But Congress wasn't really interested except that there were a handful of senators and some congressmen—mainly local—who were interested in gay rights for our people. And they were pleased with this; they liked it. There was some activity—there still is—about the Lavender Scare from back in the 1950s, the time when gays had to leave the Foreign Service. A time when they were persecuted.

Some of our congressmen and senators were interested in making up for that. Secretary Kerry apologized at one point, formally. I don't think anybody had his—and it was all men at that point—his career restored, but as far as we had active congressional involvement, it was positive.

*Q: Yeah. Interesting. So, your combination of human resources knowledge and, of course, also of the exchange programs and so on came in handy for this particular role that you were playing.*

CURTIN: It did. But I was really the facilitator. People with deep knowledge of these things, in L especially, were key. One of the places I thought I was particularly helpful was in talking to embassies about what they could do and keeping congressional liaison informed. I wrote a lot of policy guidance for our embassies. And that was sort of my role, as well as just talking to people coming back and wanting advice. I was an advocate for them. It was exciting and something I came to care about. I didn't have any feelings one way or the other on LGBT issues before I got involved in this. But then I think the last year I did it, GLIFAA (Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies), which is Gays and Lesbians in the Foreign Service, made me one of their two supporters of gay rights of the year. The first time they gave out that award. The other awardee that year was a transgender Foreign Service officer who had transitioned when she was in Romania, Robyn McCutcheon. She and I got to know each other through this connection. When she came back to this country, we would have discussions on LGBT issues, and she would be active in a lot of them. So working on LGBT issues was a very satisfying exit from State.

*Q: Interesting. Alright. That takes you then to about, is that 2010? 2011?*

CURTIN: I retired at the end of the '09 from the Foreign Service, because I had to, and spent more than ten years doing WAE work, mainly QDDR and LGBT and mixed in work with USC and other things. For my last few years as a WAE, I continued to offer advice on LGBT issues, but that work became more and more regularized. I worked on a range of issues in HR drafting issues papers, offering advice. The way it turned out, I

worked in HR longer than in any other single bureau. It was satisfying work, and I felt I was contributing to the Department and the Foreign Service.

*Q: Okay. Now, the only other things, given the length of your career and so on, you mentioned that GLIFAA gave you an award, but did you win other awards? In other words, other ways that the department recognized your work?*

CURTIN: Yes. I looked it up. I received a Superior Honor Award from the USIA for my work at the Stockholm Conference, a Meritorious Honor Award from the State Department for work on Eastern European democracy, and the Presidential Meritorious Service Award, in 2001 for my service in Korea and in 2009 for work with IIP.

I remember that when I got the Presidential Meritorious Award in 2009, Joe Melrose, who had supported us in the Stockholm Conference, got the Presidential Distinguished Award for saving our embassy in Freetown during the Sierra Leone civil war. That kind of achievement puts the significance of regular work in an embassy or IIP into perspective. Don't get me wrong, I welcomed the recognition.

*Q: Sure. Now, it seems that we are approaching the end of the interview, so unless there's another element of your retirement life where you were working on various other projects, I don't want to skip that in case there's something else you wanted to convey.*

CURTIN: No, I don't think people are interested in our hobbies now. But we stay busy, visiting our children, horseback riding in the Rocky Mountains, hiking and camping in Utah and Arizona. The usual retirement things. We're active in our church, supporting refugees, among other activities.

*Q: That's lovely. Alright, then at the end of interviews I always ask my interviewees, how would you advise the department or the public diplomacy function to be better at what it does? Are there improvements that you would recommend?*

CURTIN: My answer to that on the public diplomacy side would be very lengthy. I think the public diplomacy function should be broken up. They should get rid of R. Combine Public Affairs and IIP, in a single bureau under a single assistant secretary, which they've done. That makes the function of R even more remote and harmless. You know, I think that public diplomacy is a function of our policy. Not everybody agrees with this, some think it's just holding hands. But as a function of our policy, the closer we can be to the policy process, the better. And the information side should be integrated with the political and economic sides as much as possible. I mean, you might even put embassy spokespeople in the political section. But anyway, I think it should be less a world unto itself and really integrated into the rest of diplomacy.

*Q: Okay. And then, to people who are considering a career in the Foreign Service, perhaps public diplomacy but you've also been engaged in many other aspects of the work, how would you advise them to prepare?*

CURTIN: Well, a lot of my preparation—the main thing before I went in---was just knowing what was going on in the world. So, that's number one, and it's kind of cliché, but pay attention to what's going on in the world. If you're not interested in the world and the U.S. position in the world, you're not going to be a good Foreign Service Officer. And then develop your writing skills, which includes listening skills. That's the second one. And the third one is, learn to get along with people. It can't just sort of happen, but it's wildly important. You cannot be a good foreign Service Officer alone. People talk about State Department officers being hyper-competitive and cutthroat, and I've never found that to be true. I've seen some who've tried it, but I've never seen that approach to be successful. So, the people skills. There are no deadlines on that, but I know the world, know how to write, and people skills. And what made my career was the people I worked with, including right from the beginning. What we learned, starting with Jim and Mimi Bradshaw, how to be a Foreign Service Officer, a Foreign Service couple, and how to treat staff, up through Bosworth in Korea, how to really go after difficult policy issues with a foreign government and foreign publics. Jim Goodby demonstrated an impressive intellectual energy on policy issues. Bob Barry was professional in every way; he seemed able to pick up any policy challenge and manage it. Derek Shearer excelled on the public diplomacy side of embassy work. I'm not trying to be comprehensive.

A lot of success in the Foreign Service is luck, the luck of whom you work with and for. Elaine has sometimes said that if my second boss had been my first boss in Warsaw, we would have left after four years. I was lucky in the people I worked with.

*Q: So, in surviving and thriving in the Foreign Service there are always two things, it's location that might be lovely but boss might be really difficult. So, a lovely location and a disagreeable one. And on the other hand, the location may be disagreeable with a lot of incentive pay, but the boss may be so wonderful that you want to stay.*

CURTIN: That's exactly right. And you know, in a way, the more difficult a place is, the more interesting. And I never served in a really hard place. Poland had its difficulties, and Finland had its own challenges, but the good always outweighed the less good. You often hear that people enjoy most their most difficult hardship posts because it brings people together, the challenges there, as long as your children don't get sick. The other thing I'd stress is that I could not have done this without Elaine, without my wife. Everyone's situation is different, but to have a partner willing to pick up every three or four years and go through all the bother is invaluable. I think it's more difficult now than when I did it; now two-income families are the rule. Elaine gave up her academic career. She was willing to pick up and travel all over the world with me, and that made all the difference.

*End of interview*