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

LAWRENCE DAKS

Interviewed by: David Reuther
Initial interview date: April 1, 2023
Copyright 2025 ADST

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTERVIEW

Q: Today is April 24, we're beginning our conversation with Larry Daks, who's had a fabulous career in USIA [United States Information Agency]. But Larry, let's start at the beginning. You were born 1938 in Illinois. Was that in Chicago?

DAKS: Yes, I was born on the north side of Chicago, in a neighborhood called Palmer Square. Within six months of my birth, we moved farther north to a neighborhood called Albany Park. I lived there until I was almost fourteen. Then we moved further north but still within the city, near Evanston, to Rogers Park. I remained in Rogers Park, until I joined the Peace Corps, with time spent downstate at the University of Illinois in Champaign.

Q: Now, 1938 is coming to an end. Well, actually, it's in the middle of the Great Depression. What was your father's occupation?

DAKS: My dad was born and raised in Chicago. His initial occupation after high school was as a clerk at the Chicago Board of Education. He did that for fourteen or fifteen years. During this period, he also took other jobs to make extra income, including working as a vendor at sports events, delivering telegrams for Western Union and selling men's clothing. Subsequently, in order to make more money, he became a manufacturer's sales representative traveling throughout the Midwest, and I think did pretty well. However, he wasn't happy being away from home, wanting to spend more time with his family, my mother, sister, Geri, and me. So he accepted an offer from Ben Mostow, one of his neighbors from Palmer Square, to join his company, The Mostow Company, self-described as "wholesalers of general merchandise". It was largely a mail order business, a much smaller version of Sears, marketing through a catalog and a modest retail presence first in Chicago and then later in Skokie, Illinois. My dad was the buyer and put together the catalog. Ultimately, he became "vice president" of the company and you could say the "key man". Dad spent the bulk of his career with Mostow. Although after the company went out of business, he also held a number of other jobs, including as a buyer for a high end music box chain, and at a savings and loan. His last job was part time at a pharmaceutical manufacturer. In his late seventies, he hoped to continue working, but gave it up in order to relocate to southern California, to be near my sister and her family.

Q: Now, have you spent some time getting into the roots of the Daks family?

DAKS: Yes, I've spent a fair amount of time doing research on both sides of the family, although I've yet to systematically document it in writing. My father's family came from what was Galicia, spanning what is now south eastern Poland and western Ukraine. When my grandfather immigrated, it was Austria, the borders kept changing, and so when other family members came a few years later their home was listed as Poland. My mother was born in what is now Belarus, not far from Chernobyl. Her family, my maternal grandparents, emigrated to Canada, following one of my grandfather's siblings and her husband, and settled in Winnipeg. My mother grew up in Winnipeg, stayed until she was about sixteen or seventeen and then came down to the United States, as did my maternal grandparents, six of their children and one grandchild. One son, the second oldest, and his family remained in Winnipeg.

Q: Now were they Polish speakers?

DAKS: On my dad's side, they were Yiddish speakers. I don't know whether they could speak Polish as well. On my mother's side, they were also Yiddish speakers, but they could speak some Polish and perhaps Russian as well. My grandmother never learned English. During Prohibition, while living in Winnipeg she was caught selling liquor to laborers, summoned to court and fined. And when the judge pronounced her guilty, her response was, "Thank you", one of the few phrases she knew.

Q: How did your parents meet?

DAKS: Two things prompted my mother's side of the family to gradually leave Canada for the United States. Her entrance into World War I prior to U.S. involvement, and an economic depression that affected our northern neighbor, led my grandparents to encourage their sons to leave for a better life in the USA. Later, as I've indicated, other family members followed.

My grandmother knew she had half-brothers who had settled in the United States, so she placed an advertisement in a Jewish newspaper. A half sibling, who was living in Chicago, replied, so gradually their children started moving down to the Windy City. Then in 1930, my grandparents sold their small home in the North End of Winnipeg, and came down with the youngest two children, one of whom was actually a grandchild but who they raised as a son. Upon arriving, they also connected with friends, who were from Turov as well, their hometown in Russia (now Belarus). That family, surname Chernoff, had two boys who were friends with my father. At one point, they all went out on a date, which is how my folks met.

Q: Well, it sounds like a fairly tight knit community, then, in the Chicago area.

DAKS: I think it was. In a big city like Chicago, people lived in ethnic neighborhoods. As a result, there were groups that formed associations based on shared homeland geography and religious faith. They socialized and provided lifelong mutual support in various other ways, even establishing cemeteries, which were largely segregated at that time.

Q: Now, three years after you're born, World War Two breaks out. Did that affect your father in any way?

DAKS: Well, initially it didn't affect him because he was born in 1908, so he was older than most of the people being drafted. But at one point, people close to his age started to be called up. So, because my dad was both a planner, and a worrier, he felt he would definitely be called up. I'm guessing now, this was maybe in early 1943 or 1944.

At that time, dad was lucky enough to have a car, and vehicles were hard to find during the war. However, in anticipation of being drafted, he sold that car. Then it turned out, they changed the rules or something and he was again too old to participate. I know he tried to get his car back and couldn't. I guess later, he found a car somewhere else. So he never joined the service. On my mom's side, several family members were in the service. My dad didn't have any brothers, just two sisters, but members of his extended family were in the military as well.

Q: Now on your mother's side. The four boys in the United States. Were they army then?

DAKS: The two youngest were in the army as was the grandson who my grandparents raised as their own child. His biological father, my oldest uncle, lost his wife in Canada, shortly after this son was born. My grandmother felt that my Uncle Harry was too young to take care of this child, and encouraged him to go Chicago and start anew, which is what he did.

Q: By the time the war ends, let's see you're about seven years old. You certainly remember Daks's celebratory time.

DAKS: I can't recall celebration due to either World War II ending in the European or Pacific theaters. What I do remember is the outpouring of grief because the unthinkable had happened on April 12, 1945, near the end of the war.

Franklin Roosevelt was worshiped in my neighborhood. When he died, the people I knew were very upset and shocked. Roosevelt was a fixture in my young life. I recall that one of my boyhood friends was famous for always telling fibs. When he told me that President Roosevelt had died, I responded, "Jerry, this is just another one of your lies." But in this case, unfortunately, it proved to be accurate.

Other things I remember about the Second World War were "victory gardens", where vegetables were grown on tiny strips of land near our apartment, in the midst of a densely populated urban neighborhood. And rationing comes to mind, because of something that happened a few years after the war's end.

My sister, who was born in April of 1945, developed double pneumonia at age 3. And the doctor suggested a warm climate, so my mother, sister and I took a train out to Los Angeles. At the time, I developed a taste for BLT sandwiches, bacon, lettuce, and tomato.

Bacon was still rationed then, and so my mother and aunt, who we were living with, would go out searching for bacon. However, I showed neither gratitude or commitment to what my wife proclaims is America's greatest contribution to the culinary arts, because one day, after about three months, I abruptly said, "I'm sick of it. I don't want another BLT," and stayed away for many years. Now, however, I'm back.

Q: Now, you would have started elementary school by 1943. Did the war affect how the schools were run at that time?

DAKS: There isn't anything specific I recall relating to my elementary, or as we called it "grammar school", Alessandro Volta and the war. However, in my mind there has always been overlap between our nation's leader at the time and the principal of our school, since one was Franklin D Roosevelt and the other Franklin D Lino.

And of the various schools I've attended, Volta Elementary, is the one education institution that I've maintained contact with. I've been back there a number of times and I donate to the school. It's been interesting to see the demographic changes over the years. When I was a student at Volta, when the Jewish High Holidays came, the school basically closed, because there were hardly any non-Jewish students. Now there are about thirty plus nationalities represented, sort of a mini United Nations.

Q: I noticed the name of the elementary school was Alessandro Volta, a very famous Italian scientist. Is that the way Chicago schools were named in those days?

DAKS: I think they were named after famous people. And in my case, this practice gave me a certain level of credibility, much later in life.

About 20 years ago, my wife and I spent the night at a bed and breakfast in Spring Green, Wisconsin. The B & B owner loved Trivial Pursuit. At breakfast, his first question to the guests included "Italy" and "physicist", prompting me to instinctively blurt out, "Alessandro Volta," to which he replied, "You're a genius!"

Q: How did Elementary School strike you? Were you introduced to sports?

DAKS: I've never enjoyed participating in sports, because I found them intimidating. Fortunately, in terms of physical fitness, over the years I've built up a decent walking regimen.
Throughout most of my education, I was just a fair student. But to the extent I enjoyed my time in the classroom, it is perhaps due in part to the very fond memories of several elementary school teachers, particularly Mrs. Giles and Mrs. Wright, who taught me and a few close-knit friends from the neighborhood in the very early grades. In addition, the parents, who came from similar circumstances, all knew each other and that was comforting.

The singular grammar school activity in which I distinguished myself you might say was as a safety "patrol boy". Volta, and perhaps all Chicago public elementary schools,

utilized seventh and eighth great male students, who were given white belts that were worn diagonally across our chest, and served to inform drivers of our responsibility to help other students safely cross streets on their way to and from school. After a period of time I was promoted to the elevated rank of lieutenant of the safety patrol, which as I recall entailed some supervisory responsibility.

Q: A lot of people remarked that elementary school was where they were first given music lessons or assigned a musical instrument.

DAKS: Well, my parents tried to get me interested in the violin. I took lessons for a short period, but didn't stick with it. I also remember being in a play at a nearby park when I was still in elementary school. But I never really got into the arts, perhaps because I was shy, so much so that I was voted the politest student in my elementary school graduating class. Also, my father was fairly conservative in terms of what he felt I should be exposed to.

A friend and I asked two girls in our class out on what was supposed to be a double date to mark our graduation from 8th grade. While I was allowed to have a date, unlike my friend who took his girl to see a stage performance of "Guys and Dolls", dad felt I wasn't ready for live theater. So we went to see the film "The Greatest Show On Earth", which in terms of exposing a young person to the hard realities of life was probably even less appropriate than the musical, based on stories by Damon Runyon.

Because I was shy, I wasn't that comfortable with change, which turned out to be a blessing. We moved shortly after I started attending Von Steuben high school, which was about a mile walk from our apartment in the old neighborhood. However, the idea of going to a new school was frightening, so I told my father I didn't want to change, although this meant taking two buses and considerably more travel time. Well, my father, who as I mentioned had worked for the Chicago Board of Education, apparently spoke to someone there, and was told I could stay at Von Steuben. That's where I met a lifelong friend, who lived outside that school district as well, in a different direction, but whose father had gotten similar permission for him to attend.

Q: Educational systems. Now you have elementary school, junior high, and high school. Did you have a junior high then?

DAKS: No, it was nine years of elementary school, counting kindergarten, four years of high school and then on to college.

Q: By the end of the sixth or seventh year in elementary, you probably have developed some particular interests, subjects reading, a stimulating teacher?

DAKS: At that point, I began reading history, and fiction that promoted the use of one's imagination, perhaps because I was a daydreamer. My dad was very intelligent, self-educated, but he worked most of the time, so in terms of formal schooling, there

wasn’t a lot of mentoring going on. However, he did promote education, saying it was priceless in the sense it was something “nobody could ever take away from you”.

Q: Now, was there a public library in this neighborhood?

DAKS: We did have a library in the area. And I suppose we must have had a school library, certainly we did in high school. But I don't remember using either facility, at least not when I was in elementary school. What I do recall is faithfully listening to the radio on the weekends. The action, adventure and mystery programs really stimulated my imagination.

Q: Any radio show that particularly struck your fancy?

DAKS: So many. Through “Captain Midnight,” “Green Hornet,” “Superman,” “Tom Mix,” and other radio programs I envisioned myself being all the things that I wasn't.

There is a Chinese saying “*jing di zhi wa*”, the frog at the bottom of the well, in other words a person of very limited experience. Growing up, living in an ethnic enclave, this was my world. I remember when I was nine, ten or eleven at the most, meeting the son of a janitor in one of the apartment buildings on my block. He had recently come from Germany. I don't know how I even learned that he was not Jewish, which I found surprising, and led to one of the first realizations that I was not a member of the majority group. Now, I did hear news on the radio and see things in movie newsreels, but somehow I was still shocked, upon learning that someone in my neighborhood didn't share my religion.

Q: One of the political events that you might have become aware of at the end of elementary school was the Truman-Dewey election in November '48, you would have been ten years old by then.

DAKS: I remember that election vividly. Most everyone who I knew thought that Dewey would be elected president, but that didn't turn out to be the case. My home town newspaper, the Chicago Tribune, even ran the headline “Dewey Defeats Truman”. Coincidentally, my wife and I recently visited the Truman Presidential Library. I've long been fascinated by, interested in and an admirer of Truman.

Q: How did your family vote, if you recall, or respond to that election?

DAKS: Well, my family, everyone as far as I know voted the straight Democratic ticket, the designated Republican was not even in their mindset. But growing up in a city at that time, that's just the way that at least in my area, that's the way it was. I don't recall anybody ever expressing any views growing up in a positive way about the other party.

Q: Now, you're talking about your reading habits earlier. Were you much of a movie fan?

DAKS: Yes, I went to the movies regularly. There were three theaters within walking distance and several others easily accessible by street car or bus, or by hitching a ride. One of the more distant theaters, the Times, a favorite, always showed 3 second or third run films and 5 cartoons. The films were generally low budget Westerns, comedies or action features, all for 25 cents. The copies of these films had been shown so often that frequently segments of the sound were no longer audible. So shootouts, absent the sound of bullets flying, were a throwback to the silent era, but without the benefit of music to enhance what was going on. As I got a bit older, I would take my sister or younger cousins to the Times. The entire show was so long that when you came out of the theater, you were disoriented, as to what direction you were supposed to go, in order to get back home. Reflecting, I wonder how I managed to sit still that long.

Q: Now, the Korean War started in June of 1950 and you're twelve years old, you must have been reading the newspapers about that and discussing it in school and whatnot.

DAKS: Yes, well, I don't know if I was reading newspaper articles about the war. But certainly I listened to radio and later watched television, and people talked about it. In fact, you just touched on something interesting. I can't recall a newspaper being delivered to our home. I doubt if we subscribed. However on Sundays my dad would buy the *Chicago Tribune* occasionally and bring it home. My most vivid memory of the Korean War, however, was when President Truman fired General Douglas MacArthur from his position as commander of the United Nations forces defending Korea. MacArthur spoke before a joint session of the Congress where his speech ended in his quote "Old Soldiers Never Die-they just fade away." I was so moved that I bought a record containing that speech. And I also recall MacArthur speaking to a packed house at Soldier's Field in Chicago. I remember thinking, he'll be president. However, like the song he quoted, MacArthur did "fade away". After that, fast forward a few years, not that long after I graduated from law school, I distinctly remember the Cuban Missile Crises, and the fear that war was going to break out with Russia and that it might even hit the U.S. mainland.

Overall, however, growing up, in my family there was little interest in what was happening in other countries. My mother didn't follow the news at all and my dad was too busy earning a living. Once he left the Chicago Board of Education, and he spent time as a traveling salesman, from then on he worked nearly every day, or so it seemed, perhaps seventy hours a week. The only exception to that routine was a couple of weeks a year when our family would either go to a resort or drive around several of the Midwestern states.

Many of the people, who were living where I grew up, were either children or grandchildren of people who fled Europe, Holocaust survivors. Maybe events outside of the United States weren't something they particularly wanted to focus on. They wanted to forget about past tragedy and build a new life for themselves and for their children.

Q: Now, when did your family first buy a television set?

DAKS: I would say around 1948, that era. We had a small television set, and watched the "Texaco Star Theater", starring Milton Berle, and other shows. I've also a vivid memory of other fairly early television shows like "Your Show of Shows" with Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca and then later "Have Gun – Will Travel" with Richard Boone. I watched a fair amount of television, probably more than I should have.

Q: Now, '52, you started high school at Von Steuben. Again, the Chicago system names its schools very well. You've got to have been very patriotic to go to Von Steuben. But what do you recall as the composition of the student body?

DAKS: It was like Volta elementary school. When the Jewish high holidays came around, the school almost closed down as well. There were maybe 1,300 or 1,400 students. Under fifty were non Jews. Another nearby high school, Roosevelt, also had a similar, demographic makeup. Nowadays Von is an excellent science-focused school, drawing from all over the city. Interestingly, the alumni from my era are generous in support of the school and its students, despite their coming from backgrounds very different from ours.

Q: How did High School impact your reading habits?

DAKS: History and social studies were probably my favorite classes in high school. I particularly remember the history class taught by Mr. Lang. Perhaps, in part because of him, I got into reading more history, in addition to fiction. Overall, however, I wasn't a diligent student, and that was reflected in my grades, but I was well behaved. So with the encouragement of one or more of the teachers, I ran for student council president. The winner of the election that year, Barbara Gitler, got about 1,300 votes, and then two of us who the faculty encouraged to run received around fifty votes each. That was my one experience with active elective office. You don't have to wonder why.

Earlier in this interview, I discussed my lack of involvement with sports. This naturally affected my physical fitness. Going into my senior year of high school, I was a fairly chubby teenager. Then my class was doing a skit, a comic take-off on the movie Rebel Without A Cause, and for some reason I was selected to play the James Dean part. Well, shortly after being picked, I went to actually see the movie. And perhaps ignoring that I was chosen as a joke, I took the actor's screen image seriously, and promptly went on a diet, losing at least 20 pounds. Since then, up until today, I've paid more attention to fitness, in terms of walking regularly and, at times, doing other forms of exercise to keep myself reasonably fit.

Q: Von Steuben, you must have had a favorite teacher.

DAKS: Well, as I mentioned there was Mr. Lang, who taught American history, Virgil Puzzo who also taught history and social studies, and a Mr. Bush, who taught math courses. Math and science were very challenging for me, but Bush was entertaining. He sort of resembled the kind of mad science genius one might see portrayed in a Disney film. I also studied Spanish with Miss McGail. I remember it well because the methodology used and materials were not conducive to developing proficiency. Add to

that the lack of opportunity to really use the language, and there was little incentive to develop fluency.

One of the earliest lines in our Spanish textbook, really reflects the passage of time, still bringing a smile to my face. Rough translation. “What is a burro? It is an important animal.”

Q: Now, in between high school years, what did you do during the summers?

DAKS: I worked a couple of summers at the Moscow company where my dad was the Vice President and General Manager. They produced a catalog, sent all over the country, so the bulk of the business was mail order. Mostow was, as I mentioned earlier, self-described as “wholesale to the general public”. Maybe you could say it was a precursor to something like Costco, except there was no showroom. Customers who lived in the vicinity would order at a counter in the building, after looking up their desired items in the catalog. So I worked in the stock room. They were located first in Chicago on the north side. Then later they moved to the Chicago suburbs.

However, the summer between high school and college, I got a job at Warner Brothers. Not the media giant, but at the warehouse of a company manufacturing bras and other female undergarments. I guess you could say I was into “kinky” before it was fashionable. One of my tasks at the company was to cut the labels off certain undergarments, the ones that were sent to large retail outfits who sold them at deep discounts.

Like many of my friends, I wasn't unique in misrepresenting my intentions. In June, I was asked “Are you going off to college?” “Oh, no, I'm working here,” I replied. Then miraculously at the end of the summer, I had a change of heart.

Other jobs I tried, for very brief periods, were selling ice cream from a bicycle peddled cart and going door-to-door trying to get people to sign up for magazine subscriptions.

These experiences, and more importantly seeing my dad’s outstanding work ethic through the various jobs he had, left me with an appreciation for business people. And, I think, this reflected itself in an interest I showed at various points in my career in programming to support the American private sector.

Q: Did you have an opportunity to do things like Cub Scouts? Boy Scouts?

DAKS: Yes, I was a Cub Scout for a year or two, and my mother was a den mother. I don't think that evolved into a serious commitment to the Boy Scouts, although I may have briefly participated. And maybe a year or two after I participated in the Scouts, I went away to summer camp, not my favorite experience, again because I’m not really an outdoor person. Then as a teenager, most summers I just hung out with my best friend Marc Stickgold, dating only occasionally.

Growing up, our very close family, on both sides, was a very important part of my life. My father's family consisted of my grandmother and three aunts, their spouses and children, four cousins. One aunt and her husband were larger than life type people, who I absolutely loved being with. Whether it was going to sporting events with my Uncle Itch, Isadore, or going out for what seemed like endless courses at Club El Bianco for so called "fiesta dinners", time spent with them represent treasured moments.

My mother's family was much bigger. There were seven siblings, grandparents, and cousins. We had a cousins club. Periodically family members got together, where the men might play cards. The women met even more regularly, frequently playing mahjong. And at Passover we had large family Seders. To this day, these ties still remain, but there's far fewer of us left.

Q: That's basically an urban sort of growing up. There were no open fields and trees.

DAKS: Well Volta elementary school had an open field where we would run around and in the summer play a type of softball unique to Chicago, using a 16-inch ball, the size of a grapefruit. A glove wasn't necessary, because the ball quickly became somewhat soft. In addition, there was another Chicago game called Pinners which we played against one of Volta's outside walls.

Reflecting now, there's lots of things unique to Chicago, which are a part of my DNA. So, while I haven't really lived in the Windy City for over 60 years, whenever someone asks me where I am from, my answer remains "Chicago". The sights, the architecture, the food and, above all else, the people who I associate with growing up, have led me to develop an interest in family history. And, so, in recent years, I've taken the initiative to organize, with the help of a few others, two family reunions on my mother's side.

The first reunion took place in Chicago in 2005. We had 166 people from all over the U.S., Canada, and a number of whom came out of Russia fairly recently. Then in 2012, we had a second reunion in Winnipeg. Six-six people came to that one. Again, family from across North America and even a couple of cousins now living in Israel came. Because I got so involved with research when organizing the latter event, it turned out I knew more about our family's roots in Winnipeg than the attendees who were actually born, raised and still lived there.

Q: Now, were you a Chicago White Sox fan?

DAKS: No, come on! I'm a northsider. Early on I was a Chicago Cubs fan and then later I became a Brooklyn Dodgers fan. Why? In part because I got interested in Jackie Robinson. But also maybe it's because I couldn't stand to always be a loser. Although, the Cubs did win the pennant in 1945.

My dad, by the way, for a time was a vendor at Wrigley Field. He actually worked the game where Babe Ruth pointed prior to hitting a home run. Although, my father did say it

wasn't clear as to what Ruth was really pointing at. Anyway, I did go to Cubs games growing up.

Perhaps I went to a White Sox game as well. However, the Sox played at Comiskey Park on the South Side. It was a long train ride from where I lived to Comiskey. And overall North and South-Siders in Chicago, as I recall, didn't often get over to the other part of the city, although most everyone went downtown or to the Near North Side of the city. That reflected what was and still probably is Chicago's status as the most segregated big city in America.

Q: Now you were saying your family was very definitive Democrat voters, but Eisenhower won the election in '53. Did that cause any change in your attitude toward politics or how things are run?

DAKS: I was a volunteer in several political campaigns when I was a student, in high school. The first campaign I volunteered for was that of Robert Merriam. He was an independent Democrat, who represented the city's 5th ward, encompassing the University of Chicago. In 1955, after failing to get the Democratic nomination, he ran as the Republican candidate for mayor against Richard J. Daley. Merriam lost by several hundred thousand votes, probably the closest anyone ever came to defeating Daley. Subsequently, Merriam became deputy director of the Bureau of the Budget during the Eisenhower Administration.

Prior to that I had worked as a volunteer for Senator Paul Douglas when he was successfully re-elected in 1954. And later for Adlai Stevenson's second, unsuccessful campaign. Obviously, at the time I was not interested in seeing Eisenhower elected. However, thinking about the current political climate and even the climate over the last twenty or thirty years. I don't remember the kind of strong, bitter feelings about Eisenhower they would be directed against an opponent today. Of course, he was a war hero. But I remember people who were not Republicans speaking disparagingly of what they perceived as Eisenhower's lack of intellect. However, historians now view Ike in a much better light, and I myself now have different thoughts as to whether Stevenson had the right stuff to be president.

I remember a cousin telling me that Stevenson was an "anachronism". So one concrete benefit of this volunteer experience was adding to my vocabulary in a modest way.

Q: Now you were saying you were a volunteer campaigner for Merriam, what did that involve?

DAKS: Working in the office, answering phones, running errands and doing whatever clerical things that needed to be done. Now, I have to say while he was known as a reformer, even the reformers have their bag of tricks and I got involved in one of them. A television station was conducting a mail in survey as to who supported Merriam and who supported Richard J. Daley. So they told a couple of us young kids "Write postcards signing various names,... we're going to mail them in." And so that's what I did. Not

proud, but I went along with this childish move. It didn't work. And I also remember after election night, actually going over to Daley headquarters, where they were all celebrating. They certainly seemed like a civil enough group.

The campaign that I found the most satisfying to work in as a volunteer was that of Senator Paul Douglas. A man of extremely high principles, Douglas was a war hero and a liberal icon. At the same time, he had a practical side and would on occasion compromise to move forward on an issue of concern.

Q: Now, in '56, you graduate from high school? How did you decide what university you might be interested in?

DAKS: Well, why did I even decide to go to college? First of all, Von Steuben was a school populated by students, who by-and-large, came from families who placed high value on education. So most every graduate went on to college, so there was that expectation. But since the students' families were at best middle income, a school offering in-state tuition was attractive. And while living away from home added financial burden, tuition, room and board were still relatively reasonable.

Moreover, many of my dad's close friends went on to college and became successful professionals. He was the only one, who immediately upon graduating high school began working to help support his mother and sister. And he would frequently tell me, "Larry, you can't put a value on an education. They can never take it away from you." In addition, I think he also felt that living away from home would be a good experience. And, in hindsight, like so many other pieces of advice offered, he was right.

So I went to the University of Illinois, in Champaign-Urbana, as many of the other kids did. In the 1950s, perhaps because of the lack of competition, and relatively few out-of-state or international students, mere graduation from high school got you into the flagship state university.

It was a wonderful three-year experience, Champaign-Urbana. I wasn't an outstanding student, but my grades steadily improved, because I applied myself more and found political science and economics courses of interest. Interestingly, it's only when I got to the Peace Corps, that foreign language study became a priority.

Q: Shortly after you started University of Illinois, the Russians put the Sputnik up. How did you and your colleagues respond to that event?

DAKS: What I recall is that starting from when I was in high school and continuing into my college years, people my age were constantly exposed to the so-called Soviet menace. The era of Joseph McCarthy was winding down, but the residual effects of any thinking that indicated a perceived sympathy towards the communist ideology remained. I remember bringing home literature about socialism and my father got very, very upset. I'm not sure if he was more upset with the fact that I was reading about socialism and

communism, or he was more afraid of being labeled as someone who is sympathetic to this kind of thing.

Q: What were these materials that you were looking at?

DAKS: Maybe the *Daily Worker*. On several occasions I went down to Washington Square Park on the near north side of Chicago, more popularly known as Bughouse Square, perhaps the leading outdoor free speech zone of its kind at that time. Their materials could be obtained and people would speak out on the social and political issues of the day, almost always from an extreme far-left point of view. Reflecting back, I would describe myself as someone who had a knee-jerk reaction in terms of sympathy for liberal causes. I still see myself as being sympathetic to liberal causes, but I hope my reasoning is more logic based now.

In college, I was exposed to a somewhat broader range of people, although still mainly from Chicago, but several were from the South Side, a part of the city which until then I was largely unfamiliar with. I met them, and a few New Yorkers, living in resident student housing during my first two years.

An experience that stands out in my mind was born out of failure. At that time the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, was known as “the fraternity capital of the world”. Still fairly shy, nevertheless upon arrival for university orientation, I participated in a so-called fraternity rush. While not being invited to pledge, at the rush I met a fellow freshman, a resident of Hume, a 400-person “village” in central Illinois, the unlikely home for a three generation Jewish family tracing their roots back to Eastern Europe.

This friend, whose brilliant mind was eclipsed by his partying, flunked out of Illinois, but then amazingly continued at both Harvard and the University of Chicago, where he was, until his death, a renowned philosopher. And when we next met again, about 50 years later, his opening remark to me, despite his success, was, “I’m so ashamed!”

I also broadened my circle of friends in other ways, through a girlfriend who was interested in theater.

Q: Sounds like your collection of friends is getting a little broader than just your particular Chicago. I'm sure there were a lot of rural students and whatnot.

DAKS: Yes, there were a lot of students from downstate Illinois, but other than living together in the dormitory, there was little contact, and those few interactions weren’t uniformly pleasant. I have a vague but recognizable exposure to antisemitism. Later, law school was a bit more diverse, but the world really opened up for me when I joined the Peace Corps.

Q: Now in the courses that you were taking at University of Illinois, what professors lit a fire for you?

DAKS: I found Jack Peltason who taught political science, and authored textbooks on the subject, to be a fascinating lecturer. I don't really have a strong recollection of other courses, with the possible exception of spending an inordinate amount of time on conjugation of verbs in Latin and a remedial writing course taken during my first semester.

My memories of Illinois revolve around on-campus life, time spent with close friends, eating at the university residence hall cafeteria and, during my last year, living in a boarding house and working as a waiter at a sorority, that kind of thing.

Q: Now as the '50s unfold, there's all kinds of international events that come up in the courses that you were taking. Did you do any regional studies, Asia, Africa?

DAKS: I must have taken a world history course, although it doesn't come immediately to mind. However, I didn't take any regional study courses. Nor, growing up, was international travel something I even thought of. Until the time I joined the Peace Corps, the only time I'd been outside of the United States was when I was maybe four or five years old. I was taken to Winnipeg, Canada for a wedding. Fast forward 50 some years later, I came full circle and organized that family reunion in Winnipeg.

Q: Now, tuition in those times was not crushing. But in your summers, did you have a job? Or were you taking courses during the summer?

DAKS: In the summers, I worked off and on at the Moscow company as a stock boy. The job wasn't onerous and I took time out to travel. I went to New York once by myself to see relatives and one time with two close friends. As I mentioned earlier, growing up there were also family vacations, either going to a resort in the Midwest or driving around one of the Great Lakes.

Q: Let's see, if you're living in an urban area, there's not a lot of parking. I assume you were the traditional one-car family.

DAKS: My father gave me a car when I was in law school. It was a blue Buick. However, generally, we were a one-car family. That was dictated more by income than by the availability of parking.

Q: Now you're saying you were three years at Illinois? Normally it's four years, did you graduate early?

DAKS: No. However, at that time Northwestern Law School accepted a few students who had completed just three years of college. Perhaps they were less selective in 1959, because as I've mentioned my grades weren't particularly good, perhaps a B- average. And while my score on the Law School Aptitude test was better than average, at the 83 percentile, certainly not something that jumped out at you. As to why law, well my dad kept stressing that having a profession was desirable, and this was the only field for which I had an inkling of interest.

Northwestern counted my first year of law school towards an undergraduate degree. So in 1960 I was awarded a Bachelor of Science in Law. Then in 1962 I graduated, receiving a Bachelor of Law degree.

Years later, while serving in Taiwan, Northwestern announced that for twenty-five dollars, LLB (Bachelor of Laws) degree holders could get their degree upgraded to a Juris Doctor, reasoning that all law school graduates had taken the same courses, so why differentiate. Coincidentally, at that time, there was scandal on the island, because some political candidates who were required to hold at least a bachelor degree were found to have purchased their degree, without attending any classes, from dubious organizations in Japan. I had a bit of fun with that, telling my contacts that like the accused Taiwan legislators, I too had bought my degree.

Q: You weren't really burning to go into law school, it was an opportunity that seemed to be the thing to do.

DAKS: I think that's accurate. I didn't want to disappoint my father and, frankly, was afraid to pursue full time work.

Q: Now, law school is a significantly different academic environment. How did it strike you the way they were presenting the courses and the materials?

DAKS: Well, Northwestern at the time–I don't know if they still use this term–it was not considered a true rule school. In other words, they didn't teach you specifically to pass the bar exam. They focused on cases and the philosophy of law. So there was a significant opportunity for discussion, and I blossomed in that environment, in terms expressing myself. This led some classmates to assume that I was a top student, even though I was near the bottom. In fact, along with several similarly ranked classmates, we mutually acknowledged ourselves as principals on the "lower half law review".

Expressing myself was one thing, but listening was where I fell short. I just assumed that I could breeze through by actively participating in class. But after those first semester grades came out, I was in for quite an awakening.

That initial poor performance really turned me off, although I still felt pressure to continue, but gradually my class attendance dropped, especially in the final year when it dropped dramatically. Interestingly, my grades got a bit better then. Fortunately, I graduated.

The only time I really buckled down was for the bar exam. There was a multi-week cram course for the test, run by a good humored man named Hardy, who taught strictly to the test. Since I couldn't imagine myself taking the examination more than once, I really took the course seriously, moved out of my house into one of the university dormitories, and burned the candle late every night reading and re-reading my examination notes. At that time, the test lasted two and one-half days and it was largely essay. And, fortunately, I

passed. Perhaps it was because my handwriting is nearly illegible, so the examiners may have just looked the other way rather than develop a migraine.

Q: Now while you're in law school, in November 1960s, and the American presidential election, Kennedy and Nixon. How did that reverberate in your eyes and the group of people that you were living and working with?

DAKS: People were enamored with Kennedy, his youth and the glamour of this vibrant young couple. As a result, idealism ran strong among most young people, although frankly my motivations were more self-centered.

Near the end of my time at law school, when Kennedy was already president, there was a notice on one of the bulletin boards at Northwestern that there was a program that was likely to be started, one of the earliest Peace Corps programs, sending lawyers to Africa to provide legal advice. Thinking back, it seems presumptuous to presume that a law school student, with little or no real world experience, might make a useful contribution. Nevertheless, I immediately sent something into the Peace Corps. In part because it seemed more interesting than practicing law at home, which frightened me. Also, the military draft was heating up, and this alternate prospect was appealing, although I certainly had registered, and no doubt would have gone if called up. But that's what led me to the Peace Corps.

Then when I was about to or shortly after graduation, and hadn't heard anything, I called the Washington headquarters of the Peace Corps.

Since this was the very early days of the program, things were being done on the fly, ad hoc. So the person I spoke with told me the program hadn't started, but proceeded to ask, “Do you want to go to Thailand to teach English?” I didn't even know where Thailand was, but replied I would respond the following day. Then I immediately went to my neighborhood library and borrowed five or six books about Thailand. None of these books represented any reality that I subsequently experienced, portraying a land filled with wild elephants, snakes, things like that. Nevertheless,
despite some trepidation, and to the shock and disappointment of my parents, I accepted the offer. So that's really what led me to this international life, not something well planned.

Q: Well, speaking of international life in 1962, you have the Cuban Missile Crisis.

DAKS: Yes.

Q: In October, that must have had its own reverberation in your mind, and in the minds of your friends.

DAKS: Yes. I thought we were on the verge of war. That's a very clear memory I had: we are on the verge of war, it was going to be a disaster. At the time, the month before I joined the Peace Corps, I was working at the Commerce Clearing House where we

summarized law cases and produced publications of these synopsis for lawyers. And yes, I do remember that being a terrifying experience, thinking about it and that we may be on the verge of a nuclear war, then enjoying a great sense of relief, after it seemed to have been resolved.

Q: Now, in addition to that, in June of that year, you had James Meredith enter the University of Mississippi, he had to be escorted by federal troops. Were domestic things coming out of the south on your radar?

DAKS: I certainly was aware of desegregation efforts and other aspects of the civil rights movement. But other than as a volunteer in a few elections, I was not active. I never engaged in protests or civil disobedience. It's not something I'm proud to say but it's a reality. I was on the sidelines, you could say, during that period, although I provided emotional support. I said the right things but I was too wrapped up in myself, too selfish, to do more.

Q: Let me get this straight. You saw the advertisement about the possibility of sending lawyers to Africa, as part of an early Peace Corps program, and you reached out and then followed up. But when did you finish your law studies?

DAKS: I finished in June of 1962. I probably saw the announcement early that year, after the first group had already gone to Thailand, and a number of other programs had been launched in Africa, Asia and Latin America. I joined the Peace Corps in November of 1962.

As I recall now, and through what I've heard at a number of reunions, the largest single number of my fellow volunteers were motivated by idealism. However, in my case, it was a desire for something other than law, and a sense of adventure, trying something new. There certainly was an element of idealism or maybe it was being naive, that I could go as a newly graduated, inexperienced lawyer, perhaps being sent to a country that didn't even use our common law system, and provide useful input.

Fortunately, when I joined the Peace Corps to go to Thailand as an English teacher, even though I had not been trained in teaching English as a second or foreign language, being an educated native speaker gave me a leg up on practically all the other English teachers in the Thai educational system.

Q: Now, if you graduated from law school in June, there would have been an opportunity to be recruited by some law firm or onward employment, but that wasn't what you followed.

DAKS: Right. I already had done some work when I was in law school. I remember working as a volunteer, or perhaps it was part of the curriculum, in a legal aid office, and doing hourly research to determine whether "yo-yo" was a generic term and no longer protected as a trademark. As mentioned, I also worked at the Commerce Clearing House for a few months following graduation, summarizing cases for legal publications.

Northwestern was a highly rated law school, so if I had been near the top of my class, I probably would have been recruited by a leading law firm. But I wasn't and thinking back, I'm grateful because I would have not been a good fit.

One of my last assignments in the Foreign Service was at the Board of Examiners, in the State Department, the office responsible for recruiting, testing and issuing hiring offers to successful applicants. In that position, I was proactive about going out and speaking about the career of a diplomat, frequently finding my own opportunities. So, at one point I kind of retraced my career path, speaking at Northwestern Law about the foreign service. Visiting the school after a multi-decade absence, delivering my talk, and gauging the level of interest among the few students who attended, I thought to myself, "Thank God that I did not pursue a legal career."

At the same time, I can now more fully appreciate my time at Northwestern Law School. In fact, while recruiting for the foreign service, is when I realized how fortunate I was. As mentioned, I frequently would go to various venues to give recruitment talks. And while the audience knew about my background in terms of where I served and what I did as a diplomat, my education wasn't mentioned. Yet, the single most frequent question I got was whether I thought law was a good preparation for the Foreign Service. And, out of the blue, my response was that the one thing the law teaches you is to be able to present both sides of an argument, because all arguments have more than one side. I would then use as an example that if tasked with writing a *marcher* to protest the unequal treatment of U.S. tobacco products in country X, one needs to be able to make the best possible argument, regardless of personal belief on the wisdom of the product's use. So while I was not the greatest student, legal training gave me the discipline to look at an issue from all sides, and not let my emotions get in the way.

Q: I'd like to stop here and pick this up in another session because there's such a jump from seeing you in judicial robes to seeing you teaching English in Thailand and I want to spend a lot of time, proper time with Thailand. Would that be okay with you?

DAKS: That's fine. I haven't put you to sleep yet, so I appreciate your patience.

Q: This is just a lot of fun all around.

***

Q: Good afternoon, everybody. It's May 1, and we're returning to our conversation with Larry Daks. Now, Larry, we left you last session with getting out of law school. You obviously may have had some further law interests, but there's a gap between getting out of law school and the next part of your life, which is the Peace Corps. So, how did the Peace Corps come to your attention?

DAKS: Well, I'm repeating myself. But I graduated law school in June of 1962. Perhaps a few weeks or months before that, uncertain as to the exact time, I noticed there was an announcement on a bulletin board at the law school that the Peace Corps was in the process of establishing a program to send lawyers to Africa. It wasn't a program with a definitive date, but rather more a solicitation of interest for what was likely an aspirational program on the part of this new federal agency. I don't recall what country in Africa they were referring to, or if it was just Africa in general. However, I sent a letter or a postcard, I'm not sure what it was, to the Peace Corps. My principal motivation was the chance for an interesting adventure and, quite frankly, a preferred alternative to the draft, for which I had just registered.

Q: How long did it take the Peace Corps to respond to your postcard?

DAKS: They didn't respond, I followed up by calling Peace Corps headquarters. At that point, I'm guessing it was the early fall of 1962, after graduation, and after learning that I had passed the bar examination. I was working at the Commerce Clearing House at the time.

So I called and asked about the program and was told that it had not yet been launched. Then, after a brief discussion, the person who took my call explained an upcoming program involving sending volunteers to Thailand to teach English. And I was asked, "Are you interested?" In response, I asked for a day to think things over. Then I immediately went to my local library and got five or six books on Thailand. Obviously, I didn't spend a lot of time with those books, rather skimming through them. While Thailand certainly seemed interesting, more appealing than working in the legal area, upon reflection the information provided had little resemblance to the reality I encountered once I got there. But I called back and accepted.

Q: What was their response to your acceptance? Were you brought into Washington or?

DAKS: I'll answer that in part by first responding to a question that you haven't asked and that is what was my family's reaction? It meant a lot to my dad that I had graduated law school, and my mother was also very proud, and there was the expectation that this would be my chosen profession. For my part, I wasn't enjoying my first experience, working at the Commerce Clearing House, and I was reluctant to try and further pursue any effort to get a job with a law firm, in no small part because I lacked confidence. Anyway, there were a couple of days after I told my folks of my intention where they tried to discourage me, but that didn't work.

On the Peace Corps side, I learned that for this program, starting in November of that year, training would take place at the University of Washington in Seattle. In those early days, Peace Corps training was done in the United States at various universities. I was a part of the third group of volunteers sent to Thailand. I believe the first two groups did training at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and Indiana University.

Our training ran from mid-November 1962 until mid-February 1963, with a break to return home during the Christmas holidays.

Q: Now how many people were in your group?

DAKS: There were fifty of us who started and forty-three who went to Thailand.

Q: What did the dropouts represent?

DAKS: There was one person who dropped on her own shortly after arrival. I supposed she realized it wasn't for her. For the rest of our group, we went through the three-month program and, at the end, a so-called "deselection" took place, where individuals were advised they would not be part of the group going to Thailand. Over the course of the program, there was a psychologist, and we heard talks given by people, generally academics, who were supposed to be familiar with Thailand, its customs, culture and history. The overall program was very intensive.

The reasoning for deselection varied. One person had great difficulty, more than anyone else, learning the language. There was a couple who had been washed out of another program. The wife exhibited what was judged to be inappropriate behavior, at least from the perception of the people managing the program. There was also a woman, considerably older than the majority of us, who had come to the United States from Germany as an adult. Some of us speculated that perhaps there was a security aspect to her deselection. Interestingly, she was an anthropologist, who wound up visiting Thailand on her own, and establishing a name for herself in terms of insights into the country and its culture.

Q: Interesting. Now, what was the training like? What was your typical day?

DAKS: Well we had lectures and training on teaching English as a foreign language, area studies and American studies, as well as some physical education and health issues. And, interestingly, there were about 15 hours devoted to communism including segments describing its "menace". There was also an occasional cultural program.

However, study of the Thai language was the main focus. I believe we had at least four hours of Thai each day; the classes were quite small. So the program was intensive.

We all lived together near the campus, in a building with small apartments, four people to a suite. With the exception of physical education, we had all of our courses and meals in this facility as well. The building, called the Wilsonian, is now a condominium. In recent years, I've stopped by and marveled how it's changed from a structure that had clearly seen better days, to a renovated, sort of upscale structure. Built in the 1920s, the building has been designated by the city of Seattle as an historic property.

One other thing. At the same time, another Peace Corps group going to the Dominican Republic lived, ate and trained at the Wilsonian as well. And there was obviously some

synergy here, because two ladies from our group wound up marrying guys in the other training group. In one case, the volunteers who became a couple, were roughly the same age, and from the same home town in Rhode Island, had never met prior to training.

Q: Now, I presume the instructors and whatnot were University of Washington faculty?

DAKS: The language instructors were from Thailand, and most were students at the university. In the early years, when the Peace Corps conducted training in the U.S., they went where a sufficient number of qualified native speakers could be found to teach. So the first two Thai programs took place at Indiana University and the University of Michigan. In 1962, overall there weren't that many students from Thailand in the United States, but there were a fair number at a few large state universities. As for the faculty, specialists were brought in, although there may have been one or two people from the University of Washington faculty. But several were outsiders. The ones I recall are Albert Ravenholt, a reporter focusing on Asia, and Robert Textor an anthropologist.

Q: Now, did the program also include exposure to Thai food?

DAKS: There was some exposure. On one or two occasions, when we got together informally with our teachers, they made Thai food. I don’t have detailed memories of these gatherings, but the classroom interaction made a deep impression on me because we were with the teachers for a number of hours every day. And I still see one particular instructor, Khun Tann, during our annual visits back to Thailand. ("Khun" is a polite term, the equivalent of Mr./Ms./Mrs. We've maintained a close relationship.)

Q: So as students the Thai language instructors were probably younger or even the same age as the Peace Corps people?

DAKS: Yes, most fairly close in age to most of us. However, a couple of the instructors were a bit older. One such teacher, now 101, was Chularb Wasuwat, an accomplished tennis player who had competed internationally. Another one of our instructors, who was a bit older, a graduate student married to an American, went on to a very distinguished academic career and ultimately became Deputy Minister of Agriculture in one of many of Thailand’s revolving governments. In addition to Tann, I’ve periodically had occasional contact with a couple of our other instructors over the years.

Q: What was graduation like?

DAKS: You mean graduation from the Peace Corps?

Q: From the Peace Corps program. Yeah.

DAKS: I don't remember if there was a ceremony. There may have been, but it was probably overshadowed, because on the very last day that's when they told us who was going and who had been deselected and not allowed to travel. And, of course, there were people in our group who were really on edge about that. One of my closest friends was

George Papagiannis and he was really worried, although fortunately he wound up going to Thailand. As I recall, one-by-one, they called us into a room and gave out the news.

Q: I assume there's sort of a break after your training? Did you immediately have to go to Thailand?

DAKS: As I recall, the only break we had was midway in training, around the holiday season.
During that break, one day, my dad said, "Let's go out to dinner". We went to a favorite Italian restaurant. And lo and behold, I walked in and there were about fifty family and friends, a surprise party, to celebrate my passing the bar exam. Not because I was going to Thailand. Somehow fellow trainee George Papagiannis, who was also from Chicago, was included in the festivities.

Q: Did you go to Thailand, then through Seattle?

DAKS: We went as a group, taking Northwest Airlines from Seattle, touching down in Alaska and then staying overnight in Tokyo, before arriving in Bangkok.

Q: And let's see, you would have come to Bangkok around February. That'd be a fairly cool period.

DAKS: It was the cool season for Bangkok. I think it was February 16. In fact, three of us recently marked the sixtieth anniversary of our arrival in Thailand, by having lunch in Bangkok. It was particularly meaningful for me because our daughter was there as well.

Q: Now on arrival in Bangkok, was the group living together in the same hotel?

DAKS: No, the early groups, including ours, had host families. And so upon arrival we were sent off to various locations around the city. Myself and two or three other volunteers, went to the home of Mom Luang Terb Choomsai, who at the time was perhaps the most famous chef in Thailand. She had the cafeteria concession for the SEATO, Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, cafeteria. SEATO, which was dissolved in 1977, had its headquarters in Bangkok. “Phi Terb”, older sister Terb as I came to call her, was also a high end caterer. Anyway, we stayed at her place for about five days, and then went off to our various assignments. I was assigned to Kasetsart University in Bangkok and initially stayed at one of the school dormitories.

Q: How did you get that assignment? In Seattle? Or was that given to you when you arrived?

DAKS: We were told of our assignments after we arrived.

Q: Now, if you're the third group in Thailand, that means that there's a Peace Corps executive group or management group to handle everybody. Who is the head of the Peace Corps operations?

DAKS: His name was Glenn Ferguson. He was a terrific guy. Subsequently, he held a number of very responsible positions including head of Radio Free Europe, first director of the Volunteers in Service to America (Vista), as well as serving as Ambassador in a couple of countries and as a university president. He was succeeded by John McCarthy. There were several other staff members and a staff doctor and locally employed Thai staff as well. Like Glenn, the other staff members were, as I recall, quite competent, caring and dedicated.

The first few groups sent to Thailand consisted largely of English teachers, but there were volunteers working in other areas, including public health. Earlier, you asked about training. As mentioned, part of the training was about the field in which we were to work. So, while we all had college degrees, as I recall none of us had academic training in or experience with teaching English as a foreign language. Interestingly, at least during my time as a volunteer, there was no education requirement, so in theory someone who lacked a college degree could still serve as a Peace Corps volunteer. To this day, and this is true of the Foreign Service as well, although diplomats who lack college degrees are extremely rare.

Q: How does that work? I guess it's the same as any language you just have your students repeat.

DAKS: If you are talking about Thai language training, at that time repetition and memorization was stressed. In terms of TEFL training, a linguist tried to teach us methodology and how to present ourselves as teachers. We also had classes on how to get along in Thailand, and talks about the customs, traditions and history of the country. Early in the training, we underwent a very humbling exercise, where we were given a map, with the boundaries of the various countries outlined, but not named. Then we were asked to fill in the names. Well, as I recall, India and China were no-brainers, maybe Japan, but most of us couldn't correctly identify the location of the smaller nations, where Cambodia was, where Vietnam was in relation to Thailand, or Burma now Myanmar.

Q: Now you're with class three, were there previous people that were assigned to Kasetsart?

DAKS: Yes, there were two people from the second group who had been assigned there to teach English. I also knew people in other groups, both those who had come before us and those who followed. However, contact with volunteers from different Peace Corps groups stationed at other locations was sporadic, at least on my part. Most of my contact with other Americans were with the members of our own group. I would visit them on upcountry trips. And we also had periodic group meetings during our time in Thailand.

And then as time passed, I increasingly spent time with my in-country Thai teacher who I eventually married.

Q: Now your assignment was English teaching at a university. Were other people in group three sent to the northeast? In other parts of the country?

DAKS: Maybe four or five of us were in Bangkok, teaching at universities. The bulk of the people were sent to provincial capitals in every part of the country, teaching at boys or girls secondary schools. Several people even went to the far south of Thailand, where today volunteers would never be sent, because of security concerns.

At that time, English language study was compulsory from about fifth grade. Now I believe it's compulsory from the first grade.

Q: I assume most of your time was in Bangkok and Bangkok was the city of klongs (canals) at that time. How did Bangkok feel to you?

DAKS: Allow me to try to first answer a question you haven't even asked. That is, why was I assigned to a university in the first place? Most of our group went to secondary schools outside of Bangkok.

The only rationale I can come up with is that the staff decided to send individuals with advanced degrees, regardless of category, to institutions of higher education, and law fell into that category. Of course, I would like to believe that it was based on some other merit-based factors, but I don't think so.

Now, as far as Bangkok goes, yes, there were more canals than at the present time. However, at that point there was already a great deal of automobile traffic. So a number of the klong had already been filled. The ratio of roads to vehicles was still pretty much like it is now so traffic jams were already common. There were lots of buses, while streetcars were in the process of being phased out. Taxis were the most prevalent, roaming the streets, looking for customers.

One of the interesting things about the taxi drivers, that I remember from that time, was that they were required to wear hats. This was because one of the former prime ministers felt that civilized people had to dress a certain way. But Bangkok, even before the real onset of global warming, was quite hot, and the cabs were yet to have air conditioning. So, what you would frequently see is the cab drivers would pick you up, and if there were no police around, they'd take their hat off, and it would go on again if the authorities were around. I also recall occasions where cab drivers were wearing hats, yet driving barefooted. Also, meter use had yet to be mandated so bargaining was the custom. When my folks visited in 1964, they couldn't get over the fact that I would bargain over a baht or two difference in a fare (5 or 10 cents).

Q: Now there are three major universities in Bangkok. At this time, what was Kasetsart noted for?

DAKS: Kasetsart means agriculture and that's what it was, a university that at the time consisted of six agriculture-related faculties: agriculture, agricultural economics and

cooperatives, fisheries, forestry, irrigation and veterinary medicine. To get an undergraduate degree, which at that time was a five-year program, you also had to write a paper, the equivalent of a thesis. And they used the English words for the class levels: freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, and SUPER senior. Thailand also has a military rank of Special Colonel. I don't know if that's like super senior. I guess it's sort of an equivalency. My wife's class, the 20th, was the last to have that 5th super senior year. Subsequently, the school went to a four-year curriculum.

Q: Now, did this give you an opportunity to go to some of the agricultural areas in Thailand?

DAKS: Well, I went to various parts of Thailand because I was interested in the country, and on one such trip I went with an international student from Japan, who was studying for a master's degree in forestry.

So, whenever there were breaks I would take trips. Interestingly, Nongkran, who I eventually married, was from the south, but that's the one place I didn't go, at least not during my Peace Corps time. I went all over the northeast, central plains, north and southeast parts of the country traveling by bus and train, visiting other volunteers from our group who were stationed in the various provinces. And at one point, after I'd been in Thailand about a year, during a summer break, I exchanged places with a volunteer who was teaching English in Chiangrai, the northernmost province. I went up there and taught summer school and he came down and taught at Kasetsart.

Q: What did the Northeast look like?

DAKS: Dry for much of the year, barren and hot. And I remember at one point going up to Loei, which is a province in northeastern Thailand that borders Laos. It was during the rainy season, and I was on a big bus that got stuck on an extremely muddy, dirt road. And then the passengers, including me, got out and pushed until the bus could get moving again.

I also met people who had rather interesting things to say. I recall, again in the Northeast, walking with a farmer in a field, and it was sunset. He looked up, pointed, and asked if I had one of those in my country, referring to the sun.

Q: I was in the northeast ten years later. And when we were talking to the high school kids, they were always interested in what snow was because even the word in Thai is adopted from Hindi. Now, the U.S. Agency for International Development had been out in the field for some time building roads and whatnot. But I think you're saying, it wasn't fully in —

DAKS: Much of the road development you refer to was ongoing while I was in the Peace Corps. The Agency for International Development (AID), built an extensive road system, which is still used today, most notably “Friendship Highway” running from the eastern edge of the central plains of Thailand, all the way to a spot along the Mekong river, at the

point in the border facing Vientiane, the capital of Laos. AID contributed to the region's economic development in many other ways, although unfortunately, while the middle class has grown, the gap between the very rich and those at the opposite end of the economic spectrum in Thailand has been continuously widening.

Q: Now you're saying your wife was a student at Kasetsart?

DAKS: Yes. Despite several months of Thai language study before arriving, I certainly wasn't anything close to fluent, and so I was looking for a tutor. Nong was a student there, in her third year at the time we met. And she had been teaching another volunteer from the previous group. So, he introduced me. Also, when I arrived, Thai universities were on summer break, so I was asked to teach a special English class composed of interested students, who tended to be more fluent, I mean, compared to their peers. And Nongkran was one of the students in that class. But I really got to know her as my Thai teacher.

Q: How did that relationship develop? When did you guys get married then?

DAKS: Well, we got married during my tour, near the end. As far as how the relationship developed, it's an interesting story for which I always encounter a certain amount of disbelief. And although Nongkran and I recall things slightly differently, we agree on the basic facts.

She was my teacher for over a year. During this time, teaching me almost daily, at least a couple of hours a day. In addition, we went places together. However, we'd never even held hands or had any conversation of even a remotely romantic nature. But one day we went to a movie theater, and this strange feeling came over me. Again we'd never even held hands. Well, we walked out of the theater, and I looked at her and said, "Would you marry me and come to the United States?" That's how it happened. Sort of defies logic, but that's the way it was. She didn't answer immediately, but obviously she responded positively.

Q: And actually, this time is about the time that your Peace Corps assignment was over, right?

DAKS: Actually, I was due to leave several months later, and then I extended for another brief period so she could finish and graduate.

Q: Okay. Things in Vietnam are moving along at their own pace. Were the Thai students aware of what was going on in Vietnam? Did they discuss this with you, while living together in the dormitory?

DAKS: If they were aware they didn't talk to me about it. But keep in mind that during this period Thai students, even university students, didn't have that great an interest in matters beyond their own desire to better themselves economically. In fact, during the time I was a Peace Corps volunteer, I can't recall a single instance of a student talking to

me about Vietnam. When students I met spoke about the United States or other developed countries, it was more to contrast their perception of Thailand's backwardness with their perception as to how advanced the West was. My own awareness of the US military presence in Southeast Asia was in part through the tales of a few of my more adventurous Peace Corps colleagues who related their experience with enlisted men in the Thai-expatriate bar scene.

As to informal discussions with my students, there were probably fewer after hours opportunities than most of my fellow volunteers had. As mentioned, upon assignment to Kasetsart, I was given housing in one of the school dormitories. However, I only lived there for a few weeks. Again, it was school break so the dorms weren't that crowded. Perhaps more students and activities would have helped me get over the shock of the physical difference between a Thai and American university dorm. This wasn't Champaign-Urbana! Coincidentally, the Peace Corps office in Bangkok had announced that volunteers who wanted to live on their own, and found other arrangements, could do so, and a small, additional housing allowance would be provided.

You'll recall I mentioned we had host families during initial orientation at the time of arrival in Thailand. Well, I liked our chef-hostess, so I paid her a visit. She was an older, unmarried woman with a teen age son. And while I didn't ask her directly, maybe it was because of the way I spoke to her, or that I had gone back to visit, which prompted an invitation to live with her. And that's what I did. I stayed at her house for over two years.

Initially we lived in a lane right near a canal off Sathorn Nua Road, not far from what was then the embassy of the Soviet Union. And then we moved to another part of town, near Victory Monument, into a large house, almost like a dormitory. Along with Terb Choomsai, her son, kitchen and domestic help, a Thai military officer lived there. And, periodically, some of his fellow officers would come over and play cards and so I got to meet them, and I always ate well. In particular, when Terb catered a function for a visiting foreign VIP, I enjoyed the same dishes back at the house, as was the case when the then former Vice President Richard Nixon visited Thailand. Terb was a part of Thai royalty. So she was well known, but suffering from gradually declining economic circumstances. So, I had an interesting look into another side of Thai life.

Q: Now the Peace Corps is always associated with President Kennedy. But Kennedy was assassinated in November of '63. How did you hear the news and how did your students respond?

DAKS: Well, every Saturday or Sunday morning, I would walk to Sampheng in Bangkok's Chinatown to visit a businessman, now 102 years old, with whom I still maintain a very close relationship. On the way, passing a shop, I saw a newspaper headline, I think it was in Thai, that Kennedy had been assassinated. And I guess I was sort of numb, because I didn't respond with great grief, just went on to see my friend. But he already knew, and I'll never forget he told me "I can't eat...your president was assassinated, I have no appetite". I recall this vividly, because every time I would see

him, and we would chat, he would order food from a nearby restaurant. But that day, while he ordered lunch for me, which I ate, he didn't join in.

About ten years ago, I shared this story with my friend's niece, saying how ashamed I was, that here was someone who had never been to the United States, and who actually has more interest in China, but the assassination of Kennedy shook him to the core. Yet I proceeded to have a meal, without varying my routine. Her response, "Oh, that's a funny story".

Shortly thereafter, about two weeks later, Thai Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat died. And I recall some Thais saying that they grieved more over President Kennedy's death than Sarit's passing. This was striking to me, because in the Thai context, Sarit was fairly popular. Especially among the law-and-order group.

Q: As you're coming to the end of your Peace Corps assignment, what are you thinking is in front of you?

DAKS: I'm thinking we're returning to the United States and an uncertain situation, because my folks weren't thrilled that I married Nongkran. In fact, they had visited Thailand to dissuade us from going through with the marriage. Obviously, they were not successful, so I didn't know what to expect when I returned. However, when my dad learned we were a married couple, he told my sister that he would "learn to love her". Coming from his generation, and the thinking at that time, that was a major turning point on his part. However, family acceptance aside, I would still have to find a job. And the only option appeared to be going back to the law, even though I didn't like it.

Q: And how did you pursue that? Within the Chicago area or?

DAKS: Yes, shortly after we arrived in Chicago, I put an ad in the Wall Street Journal touting my Southeast Asian credentials. Amazingly, I got a response from a firm doing work involving Asia, but I was and remain, someone who is not overly detail-oriented. So an imprecise and erroneous written application led the person who would have made the hiring decision to ask how he could be expected to bring on someone who was so careless. That was a painful but helpful lesson, because going forward I became more aware of the need to pay more attention.

I also asked around about other jobs. We were there for a couple of months before I found something. It was a scary period, because here I was, I had a wife and she was pregnant. How am I going to support us? I knew my parents would have helped. But I wanted to be on my own.

Ultimately, perhaps through a referral, I contacted Herman Grant, the head of the regional Department of Labor office in Chicago. Coincidentally, because his agency was ramping up hiring due to the War on Poverty, there was a vacancy in the Division of Interpretations and Opinions, of the Labor Department in Washington, DC, working on

the Fair Labor Standards Act, minimum wage that kind of thing. So that's what brought me to our nation's capital.

Q: How long after the interview did you come to Washington?

DAKS: Within a few weeks. I went out first. Nongkran joined me a week or so later, once I had found an apartment. But now I need to back up a bit.

As soon as I realized we were going to live in Washington, DC, and even though we were expecting a child, I thought to myself, "Nong would like to work". So, I started making phone calls thinking, "Oh, well, she taught me Thai, Nong can teach Thai". And this is one of the wonderful coincidences of life, because when I called the Department of State, they referred me over to the Foreign Service Institute, where our officers are trained, and they just happen to be looking for a teacher of Thai. So, after Nong arrived, maybe within a couple of weeks, she had an interview and was hired.

So, we both were working. I was at the Labor Department. She was teaching Thai at the Foreign Service Institute, which really is what led to my career.

Q: Now, you've been to Chicago, you've been to Seattle. How did Washington D.C. strike you?

DAKS: Well, it was and is a beautiful city, a walker's city with a lot of history and interesting museums and monuments. While Chicago and Seattle were larger, and had worldwide commercial ties, as the nation's capital, filled with diplomatic missions, DC felt more like a true international city.

Without a car, we relied on public transportation, walking and taking an occasional taxi to get around. And so in terms of distance, we didn't cover a great deal of ground, largely spending time in the Northwest, Washington, DC area, where we were living. Our most far-flung adventures were periodic trips to Nongkran's obstetrician and later our daughter's pediatrician, in suburban Maryland, where the cab fare exceeded the doctor's fee, and we still have the receipts to prove it.

Thinking back, during that initial year or two in the DC area, we didn't begin to take advantage of all that Washington, DC had to offer. One egregious example is that although I worked directly across from the Washington Monument for a year, during that period I never visited.
Free time was spent with several co-workers, other young lawyers at the Department of Labor. While I didn't like the work, I appreciated their friendship. And then we had another circle of friends because of Nong's job, other Thai and Lao teachers at the Foreign Service Institute, as well as students preparing to take up positions in Thailand and Laos.

Q: Now, what were your duties at the Department of Labor in terms of the Fair Labor Standards Act?

DAKS: In the Division of Interpretation and Opinions, we were tasked with writing about the minimum wage and whether certain standards were met. I can't recall many details, in large part because I didn't like the work and have pushed it out of my mind. One exception was a wonderful introduction to government terminology. It was a case involving hunting wild fowl in Nebraska. And there was a quote that in Nebraska, relating to the number of hunters and the number of fowl, that there were so many million quote unquote, "Goose use days", which I think was my first introduction to bureaucratic gobbledygook.

Q: And did the geese survive?

DAKS: Well, I survived. I don't know about the geese.

Q: Now, again, Vietnam is marching along. And in fact, there were some demonstrations in Washington about the time that you arrived. How did you feel about that?

DAKS: I was certainly aware of the war, but I was not actively involved in demonstrations. Nor did I give it much thought. Perhaps I should have, but I didn't.

Q: *Now a year after you took this Department of Labor job, in early '66, how did you stumble on to the U.S. Information Agency?*

DAKS: Stumble is exactly the right word. Through Nongkran. Her students at the Foreign Service Institute, from various government agencies, had been assigned to Thailand. And as mentioned, I met them socially, along with the other Thai language instructors. Now Thai and Lao are very closely related in terms of language and culture, so interaction with the Lao teachers also came naturally. In addition, two of the Thai instructors were spouses of students preparing to go to Laos with the Agency for International Development, USAID, so I got to know them. And through these students I learned that USAID was hiring people to go to Laos to undertake development work. Now, similar to the situation of the Peace Corps planning to send lawyers to Africa, I wasn't qualified for that type of position, but I thought, "Well, that's something that's interesting. I don't like what I'm doing in the Labor Department. I'd love to get back to Southeast Asia". So, I started calling around.

If you recall earlier in our discussion, I mentioned loving to talk but not always listening carefully. Well, that continued. So I would call a number at the State Department, and right away, rattle off my name and explain, "I hear there's a program, you want to send people to Laos", so on and so forth, without really paying attention to what the individuals on the other end of the line were telling me. And at one point a call was transferred and an individual told me to come in for an interview at 1776 Pennsylvania Avenue, near the White House.

So, I go down to this address for the interview. And the first question was, "Oh, you'd like to work for the United States Information Agency?" Well, I'd never even heard of

the United States Information Agency (USIA), or had ANY familiarity with it, but I wasn't about to say "no". Reflecting back, I remember once seeing an American library on the infamous Patpong road in Bangkok. Fast forward fifteen years, when I took up the assignment as the director of the bi-national center in Bangkok, that very library, the USIS library, significantly expanded and modernized, was part of our complex. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Well, it turns out that USIA, like USAID, was also looking to hire for Laos. Just as we were doing elsewhere in Southeast Asia, at that time, the focus of its program in the Kingdom of Laos was nation building. Using the tools of public diplomacy in an attempt to install a feeling of loyalty in the citizens to the rightist government as it fought against its communist supported rival, the Pathet Lao.

At the interview with USIA, a date was set for me to take the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), because Laotian like Thai was considered a difficult language for Americans to master, and a certain score had to be obtained in order to be hired. Now prior to the arrival of that test date I did make contact with the Agency for International Development, and was promptly given a language aptitude test.

Well, while awaiting the test results from USAID, the date arrived for the aptitude test required by USIA. Immediately upon opening the exam book, I realized this was the exact same exam I had taken a couple of weeks earlier. So, I told the proctor, "I took this exact test two weeks ago. Would you accept that score?" And he said, "Oh, no, no, we're a separate agency, we can't".

That bureaucratic refusal turned out to be a great stroke of luck. Because when the results from the USAID administered exam came in, I had failed to meet the cutoff score, which indicated to the powers that be difficulty in learning the Lao language, and my application for employment was terminated. However, even though the MLAT is an aptitude test, there are certain "memory areas" that you retain. So my score on the subsequent USIA-administered exam was ten points higher, qualifying me for employment.

So that's how I wound up being hired by USIA as a lateral entry Foreign Service Limited Reserve Officer, initially receiving a five-year appointment.

Q: Now, just to refresh our audience, this aptitude test doesn't test language, it tests language structure?

DAKS: Right. It's a fictional language I think you're asking.

Q: It had a fictional language component and for U.S. Information Agency or State you had to pass it at a certain level, because that was the entrance to the difficult languages. Japanese, Chinese, Russian, and Arabic. If you didn't score high enough, you were eliminated from those four key elements. So, you got through it! Practice makes perfect.

DAKS: Right. Lao and Thai were also in that category. And what I've often told people since then is that those tests may accurately measure ability, but not motivation. So if you're in the middle in terms of natural ability, which is where I am, but have a willingness to put in the work, this can go a long way in terms of developing language proficiency. In other words, an exam may measure ability to a certain extent, but not determination and drive.

Q: You've passed the U.S. Information Agency test. Well, what's the next step?

DAKS: Well, I was hired, after I assume was some kind of a security check. However, upon learning that Nongkran was not a citizen, and had arrived in the United States fairly recently, USIA gave me an interim assignment until she could become an American citizen through a procedure called "expeditious naturalization". At that time, which is no longer the case, the spouse of an officer had to be a U.S. citizen prior to being assigned overseas. So my initial assignment was at the Voice of America, to the Radio English Teaching branch. I'd like to think that assignment was made because I had been an English teacher in Thailand and so had relevant experience. Anyway, I had that job for about a year. Nongkran became an American citizen, through expeditious naturalization, on May 1, 1967, Law Day, our government's response to the communist world's May Day.

Q: Now, what is your status with the U.S. Information Agency? I'm not hearing about an A-100 course.

DAKS: My initial appointment was for 5 years as a foreign service limited reserve officer. And,
as best as I can recall I didn't receive any training for or orientation to either the Foreign Service or USIA. I was just told to report to the Voice of America (VOA).

On a Friday, I met John Albert, the head of the News and Current Affairs Division at the VOA. Albert, a seasoned journalist with experience at European and American media outlets prior to joining the Voice, told me a bit about the job and then said to report back to him on Monday morning. However, when I returned, John Albert wasn't there anymore. It turns out there had been some kind of disagreement and Albert had been pushed out or resigned his position and gone off to be an analytical writer within the organization. In his place, as acting head of the division, was the deputy Paul Rappaport, a foreign service officer on assignment to the VOA.

Rappaport supervised my boss, Dr. Robert Goodell, who headed up the Radio English Teaching Branch. Its function was to contract and produce English teaching tapes for use by the various language services with the Voice. However, the individual services had leeway in terms of programming, so they weren't under any obligation to use this material. So I was
a kind of a salesman, going around to the various language services to introduce programs such as A Common Language, Time and Tune in English and others that had been contracted for. A number of these programs could be modified to include some local

language narration or inserts so, for example, there might be a Chinese, French or Spanish language version. As I recall, in addition to Dr. Goodell, there were a couple of other people working in the office. And then there was an intern, the daughter of Senator Jack Miller of Iowa. Well, when this intern found out about Nongkran she asked if we would like to meet her father, because he had visited Thailand. So, we have a picture of Nongkran with Senator Miller and they're holding a wooden carving of a Thai elephant that had been presented to the senator. Maybe this was part of the Thai government's very early public diplomacy program.

Q: Now, let me ask at this time in Washington was there much in the way of Thai restaurants?

DAKS: No. I remember there was, maybe one, a Thai restaurant up on Connecticut Avenue, it was the Thai Room? There was also a place that people went to called Jenny's as I recall, it was kind of Pan-Asian, but located much closer to both the State Department and USIA.

Q: Thai Room was one of my favorites, and it wasn't started till about the 1970s.

DAKS: Oh, really? Then I guess I became aware of the Thai Room when we returned to Washington, on one of our later tours.

Q: There was a fusion Chinese thing.

DAKS: Well, that was Jenny's near the State Department.

Q: Because I mean, I asked this because when I took Thai language in '71, the teachers were all very apologetic because there was no Thai restaurant that they could take us to. We could do things at their house, but it wasn't the real thing.

DAKS: Right. It was very hard to get the ingredients for authentic Thai food at that time. Nevertheless, just as you experienced, on one or two occasions Nong prepared Thai meals for her students. And in doing so, she learned first-hand about some of the dos and don'ts of people who have dietary restrictions, such as not eating pork.

During this time, we lived near where the Royal Thai Embassy, now the Thai Consulate, was located. And one day, taking our daughter around in a stroller, passing the embassy, she noticed Thai pepper and perhaps lemongrass being grown. There was no one around to ask for permission, so she harvested a few for herself. And I've thought, when I went over to the Consulate, I should bring the staff a huge bag of peppers, as interest on a loan taken without permission well over 50 years earlier.

Q: Now, back in the U.S. Information Agency you're with this small group of people trying to sell these English Language Programs. How long did that job last?

DAKS: Not quite a year, I think. And then I was sent off to Laos.

Q: How did that opportunity unfold?

DAKS: Well, as I mentioned earlier, when I was initially interviewed for a job with the Agency, it was because USIA was looking for someone to send to southern Laos as part of its “nation building” efforts. This involved training of "Mobile Information Teams", headed up by Lao military. These teams would go out and tell people about the monarchy and the government, because the average person in Laos really didn't have a sense of being part of a single state. Rather there were several fiefdoms or power centers. Southern Laos, where Pakse was located, had Prince Boun Oum, who was local royalty down there. And in order to deal with the Pathet Lao insurgency, the U.S. government felt it was important to do nation building. And we provided materials, some modest financial support, and these groups of Lao military would go into villages, usually with one of the U.S. Information Service Lao staff. They'd show movies that put the government in a positive light and passed out information about the Royal Lao government. The movies were produced by the USIS office in Vientiane. My responsibility involved supporting the training of these teams and monitoring the programs. I think my position only lasted for a year. Although, someone who had been a Fulbright Scholar there was doing this on the fly before I arrived.

Q: I have it that you arrived in Vientiane for this assignment in April of '67. What carriers did you take to get to Vientiane and ultimately Pakse?

DAKS: I arrived a little bit later than that only because Nongkran had only become a citizen on Law Day and wasn’t able to travel with me before that.

Q: Okay. So, you arrived in Vientiane, were the family packed off to Pakse right away?

DAKS: Well, I had a few days orientation in Vientiane where I met with the public affairs officer, Dave Sheppard and the entire USIS Vientiane staff and called on Ambassador Sullivan. And then we flew down to Pakse, probably on an Air America flight, which was a contractor for the U.S. government. I doubt if we took Royal Air Lao from Vientiane to Pakse. Since we transited Thailand on the way to Laos, we most likely would have taken Thai Airways from Bangkok to Vientiane. As far as flying into Bangkok, no doubt we took an American carrier that had flight to Bangkok at the time, most likely United or Northwest.

Q: Now you're working for the public affairs officer in the embassy, David Sheppard I believe?

DAKS: Yes, David Sheppard was the public affairs officer. However, my supervisor in Vientiane was the Information Officer, Stan Alpern, who was in charge of field operations, but my immediate supervisor in Pakse was Tom Finnerty. He was the Branch Public Affairs Officer, and I was the Assistant Branch Public Affairs Officer. However, after about a year, my position was abolished. That was the beginning of a gradual

reduction of the USIS presence country-wide. At the height we had about 20 American officers in Laos.

Q: Were you going around to the villages and doing this movie showing and handing out literature?

DAKS: I never personally went, in many instances perhaps for security reasons, after all there was a war going on, or because there was this idea that absent a foreigner the villagers would give the Lao government full credit. After all, nation building and a foreign presence didn't exactly go together.

However, I did travel to various provincial capitals in the South of Laos and met with officials there. I also assisted Tom with other responsibilities, the operation of our small reading room, participation in events such as the Wat Phou festival (an annual event held at ruins of Khmer style temple in Champasak province).

Q: What was the road network in that part of Laos at that time?

DAKS: Very bad. It took a long time to get anywhere. Though the U.S. Agency for International Development was working on roads, even to more remote towns like Salavan. We would drive to more nearby provinces and towns, such as Champasak, Khong Sedone and Paksong, without giving it much thought. But because of the insurgency traveling by car to Salavan, for example, was dicey at best. I did that once with one of our staff members; he was jumpy during much of the trip. We definitely flew to other locations such as Attopeu. There were, I remember, one or two times where the U.S received intelligence that maybe even Pakse would be attacked. Fortunately, that never happened, at least not during my time there.

Q: What kind of vehicle did you have?

DAKS: Jeeps. Four-wheel drive Jeeps which I had never driven before, but I learned to drive them. And maybe a Jeep Wagoneer as well.

Q: Now when you're in Pakse, in Vietnam, January '68, the Tet offensive breaks out. How did that impact your duties and responsibilities?

DAKS: I don't recall us being told to stand down because of Tet. As I mentioned, even though there was concern about security, in the area along or near the Mekong river, close to the border with Thailand, you really didn't feel like you were in a war zone. Acts of terror there were unknown or certainly uncommon, and foreign military weren't present, at least not for public consumption. Of course, as has been well documented, the U.S. government was heavily involved in providing support, particularly air support, in attempts to damage the Ho Chi Minh Trail and tremendous damage was done in the Pathet Lao controlled areas, but that wasn't where USIS worked, with the possible exception of advice and indirect assistance we gave to psychological warfare efforts. So in a weird way it was sort of "business as usual". I can't recall any embassy officer telling

me he felt unsafe or threatened, even though there was violence and a few Americans were killed. There was awareness of risk, but you didn't feel the same danger U.S. civilians working in Vietnam must have felt.

Q: Down in Pakse what did the American community consist of?

DAKS: It consisted of a decent sized USAID mission, contractors from various organizations, like Air America and the two USIA officers. Like us, the AID people were accompanied by their families, although I don't believe there was an American school. Also, throughout Laos, in addition to local employees, that is Lao nationals, there were a number of people working for the American mission with specialized skills, Third Country Nationals (TCN). They were mainly Thai, but some Filipinos like those who staffed Operation Brotherhood, a medical facility. Among the younger officers, there were several other Americans who had Thai spouses, and perhaps for this reason we became fairly close, maintaining contact over the years.

Q: Now, what were your housing arrangements like?

DAKS: We lived in a large, two story brick and concrete house, behind the police station, walking distance to the market and not far from the provincial governor's house, near the Mekong river. Pakse is at the meeting point of the Mekong and Sedone rivers. As I recall, the Sedone river runs through Pakse city. One side, part of Pakse but at that time called Thahin, was where the USAID and contract personnel worked and lived, and I think the Laotian military installations were there as well. The USIS office and our houses were on the other side, closer to the Lao civilian government offices.

Q: Now, you were saying that in due course your position was eliminated.

DAKS: Yes.

Q: What was behind that?

DAKS: Budget cuts and perhaps the beginning of a realization that the size of the USIS presence was overkill when you looked at the country's importance to the U.S. national interest. At one point, prior to the fall of Vietnam, our Mission in Laos, with dependents, was over 1,000 Americans. At times I would joke that it was like man-for-man basketball, one U.S. official for every Laotian. Of course, I'm reflecting back with the benefit of hindsight and no longer caught up in an atmosphere where we had a delusional view of our importance in terms of our actual vital interests.

Q: Just for my geographic centering, was Nong Khai on the Thai side of the Mekong River close to Pakse?

DAKS: Nong Khai is opposite Vientiane, the capital. Other towns, in addition to Vientiane, that were under the control of the Royal Lao government, along the Mekong river, that were the main population centers were Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and

Pakse. Luang Prabang is in the north central part of Laos, at the confluence of two rivers, the Mekong and the Nam Khan. Savannakhet, in the south, is across of Mukdahan, Thailand. Pakse, further south, is at the confluence of two rivers, the Mekong and the Xedon, and at that point both sides of the Mekong are in Lao territory. When we lived in Pakse, to get to Ubon, which was the adjacent province in Thailand, you first put your car on the ferry, and then you drove for perhaps half an hour to get to the border town of Chong Mek. Altogether, it took about four hours to get to Ubon Rachathani City. The roads on the Thai side were better, but still less than ideal.

Nowadays the commute is much faster, because of both improved roads and a bridge across the Mekong.

Q: Now, by this time Ubon City had a major Thai Air Force base that the Americans were given permission to use. Was your supply stuff in the U.S commissary?

DAKS: Every few weeks either my boss, Tom Finnerty, or I would drive to Ubon, usually with one of our Lao staff. I think I went to the base commissary, but normally we purchased items in the local market like bottled gas for cooking. One thing I remember is the Thai military guards, at the perimeter of the base, wouldn't allow ordinary Thai, individuals who didn't work on the base, to enter. So when we would arrive at the security checkpoint, the guard on duty would deny access to our staff, who looked like a local and spoke the language, until I said, "But he's not Thai, he's Lao". And then they let us in, sometimes with a salute.

Usually in Thailand, the Lao would get the short end of the stick, discriminated against, but somehow when we got to the air base, they were elevated to the status of friendly foreigner. Our staff looked forward to visiting Thailand because everything there was less expensive and more easily available.

Earlier, I commented on the less-than-ideal condition of the road from Laos to Thailand. Well on one trip, I recall we brought back a couple of chickens, I believe they were alive, but certainly they hadn't been prepared for cooking. Well, on the return trip that day, I was in a hurry and drove quite fast. By the time we reached Pakse, most of the feathers had been blown off the chicken. At least that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

Q: My inclination is to break it off here and do Vientiane at our next session.

DAKS: Okay, that sounds fine with me. One other thing, David. I had forgotten what years you were in Thailand?

Q: '71-'73, 73'-'75.

Q: Good afternoon. It is May the 7th. We're returning to our conversation with Larry Daks. Larry, last time you had this very unique assignment in Pakse. Did you want to add a couple of thoughts on that?

DAKS: Regarding my principal assignment in Pakse, working with mobile information teams, shortly after arriving I wrote-up or rewrote a training course to facilitate the programs that were already going on. As I mentioned earlier, I didn't actually go with the teams, but I supported them. However, you might ask, what were my qualifications? Well, I had lived in Thailand and spoke Thai. The culture and language were fairly similar so I could communicate and didn't have to overcome significant culture shock. However, in hindsight, in terms of knowledge and real-world experience working with Laotian and military and officials, in a quasi-war situation, I was in way over my head. And that was apparent in the way I ran the programs.

Q: Isn't that typical Foreign Service? First tour, here's the swimming pool. Go for it.

DAKS: Yes, that may be typical. But in my case, when I jumped in the proverbial pool so to speak, I didn't even have flotation aids, because I was not hired through the standard procedure, but via lateral entry. I hadn't taken the A-100, orientation course for new officers. Nor was I familiar with consular issues, as most of the new officers were, and I needed to know these things. It took me a while to actually realize how a diplomatic mission functioned. I sort of learned it by grabbing one leg of the elephant and then later seeing that it was a much bigger animal because I had the rear leg and I wasn't looking at the whole body.

Q: Now, in due course, the Pakse US Information Service Office was closed down and you and Tom Finnerty went to Vientiane.

DAKS: No, the office stayed open and Tom Finnerty remained as Branch Public Affairs Officer. However, it was closed a few years later.

But I was transferred up to Vientiane after about a year and became the assistant field operations officer, the AFAO. The officer in this position was to provide support to all three USIS field branches where we had officers, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Pakse. In addition, I was responsible for supporting and occasionally traveling to Sam Thong, which was the capital of Xieng Khouang province, where the ethnic Hmong civilian government was located and where USAID had a refugee support office staffed by a number of Lao-speaking AID officers. However, the real power in that area was at the military site of Long Tieng, 10 miles to the south, where General Vang Pao supported by the U.S. military and intelligence agencies had his not so secret base.

The USIS presence in Sam Thong was merely a store room with printed materials and perhaps other supplies. Basically, I was dependent upon the AID officers, with whom I traveled on occasion, via air, to other sites. The USAID Sam Thong operation was headed up by the rough-hewn, legendary Edgar "Pop" Buell, a humanitarian aid officer, who was called Pop, which apparently meant "descended from heaven" in the Hmong language. However, as mentioned, the bulk of the Americans in the area were at the military site, individuals supporting, on and off the books, involved in the secret war in Laos, which has now been acknowledged by our government.

Q: What did your duties include? What support?

DAKS: Well, traveling to the branch offices, making sure they had what they needed, whether this was films, printed materials about the Royal Lao Government and all the things it allegedly was doing for the population. So you can see this was not a traditional U.S. Information Agency operation, but rather our programs were largely another tool in the psychological warfare arsenal of the time.

Now the branches with officers all had modest reading rooms, supported English teaching, perhaps assisted a visiting Fulbright scholar, nominated an occasional student to the U.S. under that program or an official invited by the International Visitors program. However, that wasn't the main thrust of what I did, although I was aware of those programs.

Q: Now, the printed materials that you were handing, who designed them, who printed them?

DAKS: They showed either the various good works of the Royal Lao Government or the benefits of what the government was doing. The material was designed in house and some were printed locally, and perhaps others in Manila, where USIA had a regional service center. There was also material about the United States, which was most likely translated into Lao. There may have been some material in French as well, given the country's colonial history.

Q: Well, give us a sense of how the public affairs section was organized.

DAKS: The public affairs officer who headed up the office, for the first part of my first tour was Dave Sheppard. Later Keith Adamson took his place. Sheppard was a very smooth operator, I would say, and I mean this as a compliment, he was a public relations type. had a background in Hollywood. His deputy was Hakon Torjesen. In addition, there was an executive officer, who handled administrative matters, a cultural affairs officer (CAO) and an assistant CAO, an information officer (AKA the press officer) and an assistant information officer, and a radio and a motion picture officer. And then there was a field operations officer, Stan Alpern, my immediate supervisor, who supervised all three of the branch public affairs officers.
One interesting staffing aspect is that Phil Wilcox, a newly minted State Department officer, was assigned to the post, working in the information section. Phil ultimately became a Middle East specialist and reached the rank of ambassador.

Given the size of the country, it was a big post. In Vientiane, we had our own free standing building, which was in the center of the city. It had a library on the first floor with several thousand books. As I mentioned earlier, each branch office had a small library as well. In Vientiane, there was also English teaching through a bi-national center called the Lao American Association (LAA). It had a separate building and branches outside of the capital.

Q: Now, when you came up to Vientiane in June of '68, I think Sullivan was the Ambassador. How did he use the Public Affairs Office?

DAKS: Well, my only clear recollection of him was when I first arrived in Laos, transiting Vientiane. I remember going to, perhaps it was a country team meeting, where I was introduced. And Ambassador Sullivan was recounting a recent trip to the royal capital, Luang Prabang, where meet with the King. In describing their conversation, the Ambassador quoted the king as saying "All the world is watching Laos". While unspoken, just citing that remark, appeared to ridicule the King's attitude. Upon reflection, the Chinese saying jǐng dǐ zhī wā [井底之蛙] looking at something from the bottom of a well, reflecting a narrow worldview, comes to mind.

As far as Sullivan using us, he was a supporter. I mean, for example, he utilized public diplomacy through the U.S. pavilion at Boun That Luang, a multi-day festival held in front of Laos most famous Buddhist temple. This annual event was also an international fair, where a number of countries put up displays. USIS was in charge of the American pavilion. The Mission relied on the U.S. Information Service to develop and manage that pavilion, although we also worked with AID in terms of building the actual structure. But we provided the materials for the pavilion. Each foreign pavilion promoted themes dealing with aspects of the particular country, such as the space program for the USA. And on opening day, the ambassador would be there welcoming Lao dignitaries who came to view the exhibits.

Q: Now, Sullivan would not be a Lao speaker, was he a French speaker?

DAKS: I think he must have been. Officers in senior positions who were sent to Laos at that time spoke French. If they didn't speak Lao, they probably spoke French. I don't believe there was an interpreter on the staff, unlike some posts such as in China, where I also served. Of course, at times locally hired employees, Foreign Service Nationals, served as interpreters.

Just as an aside, because our conversation brings the use of language to mind, during my two tours in Laos, I had a couple of situations where senior American officers would call me over to translate because they wanted to make themselves understood, and then there would be a three-sided conversation. They asked me to translate, but then when they started speaking to the other party, a Lao official, at times they used French. And I would have to tell them, look, I'm a part of this conversation, but only a part of it because I don't understand a word of French.

Q: Now, you're the outreach to Laos society, who did you work with in the Lao government?

DAKS: We worked with the Ministry of Information. They were, I think, our main contact. Then we also worked with the Ministry of Education, although the Ministry of Education also worked very closely with the Agency for International Development. We

in turn also worked with our counterparts at AID because they were developing education materials for the Lao government. There was an education officer in AID.

Q: Now, the CIA had been there for some time, and my understanding was there was almost an American suburb built in Vientiane for them. What were your housing arrangements?

DAKS: We had a very nice house near the That Luang temple, one of several big houses, side-by-side, that were built by wealthy Lao to rent to Americans. Many Americans and other expatriates had come into Laos, with their families, and these individuals needed housing. There were a couple of large housing compounds, where many of the official or embassy-affiliated Americans lived, and then other western style houses where expatriates lived were scattered all over the city. One compound was at kilometer seven, outside the city, where the American school was located. There was also Silver City, given that name maybe because it had aluminum buildings. As I recall you had both residences and AID offices located in Silver City. It was very close to where we lived.

Q: Now, Laos is something of a war zone. What was the security situation in which you worked?

DAKS: Within Vientiane security was good. While we did have protection by an embassy provided locally hired guard force, access to our offices was fairly easy. We felt comfortable going anywhere in the city, but there were a lot of other places we couldn't go. We could drive to provinces adjacent to Vientiane although there were risks involved because of occasional ambushes. However, in addition to security issues, in many places the roads were such that it was much easier to fly to the other relatively large towns.

Q: Now, in your USIA duties, did you have an opportunity to deal with the traveling American press?

DAKS: Yes, but more during my second tour in Laos when I was first information and later the public affairs officer. As I recall, most of the international press were stationed in Bangkok, but would come by from time to time. The resident press corps was small, mostly stringers I believe. However, when you had a VIP visit or an event such as the fall of Saigon or the communist takeover of Laos, then there was a larger presence.

Q: Now, in addition to AID, there was a private organization, international—

DAKS: IVS [International Voluntary Services].

Q: —Service. IVS. Did you have an opportunity to interact with them?

DAKS: Yes, I did. The IVS volunteers worked in development. And a number of them later went on to join AID. I sort of think of IVS as a precursor to the Peace Corps. The volunteers and the staff generally worked outside of Bangkok. And, sadly, one of the people I met, Art Stillman, who was the deputy director of IVS at the time, was killed in

an ambush near the town of Paksan, the capital of the province to the east of Vientiane. Stillman's widow, Sumalee, later became a crusading journalist. Sumalee's brother, Meechai Viravaidya, is famous for promoting birth control in Thailand through, among other projects, the Cabbages and Condoms restaurant in Bangkok.

Q: Now, you mentioned Wilcox earlier. Did you work with him?

DAKS: Yes, Phil Wilcox. He was Information Officer for a while when I was there. Also, he and his wife Cindy were our next door neighbors. A very impressive guy. I am not at all surprised that he rose to the senior ranks of the Foreign Service.

Q: There was an enormous CIA presence. Did that impact your programs?

DAKS: I don't know if it impacted our programs, but I was involved, if only indirectly. There was an officer who worked on psychological warfare programs. I think his name was Bill McLean, and he and I hit it off. Perhaps it was because of my language facility, but I did discuss our programs with him. I can't recall if he was actually stationed in Laos or if he shuttled up from Thailand periodically. Most likely, my ability to speak and read Lao and the fact that I got myself involved with things that weren't traditional USIA work may be what brought us together.

While in Vientiane, I found myself free to initiate work for myself. Perhaps I came to the attention of other offices within the U.S. mission, because of what I chose to spend time on, along with my Lao language capability. For example, Ernie Kuhn, a USAID officer who worked in the north of the country, brought me seven communist Pathet Lao textbooks. I took those booklets, translated most of them, with the exception of portions of the text in different script, written for ethnic Hmong. Subsequently, I wrote up a detailed description of the booklet's contents. These were shared by the Public Affairs Officer around the mission. Recently, I found that document archived at the University of Wisconsin, see "Pathet Lao Textbooks: Observations and Recommendations of New Publications for Pathet Lao Controlled and Contested Areas", circa 1969. Apparently, this and perhaps other things caught the attention of people like Ambassador Jim Lilley, who at the time was stationed in Laos working on the intelligence side of things. Because when I returned to China for a second tour, Lilley was heading up the mission there, and he told colleagues that he remembered me favorably from Laos.

During this first tour especially, I recall a feeling among the younger AID officers in particular, who were almost all Lao speakers, that the senior people at the Embassy were out of touch because they were limited to using English or French with their counterparts and rarely left Vientiane.

I recall an informal evening get together involving several of these younger development assistance types and a very senior person in the embassy. They were telling the embassy higher up that the decision makers didn't really understand what was going on, while the senior person stated he and his colleagues had a good reading for the situation. I left the get-together early, but an AID officer told me that subsequently the *knowledgeable*

decision maker went off to one of the infamous Vientiane bars and got himself into a bit of trouble with one of the ladies, because he failed to understand what had been agreed to.

Q: Was there a university in town that you would have interacted with?

DAKS: Dong Dok was the leading teacher's college, although by the 1970s there were a few others around the country. However, I believe Dong Dok offered the highest level of teacher training available in country at the time.

When AID wanted to support education training, with the exception of a very few programs in the United States, that training often took place in Thailand. There you had institutions of higher education that Lao could more easily benefit from, because of the similarity of the Lao and Thai languages.

The bulk of the Lao population lived near the border, in close proximity to Thailand, and for this reason were exposed to the more developed Thai broadcast and print media, which facilitated language comprehension. So a number of Laotians were sent by USAID for study and short term training in Thailand.

This approach had benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, the Lao recognized their close cultural ties with their neighbor, but on the other hand, as the poor cousin, Laotians were resentful because they were often looked down upon. But being landlocked, and thus dependent upon Thailand for many things, there was and likely remains a certain resentment.

Q: Now, what were the Thai doing in Laos? Did you have an interaction with the Thai officialdom?

DAKS: Relatively little with the Thai embassy, unlike during later assignments in China. However, I had a great deal of interaction with the Thai working as part of the U.S. mission, so-called “third country nationals” (TCN). As I’ve mentioned, the TCN held key positions at the embassy, undertaking responsibilities that it was deemed the Lao employees couldn’t handle. In some cases, this may have been true, but upon reflection I believe that qualified Lao might well have been found or trained, to fill a number of these positions. However, TCNs, who were mostly, but not all Thai, tended to speak much better English, and in part for this reason were able to establish a closer working relationship with their American supervisors. Also, when someone is in a position for a number of years, and doing a good job, it is difficult for a supervisor to envision making a change.

At USIS all but one of the TCNs were in the capital; the senior Thai staff person in Savannakhet was Thai. In Vientiane, the TCN staff included an exhibition specialist, a radio and a motion picture technician, an individual charged with providing field support, and an administrative specialist. In my experience, the TCN staff got along very well

with their Lao colleagues, despite the significant disparity between the local employee and TCN staff's salary scale.

Occasionally, I also encountered Thai military who were working with both the Lao and the U.S. military. Outside of Vientiane in particular, you occasionally ran into Thai males, who were reluctant to discuss what they were doing in a rather remote area. Since commercial opportunities at that point in time were few and far between, it's reasonable to assume these individuals were involved in the war effort.

Q: With your Thai experience and your Thai wife, did you do a lot of entertaining with the Thai in Vientiane.

DAKS: We developed good relationships with both the Lao and Thai staff and with a number of Laotian officials, civilian and military, the latter being the psychological warfare people. However, when we entertained at home, our guests were generally Lao officials. But there were also staff social events, particularly when a new American officer was either arriving or being given a farewell, that our Thai colleagues also participated in.

In fact, throughout my career, I spent an inordinate amount of time developing relationships with our local employees, and to a lesser extent, with third-country nationals. I keep in touch with a number of them even to this day. My philosophy was that since we saw our local employees on a daily basis, relied on them for many things, in a sense they were our most important contacts in whatever country we served in.

Q: What did the diplomatic community look like?

DAKS: Well, it was a good-sized community. The U.S. mission was the largest. However, all the neighboring countries had a significant presence, and this was reflected in their embassies. Also, no doubt the Philippines also had a decent size embassy because of the presence of Operation Brotherhood, a USAID-funded Manila-based organization. In addition, because Laos had been a French colony, you had a large French mission. The Brits were also well represented and had an active aid program as well. Given that in Vientiane, during particular periods of time, the government was nominally a "coalition government", the embassies from China and the Soviet Union were active. And then, as I recall, a number of the Eastern European countries were present as was India. And although there was no formal diplomatic relationship, Taiwan had a footprint as well. The United Nations and the Colombo Plan were also involved in Laos.

So you had a significant number of countries with an on-the-ground presence, through embassies, but at the same time there was a relatively small, educated Lao elite. And for this reason, there was significant overlap in the activities of the various nations. So, for example, when it came to exchange programs, selecting candidates was almost like making an appointment with a popular doctor. You would ask, let's say, the Deputy Director of the Department of Public Works, if he, there were no "she's" at that point, would be available to attend a regionally sponsored or an International Visitor Program in

the United States on rural development. The response you'd sometimes get is “in March I’m going abroad on a Colombo Plan program, and then later in the year the New Zealand government has invited me to attend an international roundtable.” So then you got in line. Of course, given their history with the country, the French may have had a larger pool of language-qualified people to draw from. And then there were those, most likely who had never been abroad, other than perhaps visiting a neighboring country, who might receive training in Thailand.

Q: On your own personal time, did you travel back to Thailand or travel out of country?

DAKS**:** Actually, I traveled back to Thailand on personal and official time, both for necessity and pleasure. As I mentioned earlier, when in Pakse one of our Lao staff and I could go over to Ubon in northeastern Thailand to get supplies. In terms of purely private travel, again while in Pakse, Nongkran and I went to Bangkok from Pakse for a particularly important reason. On March 23, 1968, Lao Army Day, our son was born in the Bangkok Nursing Home. He’s our Dim Sum child, because that’s what I was enjoying with a friend, when Nongkran suddenly felt labor contractions, and went off to the hospital to give birth.

Because the road system in Laos was so bad, even when working, at times we would have to drive into Thailand to get to a location outside of Vientiane. I remember one trip with Colonel Khamthene Chinyavong, head of the psychological warfare unit of the Royal Lao Army. In order to get to Sayaboury province, northwest of Vientiane, we crossed over to Nongkhai province in Thailand and then drove to the adjacent province of Loei. Then we re-entered Laos at the very small town of Kenthao, which in the dry season you reached by driving across a small river, or stream, that could have been waded across. Due to its proximity, this area was very strongly influenced by all aspects of Thai culture. So, after crossing into Kenthao, we went into a shop and ordered iced coffee. As I recall, the term for iced black coffee in Lao was the same as the term for iced coffee with sweetened condensed milk in Thai. So, the proprietor asked “Which one do you want? The Thai or Lao version?” From there we drove into the larger town Paklay, also in Sayaboury, where we met one of the Lao King’s sons. He was there with a couple of elephants; I have a photograph of me on one of the smaller elephants, alongside the Prince.

Q: Now, Ambassador Sullivan, departed post in March '69, and Robert Hurwitch became the chargé de affairs. Did that interregnum impact on your duties?

DAKS: It didn't impact on my duties, but I do remember Robert Hurwitch. I think when we first got to Vientiane, Nongkran mistakenly referred to him as “Seawitch”.

Q: A very standard thing for USIA to do is put on a program at the time of an American presidential election. And there was such an election in November of '68. In Bangkok, they probably had quite a bit about the American election. I don't suppose that was a major theme for Vientiane.

DAKS: I only recall involvement with election centers in Thailand and China. I wasn't involved during my time in Taiwan but that's because I never served in Taipei. We didn't organize an election center at the branch post.

During my time in Laos, while we did have elements of a traditional public diplomacy program, an occasional speaker, cultural performance, a limited exchange program and our involvement in the Thai Luang fair, our main effort was focused on nation-building. For example, our motion picture office produced a gem of a film, one that could have won arts awards, I believe, called "New Years in Luang Prabang". Also, printed materials about the composition of the Royal Lao government were frequently printed at the USIS Regional Service Center in Manila.

Reflecting back, we did not have the infrastructure or audience to justify an election center, although we had libraries in Vientiane and at our branch posts.

Q: Along that regard, that you mentioned, Keith Adamson who was a PAO [Public Affairs Officer]. How was he to work for?

DAKS: He was professional, good to work for. Keith was a very senior officer. At one point he had been Deputy Director of the Voice of America. He transferred directly from Saigon, where he was the equivalent of the public affairs officer, so I wondered if he viewed the assignment as a downgrade. Moreover, like so many of us, I don't think he had a real handle on what was going on. I include myself in that critique, even though I spoke the language.

Presiding over a gradual draw down of USIA staffing in Laos, Keith was tasked with the challenge of turning the nation building aspects of the program back to the host government. In hindsight, that was an impossible task, because the RLG lacked the resources. Nor, from what I could see, did it have the people with sufficient commitment to take up the responsibility. Moreover, we were so caught up in the day to day challenges of work, we never even had time to focus on what would really be necessary for such a turnover.

Overall, the Americans who had the best feeling for the situation in much of the country, because they were building schools, supervising projects to support road construction and well digging and a host of other things most appropriate with the needs of the majority of Laotians, were the USAID officers, particularly those who worked in the field. They probably had their ears closest to the ground, a more realistic picture of what was going on and language proficiency to boot.

Q: Now you were saying that the major difference between Laos and other countries that you were stationed in was that the program in Laos was a nation-building program. You want to expand on that thought?

DAKS: The phrase "Telling America's Story to the World" described the mission of USIA throughout most of its existence. However, particularly during the Vietnam war,

the Agency was used to support nation building efforts. At best the results were mixed. When success occurred, I think it was because conditions within the host country were favorable. However, Laos was probably the least developed of the nations in which the United States attempted nation-building.

There wasn't an identity that bound together the ethnic Laotians and the various tribal groups inhabiting the country. And even among the ethnic Lao themselves, there wasn't really a national reverence for a potentially unifying figure such as the King, whose influence was confined to the Luang Prabang area in the north. Moreover, the RLG was an economic basket case. Even its currency was artificially supported by the U.S. and a number of other developed countries through the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund (FEOF). So to believe the government could maintain the tools utilized in this nation building program wasn't realistic, although based on the success of many refugees from Laos in the USA, France and elsewhere, there likely was a far bigger talent pool then what many of us realized.

Contrast this with Thailand, another country in which the USIS offices also had nation building as a priority during this same period. There was some success because the Chakri dynasty had been a unifying force, the country's success in maintaining Thai independence encouraged national pride and the insurgency at least in the Northeast was far weaker. At the same time, USIS also conducted a variety of traditional cultural and information programs, sharing the American experience with key audiences, using tools, such as English teaching, motion pictures, radio, libraries and television and for which there was a fairly large, receptive audience.

Also, during my time at USIA, when much of the technology used to support today's officers didn't exist, that proverbial "last few feet of communication", personal contact, was crucial. In Laos, as elsewhere, we of course had this kind relationship with our locally hired staff, because we worked together on a daily basis. However, this was more challenging with key contacts, and this is my own theory as to why, because they were not in a position to reciprocate. What I mean is, in other posts, if you would reach out to someone, let's say to get together for lunch or dinner, they reciprocated the hospitality. In Laos, however, at that time, perhaps because the country was so poor, in a certain sense relationships were one-sided. You kept inviting them, but they often weren't in a position to host you, even in a more modest manner.

An experience, later in my career, really brought home to me the challenges we faced in Laos. In 1978, in the midst of a tour in Washington, DC, I was sent out on TDY [Temporary Duty Assignment] to work in refugee camps in Thailand, principally the large Nong Khai camp housing ethnic Laotian refugees. During the course of my work, I found when people in the camp discussed what enabled the Pathet Lao to take power, they would cite corruption and control by a very few people on the government side. People's voices weren't being heard, they implied. But then I observed, that within a short period of time, the very structure that people criticized was replicated in the refugee camps. A minority among the refugees were running the show and doing things, albeit on a smaller scale, but nevertheless constituted corruption to benefit themselves at the

expense of others. It was yet, to my mind, another reminder as to how challenging our nation-building efforts were.

My apologies for straying a bit from our conversation.

Q: Well, by mid-1969 you began to contemplate your next assignment. I mean you came in through lateral entry, so you were still on contract to USIA. Given your status, what was the process to get your next job?

DAKS: Yes, I was still a limited foreign service reserve officer, in the midst of my five-year appointment. Dan Oleksiw, a kind of larger-than-life character, both in demeanor and size, was the USIA Area Director for East Asia. I suppose if he had been in Africa, he would be on safari, shooting elephants, at least that's the way I picture him now.

Well Dan came through Vientiane, and when we met, he asked what I wanted to do next. My response was that I wanted to study Chinese. Now, where did I get that from, because I was trained in the law and had no background in Asian studies. For that I'm going to return to my earliest involvement with the Peace Corps.

At the termination of training in Seattle, one of our Thai language instructors gave me the names of three women to look up when I arrived in Bangkok. And one of these ladies introduced me to a Sino-Thai businessman, who became and remains my close and dear friend to this very day. Whether it was over lunch, on trips together upcountry, or even events such as funerals he exposed me to Teochew culture, customs and a bit of the language. The Teochew or Chaozhou people come from Eastern Guangzhou and are by far the largest group of Chinese in Thailand.

Coincidentally, while in Thailand, I started reading more about the country, and came across a book on the Chinese in Southeast Asia, written by an American anthropologist. And in this book, there was a quote, attributed to King Rama the Sixth, Vajiravudh, describing the Chinese as the Jews of Southeast Asia. That also struck a chord in me. Although I didn't realize at the time that that was not considered a compliment, I got really interested in the Chinese in Thailand and China in general. And the very close friend mentioned above, C.Y. Yang, was an on-call professor to answer questions I might have.

So when Dan asked me what I wanted to do going forward, Chinese language study was the first and only thing that I thought of. And, amazingly, he responded "Okay," and next thing I know, I'm assigned to Chinese language studies. One year at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington, DC and the second year I'm off to Taiwan. Now, in hindsight, here I was with just two or three years in the foreign service, and maybe I wasn't going to be extended. That's a huge investment, a wonderful investment from my perspective—when you don't even know if you're going to keep employing that person. But why would you assign someone in my situation to study Chinese?

Obviously, others must have thought enough of me to think that was an okay idea. I also think that in my performance evaluations, since arriving in Laos, even though neither of my two rating officers could really speak the language, or at best had minimal facility, they would write things like “he must be the best Lao speaker in the entire mission.” Well, that wasn’t true, and my supervisors really weren’t qualified to make this judgment, but when this kind of thing gets repeated, a perception or kind of a myth develops. I'm not saying I didn't speak decent Lao. I did. But there was an assumption that I was some kind of a language whiz, which I’m grateful for, but it's not the way you want to make an assignment, although it worked for me.

Then when the orders actually came through, I said to Nongkran, "Let’s visit Taiwan", and we went off, leaving our small children with my mother-in-law. We spent a little over a week there going all around the island, before we even started language training. Upon returning to Laos, our 3 or 4 year old Jennifer initially refused to talk to us. She must have felt abandoned; the memory of this still hurts a bit today.

In those days, a senior officer, and particularly one who was so decisive, like Dan Oleksiw, could determine a subordinate’s career path almost single-handedly.

Q: Awesome. Now, was this a two year program where there's a year in Washington and a year at the FSI school? How big was the Chinese class in the Washington segment?

DAKS: In Washington, DC, there were two of us. An officer, who became a lifelong friend, Roger Blattberg, and myself. Then a few months later Nongkran started studying there with another USIA officer, Ken Wimmel. This was and I hope still is one of the great things about the foreign service, that spouses could, subject to space availability, take language classes as well. So we both were in there. Then after almost a year, we went off to Taiwan for a second year of language training.

Q: Now, did USIA assign you to a Berlitz program?

DAKS: No, we were at the Foreign Service Institute, then located in Arlington, Virginia, across from Georgetown in Washington, DC.

Q: FSI. Okay. Now, Chinese is a tonal language. Thai is a tonal language. I presume you were successful in distinguishing between the two?

DAKS: Yes, although they're fairly close. I was highly motivated. Since I had some success with Thai and Lao—the latter I never studied formally, sort of picked it up. So while I certainly wasn’t the best that ever came through the program, I was one of the better students. Roger was an equally if not better student, so we were quite compatible.

Now, I want to go back. Very early in our interview, I talked about how I became a USIA officer, about taking the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) twice because the second government agency that tested me (USIA) wouldn’t accept the results of the identical test administered by USAID.

Well, shortly after I began language study, I was called up to the administrative part of the Foreign Service Institute and told, "You have two scores on the MLAT, a sixty and a fifty. Which is it?" I repeated the story above, and said, "I've got a job now, I don't care what score you take, it doesn't matter."

Now as to studying Chinese, after I had developed some proficiency in Thai and Lao. It was helpful, in part because some of the cultural concepts underlying the languages are similar and there was some tonal overlap. Of course, reading is different. Chinese is character-based. But I was highly motivated, did fairly well, and loved it. Along with language, there was a full-blown, excellent area studies course. In area studies, we also met officers studying other languages, who were to be posted elsewhere in Asia.

The two years I spent studying Chinese, interacting daily with officers from various agencies, cemented in my mind the importance of a diplomatic mission where people have different functions, but should be working together. You were in close proximity, and you'd meet each other during breaks. Some were in the military and even though they had their own language and area studies school, a certain number were sent to study at the Foreign Service Institute. You meet people from various agencies, and when you have a common objective, like to master a language, there are certain bonds that are created, particularly during that second year when I went off to study Chinese in Taiwan.

Q: I'm a little confused because you are saying there were two of you in the class. I've seen records that the foreign service class from USIA at the time had six or seven people in it.

DAKS: That was in Taiwan. Yes, there were officers who started a little earlier, Joel Fishman, perhaps Mike Yaki, but we all came together in Taiwan. As far as a class of two people studying and starting at the same time and ending simultaneously, it was Roger and myself. Then Nongkran started and she spent four or five months with Ken Wimmel but then we left for Taiwan before he finished.

Q: Now, when you got this assignment, did you say that you had a specific job you were going to?

DAKS: No, we didn’t know where we were going to be assigned after that second year of language training. We only found that out after we had been at the language school in Taiwan for maybe six or seven months.

As I recall, Bob Nicholas, who was the deputy public affairs officer at the time, told me when he visited the language school that I would be sent to the south of Taiwan to run the branch offices in Kaohsiung and Tainan. And since this was overwhelmingly a Taiwanese speaking area, I was encouraged to begin studying this dialect as well (in addition to Mandarin). So I did study it for an hour or two a day for a couple of months, but I wasn't as diligent as I perhaps should have been. Fortunately, Taiwanese (which is Fukienese on the mainland) and the Chaozhou dialect, which is spoken in Thailand among many older

Thai-Chinese, are quite close, and I'd developed a bit of an aural familiarity with that dialect, and so there was some carry over. So ultimately, I could converse in Taiwanese at sort of a "courtesy level", but if we were getting down to real business, then discussion would be in Mandarin or, on occasion, in English.

Q: Now, when you were in language training, Chiang Ching-kuo came to the United States. Did that come to your attention at the time?

DAKS: Not his visit. What came to my attention about Chiang Ching-kuo was when he started implementing—as I recall, this is after I had left—certain reforms in Taiwan. This is getting a little bit ahead of myself, but if someone had told me that within a few years, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Taiwanese business people would be traveling to the mainland and doing business there, I would have thought they should have their head examined. Throughout my time in Taiwan, I had the impression, based on the people I dealt with, that there was very little desire or interest in associating with anything that was considered Chinese. Now, I'm not talking about the mainland born Chinese living on the island or even their children, who were definitely in the minority, but the ethnic Taiwanese majority. That development quite surprised me. Although, upon reflection I realize that the KMT [Kuomintang] had actually been quite successful in inculcating a certain amount of respect and interest in Chinese culture and other things Chinese. So you do have the interesting phenomenon of some younger pro-independence Taiwanese, who are more comfortable in articulating their views in Mandarin, the language of their perceived oppressors.

Q: Actually, at the time of Chiang Ching-kuo's visit in April, or shortly thereafter, there was a bomb planted in the USIA office in Tainan. That must have come to your attention.

DAKS: The bombing occurred a couple of months after I arrived to begin my second year of language training at the State Department Chinese language school in Taichung in central Taiwan. At the time, I must have been too engrossed with day-to-day studies, but on a trip to the south of the island, not long before beginning my assignment down there, I learned about the incident from Neal Donnelly, who was the branch public affairs officer at the time.

Neal was a marvelous officer, and quite a character. And I mean that in the best sense of the word. He was someone who quickly developed deep roots in the community and possessed impressive knowledge of Taiwanese culture. The element in Taiwan at that time that would most easily come to the attention of the government, particularly the Garrison Command (the secret police and national security agency), was the Presbyterian Church, particularly the parishioners in Tainan, who were at the forefront in advocating for democracy and Taiwanese rights. As the only American diplomat in the south of Taiwan, and a very proactive individual, Neal had a broad range of contacts in the community, including among the Church and opposition leaders. He wasn't doing anything inappropriate, just what any good USIA officer would do, and reaching out to various segments of the community. But, among Tainan's security elements, I think there was this strong feeling that the close contact with the USIS officer in Tainan was

undesirable. And so it was likely that this faction within the Taiwan government wanted to point that out. So perhaps they did so, unfortunately, through a bombing that injured a couple of people. It was something that was quite shocking when it happened. And the Taiwan government did officially respond by taking responsibility for repair of the facility and assisting the person who was injured. It was never determined who actually planted the bomb, but as I mentioned, there was a strong suspicion that the Taiwan Garrison Command was involved.

Q: As you say, what's interesting about Tainan is that the Presbyterian Church had a seminary there. One in Tainan and one outside of Taipei. Now, in that first year of language study, did they begin to expose you to Chinese characters?

DAKS: While the spoken language was emphasized during most of the first year of Chinese study, we did have some exposure to characters. In particular, we learned about radicals, one or more strokes that were the building blocks of each character. And each radical was associated with a number. And even to this day, I recall the number and meaning association, so number 32, for example, indicates "earth" and it is written in three strokes (土 – horizontal, vertical, horizontal straight lines). As we're doing this zoom interview, behind me you can see some of the various Chinese-English, English-Chinese I've collected over many years. From time-to-time, I still look at them, both for meaning and to figure out the elements of this great language puzzle.

Q: FSI, the Foreign Service Institute, at that time was still in Rosslyn, wasn't it?

DAKS: That's right. It was in Rosslyn, in Arlington, Virginia, across from the Georgetown neighborhood in Washington, DC. We lived nearby, in a rented apartment. Perhaps I've already made this point, but I would like to stress that the opportunity a foreign service career presents for ongoing education, through language and other training programs, is something that the State Department should do a better job of publicizing because it's something that can't be duplicated elsewhere, except perhaps in the military.

Q: Now, Nixon's approach to China is in the wind. How did the Mandarin Chinese speakers respond to that? I remember Agnew visited Taiwan in '70 to ameliorate the situation.

DAKS: For those studying Chinese, and the already qualified language officers serving elsewhere, I think our hope was that China would open up soon, and there would be opportunities to serve there. The desire to be among the first to help open up China diplomatically was strong. Both in Washington, DC and at the language school in Taiwan, our instructors, except for one or two teaching Taiwanese, were from mainland China. And even though they or their parents had fled because of the communist takeover, in discussing the country, its culture and language an appealing image of China was put forward. So by and large, I believe, my fellow foreign service officers and others at the language school weren't focused on staying or working in Taiwan or going to another Chinese language post like Singapore.

Perhaps as a result, in those very early years, once you did go to China, after investing all that time involved in learning about the language and the country's history, it was challenging to be overly critical of the country, and in effect denying the value of all one's efforts to get this desired destination. So people certainly made every effort to look for positive things about China. But of course, after working in country for a while, there was a certain awakening that it wasn't quite what you had hoped in so many respects.

Q: Now, in the fall of '70, you would have gone to Taiwan for the second year of language? What was the emphasis at that time?

DAKS: At the language school itself, even though Nixon and other people were starting to talk about how we couldn't ignore China, for us the primary emphasis was mastering the Chinese language. Then at the then embassy in Taipei, the focus was on our relationship with the Republic of China (Taiwan).

The language school was a world of its own during that time because you were spending so much time on trying to develop fluency in spoken Chinese and, at the same time, develop a useful level of reading ability. As I recall, there was little if any time spent on writing Chinese characters.

Our school was located in Taichung, in the central part of the island. The director, or Xiàozhǎng (校长) in Chinese, was Gerard (Gerry) Kok, and the deputy was George Beasley, who had been our supervisory linguist at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington, DC, and transferred to Taiwan around the same time Roger and I did. Gerry and George were very different in attitude and personality, the former a Cantonese linguist with a missionary background, and George, a younger linguist, more attuned to the students, because we were close in age and attitude. Kok was, as I recall, the director almost all of the time I was there. But then George took over and did a wonderful job.

Q: Now, Vice President Agnew visited Taiwan in August 1970. From time to time, the embassy dipped into the language student pool, to do various things. When you have a high ranking visitor, did you guys get pulled into that particular visit?

DAKS: I wasn't pulled in for this visit. However, as you suggest, when high level visits occur, officers in training programs, or in positions where they might be spared, were asked to take up short term support assignments. Since you normally had a press pool accompanying a visit of this type, and the resident correspondents were also focused on the event, public diplomacy officers were needed to run press centers, arrange and handle briefings and respond to inquiries. State Department officers would be called on for various other functions, assisting accompanying members of the official delegations and perhaps even as note takers in meetings. Someone like Chas Freeman, who was already at the school, and had achieved significant fluency, might have been pulled in to support the visit.

Q: Now, Canada shifted recognition to Beijing in October 1970. Would that have impacted the attitude of your professors?

DAKS: Taiwan governing style in the early 70s had a certain structural resemblance to that of China. While citizens had more freedom overall, the internal security services were still quite active. So I think that it's fair to say that our language teachers were in contact with offices like the Taiwan Garrison Command and, while this is an assumption on my part, it's likely they were advised not to discuss Taiwan's declining international presence with us. At the same time, our instructors were probably asked or pressured to provide information about us. Of course, any concern that the government of the Republic of China had at the time about loss of diplomatic recognition by a nation like Canada, was probably focused on how it might affect the United States position on this issue. My sense is that ties with the USA and perhaps with Japan to a lesser extent were, at the time, the whole ball of wax for Taiwan.

As far as the language students were concerned, we were too absorbed in our studies to have discussions about other nation's relationship with the ROC. However, years later I became aware that while the United Kingdom was, in 1950, the first major power to establish diplomatic relations with China, from that point until 1972, London retained consular relations with both Beijing and Taipei, closing its Taiwan consulate when it upgraded its ties to ambassadorial level. If we had pursued the same route, I wonder how events would have developed?

Q: Now you mentioned that the language school was in Taichung, in central Taiwan. Wasn't there an American base there as well? What was life as a student like?

DAKS: Yes, there was a US air base, Ching Chuan Kang, and other American military personnel stationed in Taichung and other places around the island. And at the language school, within our class of about thirty officers, a number of agencies were represented, including the Department of Defense.

As for Taichung, it was a very pleasant place to live. We had an older, Japanese-style house, with tatami mats all over the place. It was comfortable and convenient. We could walk to the language school. Local contacts were mainly our Chinese teachers. We saw them a number of hours daily in the classroom, generally tutorial, and on occasion socialized with them outside of class. We also took trips with both individual instructors and as a group. We became particularly friendly with one of our Chinese instructors, Eunice Chao. A number of years later she visited Bangkok and stayed with us.

One interesting get together occurred when another USIA classmate, who along with myself and one other officer was Jewish. However, he was more observant, and decided to mark his son's birth by holding a *pidyon haben*. This ceremony involves redeeming a first born son by paying a Kohen, a Jew of the priestly class, five silver shekels (a coin). Once our non-USIA colleague acknowledged he was a descendant of Aaron, therefore a Kohen, the ceremony was held, in the presence of our language instructors. At the buffet lunch that followed, one of our teachers asked, "Is this Thanksgiving?"! Our fellow

classmate, not one to seek out the limelight, later noted that after all this he had to give the shekels back!

In addition, however, a young woman gave me language lessons outside of school hours. That contact provided me with an additional, useful perspective on another element of Taiwan society, and some pretty neat slang as well.

We also made two other very interesting acquaintances through our then five year old daughter, Jennifer. Because one day she told us about two new friends that she and her younger brother met while playing in the yard outside our house. Her friends turned out to be bar or dance hall girls. And it was then that I learned the Chinese term yuánfèn (缘分) a concept that describes fate or chance that brings people together, but has no direct translation in English.

Q: Now, I assume it was part of the instruction process, you mentioned, field trips either group or separately, right?

DAKS: Yes, we took several field trips. First of all, there were individual field trips where one or two of us went—I remember we took two field trips, with our friends, Roger and Anne Blattberg, one where we went to Hualien, on the other side of the island, and another where we flew to Magong, the principal city in the Penghu island chain, which is part of Taiwan. As for the class trip, we went to the south of Taiwan, Kaohsiung and Pingtung I believe. In fact, Neil Donnelly, my predecessor, as Branch Public Affairs Officer (BPAO) facilitated this trip as did all the BPAOs in the south had. That gave me the idea that when it was my turn to arrange the students' schedule, to do something that hadn't been done before, which I will elaborate on later.

Q: So now you are in charge of the USIS offices in Kaohsiung and Tainan. What were the facilities like? How were the offices structured? And were there any special challenges being responsible for offices in different locations? Finally, based on what you've said earlier, I know that your previous assignment in Laos wasn't traditional in terms of USIA work. What about the programs in Kaohsiung and Tainan?

DAKS: Kaohsiung, the largest city in the south of Taiwan, and Tainan to the north, were only 30 miles apart. However, in terms of demographics, economics and politics there was a much greater gap. Kaohsiung is Taiwan's largest port and, at the time, was the world's center for ship breaking, taking apart various types of ocean going vessels for scrap. It also had a major export processing center and a great deal of heavy industry. Tainan, on the other hand, the oldest city on the island, the historic capital, and the place where anti-government sentiment was most evident, although low key because of the fear of the island's internal security service.

While the Kuomintang (Nationalist) party controlled the local government in both cities, the influence of mainlanders, individuals who fled to Taiwan shortly after World War II, as the communists took over China, was stronger and more evident in Kaohsiung.

I was the only diplomat in this part of Taiwan, although the U.S. military was present at the Tsoying Naval Base in Kaohsiung and at an airbase in Tainan. While we occasionally utilized the PX, my job was such that contact with the U.S. military was infrequent, although on one occasion I was called in to interpret for an Admiral during a U.S. ship visit. And, while I never received training as a consular officer, an occasional jail visit was part of my brief.

Each of these offices had seven locally hired staff, all but three were Taiwanese. The two senior staff in Kaohsiung were mainlanders. In those days, you frequently heard the distinction being made between mainlanders, or *waishengren* (外省人), people from other provinces, and *benshengren* (本省人), referring to descendants of Hokkien and Hakka people who had arrived 400 years earlier. Interestingly, the earliest arrivals, aborigines, were not considered *benshengren,* perhaps reflecting discrimination by everyone else against these minority tribal members who traditionally lived in the more mountainous areas of the island.

Both USIS offices or branches had a small library, a space for lectures and an exhibit area. Kaohsiung, reflecting its industrial bent, was in a nondescript, cement shop-house building, which I relocated during my tour to a newer but equally nondescript four story shop-house where we occupied the second and fourth floor over a Volkswagen dealer. Tainan, on the other hand, was in a historic, charming, old wooden building, which originally was the Japanese Patriotic Women's Association.

Interestingly, several of the older Taiwanese staff were addressed using the honorific Japanese term San (Mr., Mrs. Ms.), carried over from the island being a Japanese colony from 1895-1945.

And, in Tainan, the custodian was an elderly, former soldier who had been forcibly conscripted by the Nationalist army during the Chinese civil war and brought to Taiwan. He spoke neither Mandarin or Taiwanese, but rather the Chaozhou dialect. A hard working, rather forlorn figure, the office doubled as his home.

We lived in Kaohsiung and so spent more time there. Then, on average, two days a week, I went to Tainan, usually by office car. At that time the commute between the two cities was about an hour. On rare occasions I would overnight in Tainan.

Previous Branch Public Affairs Officers (BPAO) were members of the Toastmaster Club in Kaohsiung and the Rotary in Tainan. Rotary membership was honorary; BPAOs weren't required to pay dues. However, I told K.C. Chuang, our senior employee in Tainan, and a member of the Rotary, I would only join as a regular, dues paying member, an expense for which I could not be reimbursed. I believed this approach would strengthen relationships and enable me to feel comfortable making requests, which turned out to be the case. The Tainan Rotarians were all ethnic Taiwanese, and the proceedings were in the local dialect, which I found challenging, although it helped improve my listening skills. I would usually respond in Mandarin.

During my three years as BPAO Kaohsiung/Tainan, I supervised a program that was pretty much in the mainstream of U.S. Information Agency activities. We identified and nominated individuals to participate in exchange programs, sponsored lectures on a host of themes relating to the United States, held an occasional cultural presentation, sent out information on U.S. policy and publications about America, forwarded from the main office in Taipei. I made frequent calls at government agencies and schools, and occasionally gave a talk. And of course as the lone diplomat, I frequently arranged schedules for embassy officers and visiting officials from Washington.

However, although we ran a conventional program, the assignment was anything but normal, because my first day on the job, Monday, July 19, 1971 coincided with a White House announcement that Henry Kissinger had made his secret trip to China. Then within a short period you had the PRC taking over the China seat at the UN, with Taiwan's expulsion, and then the following year President Nixon traveled to China.

While there had been talk of the need to have contact with the PRC, the embassy was caught off guard by this bombshell announcement. While no doubt there were subsequent discussions in Taipei between high ranking visiting American officials and senior embassy staff, with the government leaders in Taipei, as I recall, there was little open reaction to this development among our staff and my contacts.

The events that come readily to mind relating to these developments were occasional reluctance by some administrators at Chen Kung University in Tainan to work with us, usually overcome, a question asked of a visiting USIA desk officer as to who was responsible for programming involving China and a letter sent to me by a student advising Dr. Kissinger not to visit Taiwan because of threats to his safety.

Perhaps some officials were under instruction not to bring these issues up with a relatively junior US government official, so as not to appear panicky. However, perhaps more importantly, most of our key contacts in the South were ethnic Taiwanese, who initially were indifferent to and perhaps even delighted in difficulties encountered by the island's mainland dominated central government who often were the objects of disdain and even hate on their part.

Q: During your three years as BPAO, a number of other things central to US interests were going on including the American drawdown in Vietnam, reversion of Okinawa, the Thai student overthrow of the military government in 1973 and, of course, Watergate and its aftermath leading ultimately to President Nixon's resignation. How did that impact your work?

DAKS: Of course we distributed materials and had speakers that dealt with foreign policy and U.S. domestic developments. And wherever possible I found people locally who could discuss these issues, because Washington wasn't always in a position to provide the support we needed. For example, Joe Lake, who ultimately became U.S. Ambassador to Mongolia, initially a language student and then an officer Taipei, ran a couple of very effective programs on the making of U.S. foreign policy. He utilized an outstanding film

by the State Department, entitled “From Where I Sit”, to show how American policy makers needed to take into account conflicting domestic views on a contentious issue, in this case fishing rights and territorial waters.

Regrettably, I was so absorbed in the day-to-day work at these two branch posts that I didn’t follow what was going on back at home or at times in other parts of the world all that closely. A particularly embarrassing moment is when in response to a question as to whether our president might resign because of Watergate, my definitive answer was “no way”.

Vietnam did come up from time-to-time and on this issue. Once again, I probably missed the mark by failing to cite protests as a sign of our healthy democracy, but rather pointed out that the controversy over our involvement in Southeast Asia didn’t serve Taiwan interests, because many Americans now negatively lump our involvement in all Asian countries together as presenting the same problems.

The only issue that I nailed, perhaps because of personal experience, or maybe just luck, was after we returned from a family visit to Thailand in 1973, observing that the military government at the time was in trouble. However, the situation in Thailand was of little interest in Taiwan.

This discussion brings to mind a point I would like to make about State Department guidance to its officers. It’s an accepted rule that as officers we must advocate US policy and not our personal views. And in public forums I always tried, to the best of my ability, to present American policy and where there was no specific policy, reasonable arguments on all sides of an issue. However, in some cases, particularly with close contacts in a one-on-one situation, if I only stated the US government policy, without any expression of personal views, then after a while the people I dealt with would conclude that they could never expect candid discussion. And I doubted interaction with someone who merely spouted government policy would be of any interest? So, for example, on one occasion when I was working at an embassy sponsored “election center” reporting the results of a presidential race, I was asked privately who I voted for. And in the context of discussing this democratic election, I responded that my ballot went to the losing candidate.

During my time in Taiwan, I worked closely with the resident American business community, organizing seminars and hosting the first ever catalog show and trade mission on behalf of the Embassy and Commerce Department. We also hosted periodic exhibits by the embassy commercial attaché at which trade inquiry appointments were taken. In recognition of my work in promoting investment and trade, the American Chamber of Commerce in Taiwan awarded me honorary membership.

One particular trade promotion event remains a vivid memory. Art Potuise, I believe that was his name, was the featured speaker at this event in Kaohsiung. Arriving the day before, we stayed overnight in Tainan. The following morning Potuise woke up to find that he had lost vision in one eye. Immediately seeking locally available medical

attention, Potuise was advised that it was likely that a blood vessel had burst and that, if so, this might be a permanent condition. Nevertheless, Potuise insisted on fulfilling his obligation, speaking and participating in the program, before returning to Taipei for further treatment, which unfortunately was unsuccessful.

Apparently, others judged my performance adequate, because at the end of the tour I received a meritorious honor award from USIA for my work in Taiwan.

Q: I gather while in Taiwan you became a commissioned Foreign Service Officer? Right? How did that work out?

DAKS: With difficulty. To become a career officer, I had to appear before a panel in Washington, DC, which I did, just prior to taking up the Taiwan assignment.

The interview or oral examination, if you will, focused on American society, history and life. I failed, due to a weak educational background and a failure to follow events and trends outside my country of service while abroad. A second, likely last opportunity to pass the examination, would be forthcoming in a year. And, so, with a sense of panic, I approached the challenge in two ways. First of all, to prepare, I read about 20 books on various aspects of American history and contemporary life. At the same time, since I did have a strong interest in Asia, and wasn't receptive to assignments outside the region, while in Taiwan I started to look around for other career opportunities.

Initially, there was a feeler by a US government intelligence agency, but no follow up, due perhaps to a legal restriction on hiring former Peace Corps volunteers. Subsequently, I met Rein Narma, President, General Instrument of Taiwan. Narma was looking for a special assistant, who could help him navigate the challenges of working in Taiwan, understanding the cultural environment of the firm's branch that employed over 10,000 people. Following a discussion, an American psychologist was sent down to spend time with me in the south of Taiwan, observing how I handled work and the social environment. At the end of that day, he expressed confidence I could handle the position at General Instrument. Subsequently, I visited the factory, and the next day I was offered and accepted the job.

That same month, June of 1973, USIA had sent out an inspection team to review and evaluate our public diplomacy operation. The team traveled to Kaohsiung and Taiwan and subsequently evaluated my performance. Ironically, the Public Member of the team, a businessman, "concurred specifically in the high marks contained in this report...Mr. McGuire believes that Daks, if he chose (and he doesn't), could make a great deal of money outside the government."

Well, as mentioned, I accepted the job at General Instrument, and immediately sent in a letter of resignation. However, no sooner had the letter been sent off I began to worry about how I would fare in a private sector environment. Within 24 hours, I called the Public Affairs Officer's secretary, who had just received the letter, and asked her to tear it up.

Looking back on how everything turned out, I consider myself blessed to have had such an interesting career. However, while at times I found myself in harm's way at one or two of my postings, my concern about the loss of a secure position was even greater, which is what prompted this abrupt change of mind. To this day, I wonder how things might have turned out, had I taken up the challenge.

Years later, at a high school reunion, a highly successful classmate admired what a "risk taker" I was, working in unstable countries. I responded, "Ronnie, you're the risk taker... making payroll, covering rent and utilities scares the hell out of me."

Q: Following your time in Taiwan, you were ordered to return to Laos on a direct transfer. How did you feel about going back to a program in an unstable political environment?

DAKS: When Nongkran learned we were assigned back to Vientiane her response was "stuck again". Like me, she wanted a posting in Thailand. In addition, I was hoping for an assignment as a Cultural Affairs Officer. However, I was told the "needs of the service" meant I needed to fill the position of the director of the bi-national center, the Lao American Association.
Then when we were transiting Bangkok back to Laos I learned that my job had changed. I was now the Information Officer-designate. This assignment was the first, where I would have another American officer as a subordinate.

As I recall, this change was due to a drawdown of USIA personnel. The position of the director of the bi-national center had been eliminated, and a contract employee was hired to do this job. In addition, the Cultural Affairs Officer was away, so I started off wearing several supervisory hats.

Early in 1974, the fighting had ended in Laos and the third coalition government formed. From the outset, coalition partner Communist Pathet Lao steadily gained the upper hand. Supported by North Vietnam, they were also aided in the capital, perhaps unwittingly, by other groups such as the Association of Lao government employees, labor federations and student organizations. The members of these latter groups weren't necessarily pro-communist, but may have believed that anything was better than the corrupt leaders of the Royal Lao government faction.

During the initial year of assignment, I steadily transitioned from doing USIS work to assisting the Mission, and Washington on occasion, with unexpected developments due to the rapidly deteriorating political situation in Vientiane.

Upon arrival I was involved with the planning and construction of the U.S. pavilion at the That Luang Fair exhibit, arranging lectures in the southern towns of Savannakhet and Pakse and helping to finalize arrangements for student grantees under the Fulbright program and international visitors to travel to the United States.

However, early on it wasn't all work. My parents visited not long after we had arrived. They greatly enjoyed their time in Vientiane, impressed by our grand embassy-leased house, complete with a pond in front and large yard. My dad, who had sold photographic supplies, took myriad snapshots of our house to record the diplomatic splendor, and he and my mom were reassured by the seeming calm as we did a bit of sightseeing and sampled a few of the city's better restaurants during a brief period when the Pathet Lao while present everywhere had yet to make any dramatic moves. Upon returning home, my dad was surprised to find that all his photographs were pitch black, because he had failed to remove his camera lens cap!

But then things started to get dicey. So, I would help out the Counselor of the Embassy for Administration with interpreting and later advising as he negotiated settlement of a strike by 500 locally hired security watchmen. And as the drawdown of Americans rapidly accelerated following the fall of the government in Vietnam, several embassy personnel occupied facilities were seized by communist groups and their supporters and I was asked to join with another embassy officer as we helped the chargé d'affaires negotiate temporary return to these offices.

While all this was happening USIS was part of this draw down and so in a very short period we went from 10 American officers to just two, myself and the Assistant Information Officer, Margaret Converse. For several weeks, Lew Pate, who was Public Affairs Officer when I arrived, would call me and our wonderful Deputy Howard Hardy into his office and go through a list of officers, one by one, reciting their names in order to determine who would remain in Vientiane and who would leave. However, it soon became apparent to me that this recital of names was merely that and that Margaret and I were the officers destined to stay on. Ultimately, Nongkran and our children left Laos as part of the overall Mission drawdown and evacuation. We went from many hundreds of individuals to an Embassy of fewer than thirty officers.

A couple of other incidents stick out in my mind.

In one, an embassy secretary had gone back into her house in Silver City, one of the U.S. government leased compounds, to retrieve her belongings, and several young Pathet Lao soldiers had intruded wanting to know why she was there. Panicking, and unable to speak Lao, I was asked to go in and straighten things out. While I did solve the problem, only later was I told by one of our Laotian staff who accompanied me, that telling one of the soldier, who wore glasses, that couldn't he see with his "four eyes" that the frightened woman was only retrieving her personal belongings had put me in a potentially precarious situation.

The Chancery of the Embassy itself, which while not owned by the United States was considered American property and entitled to protection and privileges under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. And as such it was never breached during this period of turmoil. The United States Information Services leased offices were under this same protection. However, with the drawdown of Americans and necessarily reduced

level of activity, I determined we were best served by moving the bulk of our office to the Embassy compound. Only our library remained.

Unfortunately, Pathet Lao soldiers, who were basically, uneducated rural youth, now occupied Vientiane. They obviously weren't aware of any diplomatic niceties, and so they seized the library as part of their overall movement against the U.S. presence. Subsequently, at a press conference at the Ministry of Information (MOI), in response to a question, the spokesman acknowledged that the USIS library was part of the embassy, and entitled to diplomatic protection.

Subsequently, a group of reporters headed up by New York Times correspondent Henry Kamm asked, in light of what transpired at the press conference, if I was going to take back the property, and then accompanied me when I went, intending to do just that. When I arrived at the library two armed soldiers were sitting inside and I proceeded forthwith to summarize what was said at the MOI press conference, proclaiming I was there to take back the library. Most likely, knowing nothing about what had transpired, and perhaps even what that meant, one soldier pointed a gun at me, and proceeded to make clear that I should leave, which I did along with the reporters as the armed young man followed us out.

The next day, everything was clarified and I returned to take possession of the library and dispose of the books via donation, since while we were on sound legal ground, in that environment, the facility would be of no use.

What was never reported by correspondent Kamm, was that as we were being escorted out at gunpoint on that initial, failed recovery attempt, I whispered that the soldier "must be antisemitic." Years later, when meeting in Bangkok, Kamm retold the story with great relish.

Q: Once the communists were firmly in control, and the evacuation occurred, what kinds of things were you and Margaret able to do.

DAKS: We were able to maintain a low key public diplomacy program. We provided briefings for visiting American or third country press and our news bulletin was distributed to leadership groups. Otherwise, we focused on American culture, support for English language study and various other aspects of American society. We sponsored one cultural presentation and Rip Van Winkle was translated into Laotian, although I can't recall if it was actually published.

Despite the drawdown, we indicated through our continued presence a desire to remain engaged with the new government. And while communists were in control, they were Lao communists, and in Vientiane at least, less strident perhaps than revolutionary leaders elsewhere, although certainly the treatment of rightist leaders and the royal family sent to reeducation camps was extremely harsh, leading at times to starvation and death. However, the new leaders also were well aware that as a poor, landlocked nation, they needed support from as diverse a group of nations as possible, rather than being solely

dependent on the largess of the newly unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Russia and China.

Another one of my duties was to monitor the Laotian media and evaluate our own efforts via the Lao language service of the Voice of America. I made every effort to be both accurate and unbiased in my evaluations. However, being considered fluent as a foreign service officer and at a level capable of evaluating print and broadcast media were two very different things.

During this period, a number of the USIS locally hired staff fled the country. For a couple of the very senior people, I documented their contribution to the work of the U.S. mission so they could qualify for a Special Immigrant Visa. These individuals and their family immigrated in the normal manner, and this facilitated their getting work and a host of other benefits. It's been gratifying to see how well these individuals and their families have thrived here in the United States.

Interestingly, however, a significant percentage of those individuals who fled or otherwise left Laos, and were harshly critical of the regime, have since returned to visit. Some of these same individuals established commercial ties, and even resettled or retired there. In that regard, holding a foreign passport no doubt provides a level of security.

Q: During your final year in Laos, who did you report to? Was it the senior person at the embassy or your supervisor at USIA in Washington, DC.

DAKS: On a day-to-day basis I reported to Tom Corcoran, who replaced Chris Chapman as the chargé d'affaires. Tom had extensive experience in Southeast Asia, serving at challenging hardship posts through most of his career. He held very strong anti-communist views. However, at the same time, he was the ultimate professional, carrying out policy as mandated by Washington. Whatever his personal views about the merit of public diplomacy in a situation like this, he pretty much allowed Margaret Converse and I the freedom to run the USIS program as we saw fit.

I was also supervised from afar by the USIA Area Director for East Asia and the Pacific, but given the totality of our remaining interests in Asia, maintaining a presence in Laos probably wasn't a high priority. However, since we could do very little, minimal support was required.

In a situation like this, when you are the last man standing so to speak, praise comes easily, and there were indications that had I wished, another more comfortable overseas assignment concurrent with my interests, that it would be forthcoming.

***

Q: Larry, we had left it that you were in Laos, serving first as Information Officer and then as Public Affairs Officer during the final coalition government and into a

full-fledged take over by the Pathet Lao. And so you left, I gather not at the end of a normal tour. What was the next step?

DAKS: I stayed slightly longer than the normal two-year tour. During this time, we went from well over 1,000 Americans affiliated with the embassy to twenty-seven officers. Once things stabilized at the Mission, then I think it was kind of up to me as to how long I would stay on.

During much of my time in Laos, I was so wrapped up in day-to-day matters, working as a USIS officer, and as sort of a language qualified troubleshooter if you will, that I really didn't focus on my next assignment. However, at some point, Bill Payeff, the Agency's area director for East Asia and the Pacific, pretty much told me that, within reason, he would consider my request. But he did mention an assignment in Hong Kong, which at the time was a coveted destination for any Chinese language officer.

However, my first priority was to be reunited with Nongkran and the children. Being closer to aging parents was another factor. And, so, I asked for assignment in Washington, DC as the USIA desk officer working on China. At that time, there was a single China desk officer at USIA who was responsible for backstopping our program in Taiwan, Hong Kong and, as I recall, Singapore. And occasionally there were requests from the liaison office, although a USIA officer had yet to be assigned to Beijing.

Then as our relationship with the People's Republic began to evolve, two other officers were assigned to work on China-related matters at USIA headquarters. A language school and USIS Taiwan colleague, Gene Nojek joined me and then Norrie Smith, a more senior officer, filled a newly created position of office deputy director for China.

While USIA was still an independent agency, overseas we were integrated into embassies and in Washington, DC we coordinated our work with colleagues at the Department of State. If I needed to clear a message, then usually my contact would be State's China desk, which was headed by Stapleton Roy. However, my closest contacts were with officers in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (CU). Initially that was George Beasley, who had left the language school in Taichung and was now supervising China exchanges.

About a year after I took up the position of China desk officer at USIA, we had a change of leadership. Mort Smith, a hard charging, no nonsense guy took over as area director. This coincided with the State Department asking that we present ideas on what more might be done with China in terms of public diplomacy. So Mort convened a meeting of various department representatives within USIA responsible for field support.

At that time, decision makers within the agency had begun to promote narrowly focused programs to small target audiences, and we were being asked to provide empirical proof of the effectiveness of every aspect of our work. This bothered me, because this signaled diminished support for popular programs such as bi-national centers, English teaching and libraries. In my view, the effectiveness of some things just can't be quantified.

However, the prevailing attitude seemed to be that if large numbers of people liked a certain program, then it became suspect, viewed as a reward, and so we needed to cut back.

So when Mort asked, “What could we do with China? What kind of resources do we have? What would we like to propose to the State Department”? As I recall, there was one person, who asked Mort, "Well you know, we first need to do an audience analysis; who do we want to get to"? And Mort Smith exploded. I don't remember his exact words, but in effect, he basically said, "We are talking about China here. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Don't start talking to me about specific audiences, we've got to be imaginative. We've got to be creative." In effect, he was saying we have to move now, strike while the iron is hot.

I suppose now, in May of 2023, given the state of our relationship with China, in terms of hindsight, perhaps that wouldn't be perceived in such a good light. But for me, that was very notable, and I would say in a certain sense, an inspiring moment.

Q: So you're probably in the same situation as the State Department. I mean after Nixon then goes, after the initial contacts are made, people start thinking, what if? Here you are. You're spending much of your time working on Taiwan and Hong Kong, and yet, in meetings and in the hallway, you're trying to think of things that you might want to do with big China.

DAKS: Yes, as I mentioned, initially when the liaison office was established, there wasn’t a USIA officer assigned there. In fact, early on several attempts by Area Director Bill Payeff to get someone assigned were rebuffed. In part, there probably was a feeling that there were few opportunities for public diplomacy programming, as well as the thinking that politically sensitive assignments should be left for the State Department officers. Ultimately, however, John Thomson, who was my successor in Kaohsiung and Tainan, an outstanding Chinese language officer, was selected to go to China, but not to do USIA work, per se. The understanding was that his talents would be used as a political officer and circumstances permitting he would run Agency programs on the side. However, once John arrived, a number of opportunities presented themselves, and within a year or two you had a program with several officers and a locally employed staff, the latter assigned by the Beijing Service Bureau for Diplomatic Missions, an arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Q: So, when did he first arrive?

DAKS: Late June 1978, before formal diplomatic relations were established. But, as I mentioned, within a short period of time he had several other USIA officers working with him. Some of the other earliest officers were Ted Liu, Leon Slawecki, Bob Knopes, Bill Stubbs, Mark Crocker and Norrie Smith.

But even before John arrived we were supporting USLO in various ways. For example, we provided films for the Liaison Office staff to show to their contacts. In that regard, one story stands out.

Prior to inviting Chinese guests to see a film, each movie had to be reviewed by the authorities, gatekeepers if you will. And I recall, in one instance we sent over a comedy. I can't remember the title, but the censors watched, laughed uproariously, and then said "This isn't appropriate for the Chinese people."

We also provided books and other printed materials. At the same time, the bulk of Agency support went to our programs in Hong Kong and Taiwan. And I think for a time I also had responsibility for Singapore, where we had a few people. Jerry Stryker, our most experienced China hand, was the public affairs officer in Singapore at the time. That program didn't require much work, but it gave me the opportunity to visit the island-nation for the first time.

Of course, once we established diplomatic relations on the first of January 1979, then the program in China really began to take off. And there was also work to be done in terms of welcoming groups from the PRC.

Then there is also a lot of work relating to our unofficial, non-governmental relationship with the Republic of China under the Taiwan Relations Act. And even though I was enthusiastic about building up the program in China, because of my service in Taiwan and I think, because of a natural tendency to root for the underdog, those with less leverage, I became an even stronger advocate for maintaining our program in Taiwan at its current level. Regretfully, from my point of view, Alan Carter, the Area Director who succeeded Mort Smith, didn't always support my position in that regard.

Q: Now, in response to this opportunity that came to fruition in '79, did USIA say, we need more Chinese language officers?

DAKS: Actually, for quite a few years prior to that, the Agency had been sending a number of officers off for language training. And that continued. Of course when a post like China suddenly opens up, and you need multiple officers, and qualified people are in the midst of tours of duty elsewhere, in the short term staffing becomes an issue.

So, I think the pipeline stayed about the same, but what changed was additional funding for programs like the Fulbright exchanges of students and scholars and the International Visitor [Leadership] Program, which draws funds from the exchange appropriation as well. Of course, a key event in the resumption of our relationship with China started because of ping pong diplomacy, way back in 1971, and that was something that was in the area of sports exchanges.

Q: One of the ways the roll-up was a "Brzezinski goes to China" in May of '78. Would that have impacted you more or the embassy?

DAKS: Well, it wasn't an embassy at that point, but a liaison office.

Q: Right, the liaison office.

DAKS: When you had a visit like that, various agencies would be tasked not only for briefings about their programs involving the country or region to be visited, but for new initiatives that might be proposed or support provided. The idea being that during such a high profile event, a senior Administration figure like Brzezinski should announce something tangible, moving the relationship further in a positive direction.

These visits potentially had a big upside. However, sometimes in the rush to score policy or political points the visitor would unilaterally make commitments. When Dr. Frank Press was the science advisor to President Jimmy Carter, he traveled to Beijing. At some point, Press said that the White House would host a large delegation of his counterparts from China, and personally issued the invitation. However, upon return to Washington, he was advised that in fact his office did not possess legal authority, and the budget, to serve as host. Fortunately, USIA did have authority to fund the expense of hosting such a delegation, although we had little if anything to do with the substance of the visit.

I along with other foreign service officers were, however, involved with visiting cultural groups. Early on in the reestablishment of informal and then formal diplomatic relations, visiting groups and delegations were relatively rare. Therefore, in order to formally represent the host country, that is the United States government, and frankly to glean insights into China, officers were assigned to accompany each group. So I was sent out to the West Coast to meet an acrobatic or dance delegation, this kind of thing. Well, that practice didn't last very long, because the number of visitors and delegations soon grew way beyond the ability of the federal government to provide hand holding or meet and greet and observe. And of course, quite appropriately, then it was left to the private sector, to educational institutions and others to carry on the bulk of this responsibility.

Reflecting back, U.S. policymakers didn’t foresee how quickly people-to-people and cultural and education contacts would develop between the United States and China. The dynamism of American society, with so many individuals and groups aggressively pursuing contact with the PRC, now that it was opening up to the West, far outstripped the ability of any government entity to track these developments, and that in my view was a good thing.

Q: In '79, when the U.S. did formally establish diplomatic relations, what was the atmosphere in your office?

DAKS: Well, people were upbeat, bubbling with ideas, and looking for resources to expand contact with China. Moreover, in 1947, China was the first country to sign a Fulbright agreement with the United States, so revitalizing exchanges with the PRC had symbolic importance as well. On the other hand, now there was quite naturally less interest in continued contact with Taiwan. To this point, the following comes to mind.

After we normalized relationships with China and announced contact with the Republic of China would continue, but as a people-to-people relationship, various agency representatives were called over to the State Department. I represented USIA. There were also people from Agriculture, Commerce, perhaps the Defense Department, and of course the Department of State.

In that meeting, we were told that going forward there would be only fifty official Americans on the island, working as part of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT). Then each agency representative was asked how many officers did we want stationed there. And then with each response, the agency name and requested number of staff were written on a blackboard at the front of the meeting room. At the time, we had five Americans staffing our offices in Taipei and Kaohsiung, and I was very interested in keeping the relationship at its current level, so I responded "five". Had someone more senior represented the Agency, my suspicion is that the number of slots requested might have been lower because frankly my supervisors were less supportive, particularly those focused on the narrow targeted programming I mentioned earlier.

Shortly after the United States and China announced the establishment of diplomatic relations and the transition of our relationship with Taiwan to that of a people-to-people nature, Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher led a delegation to Taipei to explain our position to the leaders of the Republic of China. Area Director Smith really didn't want to go, but I argued that his participation, representing USIA, was important, especially since maintaining cultural ties with the island was mentioned in the Taiwan Relations Act. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the delegation received a hostile and violent reception, their motorcade was attacked and a few people had minor injuries. Upon returning, Mort Smith, I'd like to think somewhat jokingly, but pointedly told me something like, "Daks you're responsible for my getting caught up in this."

Several months later, David Dean, who was the first Director of the AIT Washington, DC office, approached me requesting an additional 25,000 to expand the Fulbright program in Taiwan.
I was completely on board, wrote up the request and passed it to the Area Director Alan Carter. And that's where the request died. I was extremely disappointed and felt I let down my colleagues at AIT. Fortunately, however, the public affairs office director and deputy at AIT in Taipei, Neal Donnelly and George Beasley were very effective, doing an excellent job of managing the transition in our program.

Q: Now, you were saying that you felt some responsibility to maintain a relationship with Taiwan that would be profitable and helpful. Were there other things that didn't quite make the cut?

DAKS: There were some cutbacks. I don't recall what they were. I don't think that there were a lot of complaints from our office in Taiwan. I think they felt I was a good advocate for them. But certainly, there wasn't any kind of growth in programs. It's a very good question, because you had an expansion of budget relating to China. And at whose expense was it? Or was it at anybody's expense? I'm not sure I know the answer to that.

Certainly, within Asia, other cutbacks were going on. And we hadn't opened up in Vietnam yet. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, programs in Thailand had been gradually drawing down.

Q: Actually, in your notes, you noted that for several months you had a TDY (Temporary Duty) in Thailand.

DAKS: The refugee program had grown substantially. And they were looking for people who had served in Indochina, preferably with language skills, to go out and augment existing staff. I can't recall how I got involved, but was asked to go out, and was quite willing to do that. Although I didn't necessarily want to leave my family for an extended period, I thought it would be an interesting opportunity.

So I spent several months as an ethnic affairs officer working in refugee camps, mainly in Nong Khai and also in Loei province.

There were certain criteria that people applying to the United States had to meet in order to qualify. One category was a close association with the U.S. government. And that's why they fled; they were in danger. The thinking was that officers who had worked in one or more of the countries of Indochina could provide input on the validity of the claim of close association.
So, the people would come in, and along with an immigration officer, who I assume was from INS, and someone like myself, who supposedly was in a position to know, would confirm or express doubt as to whether the individual had a close association with the United States government. For example, we might remember this person as one of our foreign service nationals. On the other hand, since the Embassy and all its affiliate entities in Laos had over 3,000 individuals working in various locations. We didn't necessarily have first-hand knowledge, but some of the things they were saying might or might not ring true, or their perception of whether they were in danger would ring true.

It got kind of interesting at times because ethnic refugees, such as the Hmong who were working up in Long Tieng or other clandestine sites in the area, might only know their American colleague by an assumed name or a nickname. An example was "Mr. Clean", who I assume was bald. Of course, one of the things that might have happened is that the word gets passed, as to whose name you should say, for this kind of thing, so the ethnic affairs officers' advice was relied upon to a fairly significant extent to say whether this person's claim of a close association was legitimate.

Another responsibility that was given to me because I spoke Chinese was to make contact with a representative of the office unofficially representing the interests of the Republic of China (ROC) in Thailand, to encourage Taiwan to be more accommodating in terms of refugee resettlement and support. (The Kingdom of Thailand recognized the People's Republic of China in mid-1975; subsequently unofficial relations were managed on the Taiwan side through a non-governmental entity, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office.)

Obviously, we wanted shared responsibility. I guess maybe in those days they said burden, but let's say responsibility. So, I met with the people from the ROC. I'm sure they reported it back. I don't know if there were any positive results, but certainly, because Taiwan wanted to stay on our good side, I always got a sympathetic hearing when I spoke with them. And since it was a situation where I could speak Chinese and no one else in that office could—or if they did it wasn't at working level proficiency—whatever I reported was gold.

Q: Nong Khai and Loei provinces in Thailand are just south and east of Vientiane. How many refugees do you think were coming across the Mekong River?

DAKS: Well, during this period, at any given time there were at least a few thousand individuals in the various camps, and there were several of these camps.

I may have mentioned this earlier in the interview, but I believe it bears repeating. In the Nong Khai camp, established to house lowland Lao, there were people who told me the reason that they fled Laos was because of the corruption of the old government, people taking advantage of people and so on and so forth. But then I observed that in the camps, that same society that people complained about replicated itself, in terms of how people dealt with each other.

The Ban Vinai refugee camp in Loei province was largely ethnic Hmong. And it was working in that camp that an incident occurred directly attributable to a recommendation that I made. While I can't recall the specifics, I believed that one of the applicants for refugee status's claim was not legitimate. Well upon learning he had been rejected, this individual got very upset and attacked me physically. Fortunately, his punches landed on my attaché case, held in front of my body, so I wasn't injured, other than being frightened. However, that night, there was a fire at the camp, and the office where we worked was burned down.

Subsequently, Jerry Daniels, an intelligence operative known for his work with the Hmong, advised that it would be best if I didn't stay in that camp after that. And so I moved on to another camp or perhaps went back to Bangkok to work. Jerry didn't appear to blame me for what happened. However, I'll never know whether the individual's outburst occurred because of an injustice or a lost opportunity to game the system that others had perhaps taken advantage of.

Q: Who was running these camps, is this UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)?

DAKS: I think so, although I can't recall seeing a UNHCR presence per se on the ground, the agency had an office in Bangkok. On the other hand, while the United States government had no official role in the administration of these camps, we were providing a significant amount of the aid they received.

In Bangkok, there was a refugee office within the embassy headed by Tom Barnes—that's who I worked for—and there were a number of other Americans working there. Some people were on contract. Others may have been seconded from AID. I was the only one from USIA. Most everyone in the office stayed assigned there for a longer period than I was. Finally, you also had
a near-legendary figure in regards to refugee resettlement, Lionel Rosenblatt, who visited perhaps from Washington, DC, and over an extended period successfully pushed for expansion and expeditious processing of Indochinese refugees into the United States.

I know that had I requested it, I could have stayed longer working on the refugee program.

Q: And what period was that covered? When were you there? And when did you leave?

DAKS: December 6, 1978 to March 15, 1979.

Q: Yeah, Lionel Rosenblatt was very deeply involved in refugee issues. Now, so these were Hmong Lao, but not Vietnamese?

DAKS: That's right, the ethnic Lao and Hmong were the refugees I worked with. Other camps housed Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, but since I hadn't served in those posts, I was never asked to get involved with camps housing those groups.

Q: I suspect that the camps were maintained by Thai authorities, and supported by the NGOs.

DAKS: Yes, that's right, Thai authorities were by virtue of sovereignty primarily in charge of all the camps. However, my impression was that they left the internal management of these camps to the refugees who received assistance from a number of foreign governments, the United Nations and various non-profit organizations. However, once refugees needed to leave the camp, even for a short period, then they were at the sufferance of the local authorities, some of whom likely saw this as an opportunity to line their pockets.

Although the treatment often varied by who you were. The lowland Lao, who share ethnicity, language and culture with the Thai got the relatively better treatment, then the Hmong or Khmer. And this hierarchy of treatment persists to this very day as few complaints are heard about Laotians living in Thailand, but there are significant issues with illegal workers from Cambodia and Myanmar and most recently from China.

Q: Now, if you interviewed somebody, and you were able to authenticate their association with the United States, what would happen to them next?

DAKS: Assuming the immigration officer agreed with my assessment, and as I recall he usually did, then that would trigger the process for paperwork to be admitted to the United States. The entire process might take months. My impression was they would

usually travel directly from Thailand to the United States, although at times the refugee may have first been transferred to a third country, the Philippines for example, and wait at a location there.

Now, while in Laos, and perhaps even before that while serving in Taiwan, I had written up nominations for individuals to travel to the United States under the special immigrant visa program. These were for people who had worked for the United States for an extended period of time, at least 15 years as I recall, which entitled them and their family to be admitted as immigrants.

In the case of Taiwan, it was an employee, someone with long, outstanding association with the United States, who had made a significant contribution to U.S.–Taiwan relations. But in the case of Laos, you also had the fact that an individual was not only a loyal senior employee, but he may have been in danger. And, as I recall, I successfully nominated several such individuals, who came to the United States with their families. This visa category enabled individuals to work immediately and they had far less bureaucratic hassle when applying for various benefits.

Q: Do you recall any other Foreign Service officers that worked at the camps that you were at?

DAKS: Names that occur to me include Tim Carney, Mike Eiland, who was a military officer at the time but later became an FSO, and as mentioned Lionel Rosenblatt. As I recall, a number of AID officers worked on the program as well.

Q: At the end of the day, did you return to Udon for a hotel?

DAKS: Well in Loei province I stayed at Camp Vinai, at least until the assault and fire incident I described earlier. While working at Camp Nong Khai, I may have stayed in a hotel in Nong Khai city. But I suppose Udon was also possible, because traveling via the Friendship Highway, constructed by the U.S. in the 50s, wasn't that far away. Also, we had a consulate in Udon and the city was larger with more accommodation options.

Q: Were there any other refugee camps along the Mekong?

DAKS: Yes, there were other camps, such as those processing Khmer refugees along the Thai-Cambodian border. While I may have gone into those other camps once or twice, it was incidental to my work.

Q: As you're traveling around, who's providing your transportation?

DAKS: I think we were given vehicles at the various locations. As I recall, we took trains or airplanes to get to the sites. We didn't drive up from Bangkok, certainly. Because on the ground there were Americans stationed there for longer periods than I and they definitely had vehicles. Probably Jeeps. That's what we used, I remember, in Laos and northeastern Thailand.

Q: In that same time frame in '76, the political situation in Thailand changed, and the military came back. Did that change in Thailand impact your refugee work?

DAKS: Actually, as mentioned, my short assignment in Thailand didn't start until the very end of 1978. Whether civilian or military government in Thailand, my day-to-day work in the camps at the Refugee Office at the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok wasn't impacted.

Jumping ahead a bit, my next assignment was in Thailand, and when I got there late 1979 the Ambassador was Morton Abramowitz. The Ambassador and his wife Sheppie were very concerned about the status and treatment of refugees. He bumped heads with the Thai government, to the extent you could bump heads with Thais, and openly showed displeasure with Thai authorities because he wanted them to do more in terms of accommodating refugees. Ultimately, I believe he persuaded the Thai government to accept more refugees from Cambodia.

Q: Now, 1979 was when the U.S. recognized China, but it was also noted for the attack on the Embassy in Tehran and the subsequent hostage situation. Did that come to your awareness as you were on the China desk in Washington, or was that just another part of the world, not the one you were focused on?

DAKS: It was another part of the world obviously, it was in the news, but I was embroiled with China. It's not something that I really got involved with other than being an interested citizen.

Interestingly, however, one of the Americans who was taken hostage in Iran and ultimately freed, an English teaching officer, later worked for me at the bi-national center in Bangkok. His name was Bill Royer. I believe he arrived in Bangkok in 1984. And that prompts me to jump ahead in order to share a rather humiliating story.

At one point, late in my tenure at the bi-national center, I became very frustrated with what was going on among the staff, and was feeling sorry for myself, having a very bad day. And this came up in a phone conversation I was having with Bill. Then without thinking, I asked, "Did you ever have a day like that?" To which, after a long pause, he replied, "Oh, yes, I've had a few." It was only then I reminded myself who I was talking to, and that self-pity really didn't count for much.

Q: Well, let's move on to that because your next assignment was back in Bangkok as a director. Now, are you saying this was the bi-national director? Because in your list of jobs to me you described yourself as director, American University Alumni Language Center.

DAKS: Right and that's the formal name of the bi-national center, American University Alumni Language Center. Now first indulge me as I relate how I became aware of the position of bi-national center director.

During my second assignment in Laos, in 1974 my parents came to visit.

I met them in Bangkok, where we stayed at the Erawan Hotel for a few days. And it happened to be around the time of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year.

Well we were in the lobby and my mother sees a man with a beard reading, and she said to my father, "Oh, he's praying. He's Jewish. I'm going to ask him (if he was observing the holiday)." And my father said, "No, no, he's an Arab, don't talk to him." But my mother went over and it turned out it was another USIA officer, Milton Levitt, the director of the bi-national center at the time.

Upon meeting us, Leavitt invited me to see the facility, which was just down the street. So, I went over, got a tour of the building. Perhaps this was on a Sunday, because the AUA was empty. Well, when we got to his office, I saw there was a bathroom with a shower. And thinking back from my time in the Peace Corps, and how hot and sweaty one could get in Bangkok, I thought, if I had a job like that, with my own private bathroom, where I could take a shower any time I wanted, it would be absolute heaven.

Now fast forward, and it's 1979 and I'm working in the East Asia office of USIA, looking for my next overseas assignment. Well, around that time, and for a relatively short period, the mandatory retirement age for the foreign service was changed to age 60, as opposed to the current age of 65. Well, unfortunately for him, because he thought it was the best job he ever had, the then center director, Harry Kendall, got caught in this brief window when mandatory retirement was lowered, and so he was forced to leave earlier than planned.

Working in the area office, I had the inside track in terms of knowing what was going on, and got the assignment. Actually, I recalled little about AUA Language Center, outside of the private bathroom. But on the surface the job seemed interesting. And it turned out it was everything I could have hoped for and more.

Q: Well, let's look into that. You're the senior officer at the bi-national center. How many people worked for you?

DAKS: First a bit more background about the school. The bi-national center was founded in 1952 by an organization composed of Thai alumni of American universities, the American University Alumni Association, in cooperation with the U.S. government.

The key individual on the Thai side, the Chairman of the Language Center, who held this position for 39 years, was Phra Bisal Sukhumvit. A graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy and MIT, Phra Bisal was a contemporary of the current Thai king’s grandparents. Because WWI prevented what was still called Siam from sending elite students to any of its traditional destinations, such as the United Kingdom, he was among a small group sent to the United States.

Sukhumvit, one of the most well-known roads in Thailand, is named after Phra Bisal, in recognition of his work as the head of the highway department. During the Second World War, as a member of the Free Thai movement, Phra Bisal was smuggled out of Thailand, which ostensibly was an ally of Japan, and sent to the United States to lobby for the Kingdom to receive treatment, post-war, as an ally rather than an enemy nation. (Thailand's success in that regard may have been a bit misguided, considering all that was done to restore and repair Germany and Japan.)

When the AUA Language Center was founded, it was established under Thai law as a private vocational school. USIA provided financial assistance and sent a succession of American foreign service officers to serve as the center directors and a series of USIA English language specialists as the director of courses.

In addition to the English Language Officer, the AUA employed seven locally hired Americans and about ninety Thai employees. There were also about 100 teachers of English as a second language. The teachers, who were hourly hires, were all native speakers, largely Americans, but there were also Brits, Australians and a few other nationalities. The center also taught Thai as a foreign language, probably the largest such program in the world, with about a half dozen full time instructors and a program director, an American linguist fluent in Thai.

Our Bangkok office was far and away the largest facility, but at that time we also had six branches mainly in larger provincial capitals. The branches tended to fluctuate in number, because of the very small pool of qualified Americans outside Bangkok, who could be hired as directors and or serve as instructors. You also had the challenge of finding available space for classrooms.

The Bangkok headquarters of the bi-national center included a three story building housing offices and classrooms, a beautiful library, staffed by an American-educated Thai librarian whose salary was paid by the embassy and another 10 or so people hired and paid for by the language center. Other facilities included a decent sized auditorium, lecture rooms, a language laboratory, a bookstore and a concession-managed cafeteria. The center also housed the alumni association office and the offices of AFS, formerly American Field Service, that managed a secondary school exchange program. Later AFS moved out and a student advisory office of IIE (Institute of International Education) relocated to the center.

In addition to language classes held from early morning into the evening every weekday, the school hosted lectures in English and Thai and a broad range of cultural programs. On average, especially when classes were in session, five to ten thousand students, library patrons and a broad cross section of Thai society came to the center daily.

In the USIS Bangkok bureaucratic structure, the American who served as director was an Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer, not a particularly senior position. However, heading up one of the largest bi-national centers in the world garnered a great deal of respect in the Thai community, and one that came with a significant amount of autonomy, in large part

because the facility had a separate source of income, due to the language instruction programs. Physical distance from USIS and embassy facilities also meant day-to-day supervision was minimal.

As a USIS officer, and the director of the bi-national center, I was responsible for the overall management of the center, which included arranging programs about American culture, history and institutions. Maintaining a good relationship with our chairman and key members of our sponsoring organization, the alumni association, was also part of my brief. And, as a bi-national center, we also needed to offer programs that the American community might find beneficial as well.

And the challenge of the job—while neither in a hostile or difficult political environment like China or Laos—was to promote American interests within a Thai organization. In particular, our Chairman, Phra Bisal, felt that the center should have its own identity, and not be perceived as merely a tool of the United States. Although, like most Thais, he was flexible in his thinking if you presented things the right way. So, for example, as long as you explained that every four years, the elections center that we would hold at the bi-national center, was educational, and not propaganda for our system of government, he was fine with that.

In terms of management, a lot of what I did related to potential morale problems due to the different funding sources, and the challenge of working in what was largely a Thai cultural environment.

During my time as director, we had two senior Thai who were actually on the staff of USIS, and paid under the embassy salary scale, which was higher than that of the bi-national center. One individual, as I mentioned, headed up the library and another in charge of our activities office. However, their subordinates were on the lower pay scale, even though the bi-national center's salaries were certainly above average. In addition, the embassy paid an annual bonus, which we hadn't done prior to my arrival. Changes in compensation had to be approved by the chairman, and I was told that he didn't like the idea of a school paying bonuses. And so I proposed to Phra Bisal that the center issue a "year-end special payment" to the staff, which apparently fell within his concept of appropriate staff compensation, because he approved the suggestion, which brought us a bit closer to the embassy pay scale.

We also provided health insurance for the entire bi-national center staff. However, I found not all received the same hospitalization benefits. Senior bi-national center staff, when hospitalized, stayed in private rooms under an A version of the policy. Other staff, such as janitors, stayed in less desirable semi-private rooms under a B version of the policy. Since in Thailand, a family member often stayed overnight in the patient's room, the better, larger room was far preferable.

So appealing to Phra Bisal's sense of what I hoped would be American fairness, I pointed out "That's not right. Everybody should be equal." To which he immediately acknowledged agreement, and said, "So, everybody should stay in the B rooms." Licking

my bureaucratic wounds, I waited a day or so and presented my proposal in another way that did the trick, although I don't recall exactly how. Ultimately, every staff member was given the right to stay in a private room when hospitalized.

Obviously, the portion of my job that USIS and the embassy were most interested in was programming aimed at fostering a favorable impression of the United States by a broad cross section of educated Thai society, whether it was through lectures, seminars and cultural programs, including hosting musical performances by American artists, enrollment in our English language classes, or the training of Thai teachers of English. I was involved with all that and much more, usually working into the early evening and at times putting in seven days a week.

One of my USIS colleagues, our executive officer Willie Brown, never forgot that I told him, "This is so much fun. I think I should be paying them." I loved that job.

Q: Let me get this straight. What is the relationship between USIS and the embassy and the bi-national center? Are they your bosses, your partners, your—?

DAKS: The US Information Service offices, while in a separate compound at that time, was part of the embassy. The chancery of the embassy was on Wireless Road, as was the Ambassador's residence, while USIS was located on Sathorn, perhaps a half hour away by car. The bi-national center was closer to the embassy, in a physically separate location, on property owned by a school, Vajiravudh College, but managed by the Privy Purse which takes care of the Thai monarch's personal wealth. As mentioned, the bi-national center was a separate entity, a private school under Thai law.

As director of the AUA I answered to the Chairman and language center board of directors. However, this relationship was informal, not contractual, because as a USIA foreign service officer my immediate supervisor was the cultural affairs officer of USIS Bangkok, who wrote my performance evaluation report. The deputy public affairs officer in turn was my reviewing officer. On occasion, perhaps a few times a month, one of my supervisors or the public affairs officer would visit the bi-national center. However, my main contact was through a weekly staff meeting that took place at the USIS office. As for the main embassy, my interaction there was infrequent. And unlike the other USIS officers, I wasn't a part of the rotation to be a duty officer at the embassy, who might be called in the evening or on weekends. Nor did I get involved with the handling of any classified material that pertained to the work of USIS.

Q: Now, in programming, were you in charge of your own programming or was the PAO (public affairs officer) or the cultural affairs officer feeding you dance, groups, and movies?

DAKS: Both. USIS provided the bi-national center with periodic programs that we managed or sometimes we were just asked to serve as the site and logistic support for a U.S. government sponsored program. that that office would arrange. For example, just after I arrived in country Joan Baez came with a group of other prominent individuals,

like civil rights advocate Bayard Rustin, to look into the refugee situation in Thailand. And in order to promote goodwill, Ms. Baez offered to give a couple of concerts.

At that time, Bob Chatten was the public affairs officer. Chatten, who had extensive experience in Latin America, where many bi-national centers were located, recommended our auditorium as the venue. While there were bigger (and perhaps better) venues in Bangkok for a big name performer, Chatten suggested the AUA, in part I believe to promote the facility. Now I arrived in Bangkok just after the language center auditorium had been decided upon.

Given my penchant for "irrational exuberance" I likely would have enthusiastically made the same recommendation.

While admission to these performances was complimentary, we printed tickets, which were to be given away, and in this way we could monitor audience size and, ideally, insure a full house, commensurate with the quality of the program. And so we had to advertise so people could pick up the tickets. Unfortunately, outreach for the initial night was lacking, so there were many empty seats and Baez was quite unhappy when she looked at this rather sparse audience. If I had been more on top of things at that point, and remembered from my Peace Corps days, that Thai are normally quite reluctant to share bad news, which was the approach by the inexperienced staff member I designated to handle distribution, turn out might have been better. However, because the word finally did get out, the house was packed on the second night. Fortunately, I think that was the only major glitch during my time overseeing events at the center.

The AUA had a weekly Monday night program, usually featuring speakers we recruited locally, although occasionally it featured academics or others in country under the USIA sponsored American Participant program. But as mentioned, most of these programs were developed locally and, because we were a bi-national center, there was an effort to provide a mixture of topics relating to Thailand and the United States. I opened and attended most of these programs, making a point of welcoming the audiences and introducing each talk or discussion in Thai. Our audiences drew largely but not exclusively from our student body and ranged in size from 20 people to well over 100, the capacity of our air conditioned lecture room.

Utilizing the embassy's unclassified channel of communication, assuming my supervisor signed off, I could also access USIA Washington resources in arranging bi-national center programs, which enabled us to do some innovative programming.

For example, in 1983, I was introduced to Dome Sukvong, a film enthusiast, working to establish a Thai motion picture archive. He wanted help in locating a copy of Chang (elephant), one of the earliest features produced in country, by two American film makers. Thinking it would be neat to bring the movie back to Thailand, I requested assistance from the Agency.

Well, it turned out that *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness*, was produced and directed by Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, the same team who made the original *King Kong,* and that *Chang* had received special recognition at the first Academy Award ceremony in 1929.
And lo and behold, because the rights holder for the film held King Bhumibol of Thailand in high regard, a copy of the film was sent along with permission to screen it publicly.

Since Chang was a silent feature, Dome contacted Bruce Gaston, an American who had co-founded an ensemble doing innovative work with Thai classical music. And Gaston provided live accompaniment at the bi-national center showings, which he ultimately developed into an original score for the film, now part of the commercially available version.

Chang was shot in the northern province of Nan featuring resident villagers as featured actors, one of whom, a child at the time, we located and brought down to Bangkok, as part of our publicity effort.

On other occasions, because Bangkok was a desired destination for tourists, visiting Americans with interesting and relevant backgrounds would come to my attention. For this reason, where possible, I also augmented Agency support by utilizing this talent. Two of the more successful programs of this type were seminars on writing and oral presentations for decision makers, conducted by Judy Stein, a co-author of books on these subjects, one of particular relevance for Thai executives.

Another initiative I took, utilizing my China background, was to reach out to the embassy of the People's Republic of China. Ultimately, this resulted in a number of its officers studying English at the bi-national center for an hour every morning, several of whom completed the entire two-year course, and received certifications of graduation. My principal contact at the embassy was Guan Dengming, who ultimately became China's ambassador to the Philippines.

And, in turn, I introduced other American embassy officers to their Chinese counterparts, hosting a couple of dinners for them. While focusing on the People's Republic wasn't my responsibility, it remained a strong interest, and useful to our China watchers.

I also continued studying Mandarin while I was serving in Bangkok, with the spouse of the only locally hired Thai national at the Chinese Embassy, at least at that time.

Q: So, you had access to the regular USIA program, through the embassy, and your own speakers that you could invite.

DAKS: Right. And also, what was originally the USIS library, relocated in a beautifully designed space, was on our premises. So we had a book collection, periodicals for our students and the general community, and we also hosted events at the site. For example, when Daniel Boorstin, the Librarian of Congress visited Bangkok, the bi-national center

hosted a reception for him. This kind of event was something our chairman was very supportive of, so we were able to utilize the bi-national center budget for the event, and didn't have to go through bureaucratic hopes at the embassy to arrange.

Q: Would you also be providing student advisory services to students interested in going to the States?

DAKS: Yes, we supported student exchange, albeit indirectly.

When I arrived, AFS had an office on our premises. Originally named American Field Service, the organization was a private sector pioneer in student exchange involving the United States. Subsequently, when the organization expanded worldwide, you also had exchanges involving students from two countries, neither of which was the United States. For example, New Zealand, and Thailand. So for this reason the acronym AFS is now used exclusively. Subsequently, perhaps because the organization needed additional space, it relocated the Bangkok office elsewhere.

However, shortly thereafter, working with its Hong Kong and Bangkok office director, Dr. John Brohm, I invited the International Institute of Education (IIE) into our facility, rent-free, because it provided a needed student counseling service, and drew additional people into the bi-national center. Subsequently, John was replaced by Jay Henderson. Both individuals and I shared a background involving China, so we also had common interests beyond Thailand.

Q: Now, Morton Abramowitz was the Ambassador when you arrived and John Gunther Dean came in as Ambassador, in October '81. Did you have enough contact with the embassy that you noted the difference between the ambassadors?

DAKS: Yes, from my perspective there was quite a difference. Abramowitz was a "straight shooter", less inclined to diplomatic niceties, candid to the point where he might rub his contacts the wrong way. While less interested in public diplomacy, his efforts were directed towards getting the government of Thailand to fulfill its international responsibility towards refugees. And for this reason, when I think of Abramowitz, the image of an outstanding public servant comes to mind. And, his wife, Sheppie, was perhaps even more dedicated to the plight of refugees.

Dean was perhaps the more refined, skilled diplomat of the two. My main personal interaction with him was when he asked me to interpret at public events on a couple of occasions.

However, my principal embassy contacts, outside of USIS colleagues, initially was Burt Levin, the Deputy Chief of Mission, a fellow Chinese language officer and a mentor and friend from our time in Taiwan, and Jim Wilkinson, the Political Counselor, one of Nongkran's favorite and best Thai language students from her time teaching at the Foreign Service Institute. I also had a prior relationship with the two subsequent Deputy Chief of Missions, Stapleton Roy, from when he headed up the China desk at the

Department of State, and later as one of my ambassadors in China, and Chas Freeman, a colleague and friend from the Chinese language school in Taiwan.

My relationship with Jim Wilkinson proved particularly beneficial to the bi-national center, which was located on a long, rectangular but narrow piece of land owned by the Privy Purse. Adjacent to the property was U.S. government owned land where a couple of embassy residences were situated on a rather large lot. Aware that the center really needed additional parking for staff and students, I asked Jim if there was any way we could get a strip of 15 or 20 feet of that land, which was vacant, abutting our school. He in turn persuaded the decision makers in the embassy to agree, and the center proceeded to add a parking lot that for many years was leased for the equivalent of a few dollars annually. Not surprisingly, years later, security concerns came to the forefront and the property was taken back.

Now permit me the interviewee's prerogative to tell a story of personal importance.

In late December 1979, a few days after arriving in Bangkok to take up the position as AUA director, out of the blue Nongkran said "You know I have a brother" (actually half-brother, same father, different mother) "who's pretty high up in the Thai government". And she went on to tell me about him.

That very evening, the Deputy Chief of Mission, Burt Levin, invited me to a reception at his house for a group called "the interior gang" by the Thai media. (It was perhaps one of the last get-togethers for this group from the Ministry of Interior, because shortly thereafter its informal leader was named as a principal in some type of scandal.)

Anyway, immediately upon entering the DCM's residence, I was introduced to Wichit Thongkam, Deputy Director General of the Corrections Department. And I responded, "I know you" to which another guest said, "Oh, he's in the newspaper all the time", to which I responded directly to Wichit, "No, no, that's not why I know you". And I went on to tell him that I knew that he was from the south of Thailand, that his father's name was Yi, and that I know something else, "You're my brother-in-law", proceeding to explain that I was married to his (half) sister, Nongkran, who he hadn't seen since well before we were married.

As a result of that chance meeting we developed a close relationship during our time in Thailand, and that relationship continues to this day through the children and grandchildren.

Q: That leads me to the question, when USIA was consolidated in the 90s, did the bi-national center die or survive?

DAKS: It still exists, but with far less official U.S. involvement.

The bi-national center, as an institution, is registered with the Ministry of Education, and as such wasn't subject to any U.S. government consolidation of agencies. However,

regretfully from my point of view, there was a steady diminishing level of support. While I was followed by two other officers who took up the position of BNC director, and for a time the director of courses continued to be an English teaching officer on loan from USIA and then the Department of State, by about 1994 official Americans were no longer assigned to the Center. Since then the director of the BNC has been a U.S.-educated Thai national and the head of the English program someone hired on contract. Subsequently, support was limited to grants for specific activities or projects and perhaps books were provided to the library, although an embassy representative continued to be a member of the governing board of the bi-national Center.

Then, perhaps twenty years ago, the Privy Purse decided to develop the land leased by the BNC and it was "temporarily" relocated to a much smaller location in a commercial building in close proximity to Chulalongkorn, Thailand's leading university. However, there was an agreement with the developer that upon completion the Alumni Association and Center would be given new space in the redeveloped location. And, surprisingly, at least to me, that relocation has taken place and the BNC and alumni association occupy a smaller cutting edge designed boutique building that has become a bit of a tourist attraction because of the architecture. However, there no longer is a library or space for cultural programs and the language instruction seems to focus on specialized courses for small groups of more advanced learners.

When I visited the facility last year, only one individual remained from the time I was assigned there over 40 years earlier. And she bemoaned the fact that the organization no longer seemed that welcoming to groups outside a certain clique.

Q: Now, as you said, you were at the bi-national center from '79 to '85. That's a long tour.

DAKS: Yes. As I recall, I asked for and received an extension. And then the plan was that I would take up the position of public affairs officer in Taiwan. But as a result of a family situation, the Bangkok assignment ended abruptly and I was reassigned back to the United States.

But yes, we were in Bangkok for a long time. And it was a position, as an Assistant Culture Affairs Officer, where promotion was unlikely. But lo and behold, shortly after I returned to the USA, based upon my performance in Thailand, I was promoted to Counselor, the entry level of the Senior Foreign Service. Subsequently, I met an individual who was on my evaluation panel that year, and he acknowledged it was quite unusual, saying ""We had a lot of discussion about that." But then again, in terms of my assignments and advancement, overall my foreign service career was a bit unusual. For example, while you're never supposed to do this, in terms of assignments, I held the same position in China on two separate occasions. And, no doubt, this was a factor determining the length of my career.

While the foreign service emphasizes worldwide availability in terms of assignments, I felt that within Asia writ large, from Myanmar on East, was enough variety and should be

sufficient. In terms of my career, that may have been a mistake, but it's the way I felt and still feel.

Anyway, I loved all my overseas tours, although for different reasons.

Q: Well, in '85, you came back to Washington. You're saying for personal reasons, to USIA and then were assigned to the International Visitors Program?

DAKS: Actually, just prior to taking the assignment with the International Visitor Program (IVP), I spent five weeks working as part of the Bonn Summit Public Diplomacy Team in support of President Reagan's participation. Ambassador James Rentscheler, another USIA officer was in charge of this team

I was given the title of Deputy Coordinator charged with helping coordinate an inter-agency effort to support this visit. However, my sole recollections are of the proximity of the team's offices in the Old Executive Office Building (now Eisenhower Executive Office Building) to the White House, and of the controversy surrounding a planned presidential stop to a German veterans cemetery that contained graves of Nazi officers determined to have a role in the Holocaust.

Now revisiting Rentschler's memorandum to USIA Director Wick praising my performance, riddled with phrases such as "developed a comprehensive Action Program….took the lead in organizing our government-wide 'Talent-Roster'...administering the (team's)...temporary offices….quickly absorbed the nitty-gritty of European issues including the often arcane substances of economic summitry", Woody Allen's comment that "80% of success is showing up" comes to mind.

What I recall is having a total lack of expertise in economics, European issues and how such a team might function. The only thing I did was to put aside my doubts, go in every day, despite feeling like a lost soul.

In a staffing situation like this, once supposedly urgently needed assistance is provided, there is I think a knee jerk tendency to justify the request, regardless of its actual value.

Now as far as my time with the IVP, those years were very rewarding. While assigned as deputy director, for the first few months I was acting director of the office, because the director, Bob Schadler, a political appointee, had been called up to the front office temporarily to be the special assistant for Director Charles Wick. And fortunately, the transition of going back to being deputy was an easy one, in no small part because Schadler was a very thoughtful, kind individual. This experience, working for a Schedule C (political appointee) reinforced my existing tendency to avoid making assumptions because a colleague came to the table through a different channel.

And that was a plum job, because the International Visitor Program, in my view, is perhaps the federal government's premier international exchange program.

The reason I call it the premier program is two fold.

First of all, it allows embassy officers to nominate individuals who they feel will be increasingly important to the U.S. relationship and have room for growth and influence. During their relatively brief time in the United States, these individuals experience a varied professional program, generally get excellent access to leaders in their chosen field, and through informal interaction, gain an appreciation for our culture and society. And then when that person returns home, most likely he'll see that same embassy officer who nominated him or her, so there is the likelihood that contact with the embassy will continue.

Fulbright scholarships are very important. However, the reality is that because the grantees go off for extended periods, at times several years, upon returning to their home country it's unlikely they will know any of the American officers staffing the embassy or consulate and vice versa. Of course, Fulbright alumni associations and commissions that vet scholarship applications serve to perpetuate linkages with the United States, but nevertheless these linkages are more social and less policy related.

Statistics also show that quite a few leaders in their fields, even including prime ministers and presidents, had their first exposure to the United States through the International Visitor program. And that program in turn, although administered and funded by the federal government is supported by volunteer organizations throughout the United States, including a number in smaller communities, where there are opportunities for home stays, even on farms, so the IVs interact with average Americans in a way that most visitors to our country will never experience. Often these are high points in a visit.

After retiring I continued to work on exchange programs carried out by academic and non profit organizations, both federally and privately funded. In doing so, at times I accompanied visitors to communities that hosted International Visitors. In particular, Fremont, Illinois comes to mind, where along with a visiting academic from China, we were hosted by a farm family, even accompanying them to church, and so I had a chance to see firsthand what kind of an effect this type of experience has. From what I've observed, prior to visiting the United States, visitors generally think of our country as consisting of New York and certain West Coast cities, and it's a big black hole in the middle. Then, all of a sudden, through the IVP we start filling in the blanks and visitors gain a much more nuanced appreciation of the U.S.

Q: Now, there's various types of International Visitor programs. One you just mentioned, an individual with an escort goes around, but others are, for example, groups of journalists from Africa or artists. Who decides whether a program should be a personal introduction or a group introduction?

DAKS: Well, for starters, there are various types of group projects. You have a group of individuals from a single country. And, as I recall, the impetus for this type of a project might well come from the embassy, based on country specific goals. For example, if piracy of intellectual property is a particular problem in let's say Thailand, then perhaps a

program would be addressed for media figures who write about legal issues, in order to bring out the negative aspects for both the Thai and U.S. economy and show ways this challenge is being addressed. Because it is a single country project, a wider net can be cast for appropriate nominees, since an interpreter would be assigned by Department of State, and so a language barrier wouldn't be an issue.

Then there are regional group projects, based on U.S. policy objectives in relation to a particular geographic area. So it may be, for example, dealing with the effects of narcotics addiction, and sharing our experience with self-help programs. Or the perceived need to share information about our election process in a region largely consisting of countries that have authoritarian governments. So you have regional or at times, as I recall, even worldwide projects where International Visitors are drawn from various continents. I mean, for example, while I haven't talked to anybody about this, I would not be surprised if in recent years there isn't some kind of a worldwide theme about the need to work together to accommodate the various challenges faced by the migration of refugees and the movement of large numbers of people within borders. So that might be a program that would be offered.

The strong points of regional and worldwide programs include the interaction that occurs when people from various countries get together and at times form their own linkages based on this shared experience. Perhaps more importantly, sometimes you can get better access if you have a group because you're saying to someone that he or she will meet opinion makers in their field from more than one nation. For example, a mayor may wish to expand his city's sister-city relationship, and he will be more open to taking a meeting if representatives from a number of different countries are present because that may increase the likelihood of making a fruitful contact. And then of course, it also may be particularly eye-opening for grantees from relatively closed societies, to learn how other nations face common challenges.

The downside of group programs is that almost always they must be limited to individuals who are fluent in English, or in French, for Francophone Africa, or in Spanish for Latin America.

My responsibility as acting director and later deputy, of course, was worldwide so I worked with all the various sections within the International Visitors office.

We had branches, organized geographically. And as we touched on individual programs and group projects. In addition, we also arranged programs for "voluntary visitors". These were one or more individuals already planning a visit to the United States, and at the recommendation of an embassy, the International Visitors office would provide an add-on to their schedule that addressed American policy priorities. Finally, we had staff members working on what was called "community relations" where we were working with the volunteer based organizations throughout the United States and the Washington-based program agencies that actually designed and arranged the day-to-day schedules of IVS.

Q: Now, the nominees for IVs come out of the embassies. The individual may be a key contact who perhaps they want to impress or introduce to the United States. So they're sending you nominees. Have you told them, "Okay, we are only doing journalists this year"? How does the embassy's desire to nominate fit the program resources you have?

DAKS: Well, each embassy has a set of goals in terms of its relationship with the host country. In addition, the U.S. Information Service office had its country plan in support of the overall diplomatic mission and Department of State foreign policy objectives.

In terms of nominating individuals, Washington, that is USIA headquarters, would pretty much rely on the embassy to select nominees without any prior guidance or suggestion. The nomination process was, or at least should have been, coordinated by the in-country USIS post. However, the actual mechanics varied, depending upon the interest in the IV program throughout the mission.
In my view, the program worked best when the embassy, the ambassador and other senior officers, saw its value, and took advantage of the opportunity to nominate individuals. However, if the program was viewed merely as a "reward" for friendship, then there were more likely to be wasted opportunities. For example, nominating an individual who had already visited the United States on multiple occasions or someone who was on the verge of retirement usually represented a wasted opportunity. Or in some diplomatic missions the program was only of interest to USIS officers and these officers in fact did almost all of the nominating. While bureaucratically this may have made our lives easier, no one section of the embassy or office had a monopoly on what best serves American interests.

For a program like this to best serve U.S. interests, the embassy needed to control the nomination process. We did not want the host government to be nominating people. And in a place like China this was a challenge. I'm getting ahead of myself, but during my time there, the post within the PRC (People's Republic of China) where we had the most difficulty managing the relationship in terms of selecting international visitors was Guangzhou. Now, I would have thought, Guangzhou, as the economic engine freest to experiment, that our consulate would have an easier time in recommending IV candidates. However, what I concluded was that because they were relatively free to experiment economically, the local authorities wanted to show the central government that they were politically in lock step with the national political policy, and the authorities there were less flexible than elsewhere.
Fortunately, in most countries, we were free to nominate, and you just relied on the good sense of the embassy officers and hoped they were doing their due diligence in terms of getting out to meet people. And based on what I saw, I think embassies did a pretty good job of nominating qualified people.

Q: Just to get an understanding of USIA's organization. I believe this job is in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

DAKS: That's right. That's right.

Q: Because before you were a desk officer and at the China office and another bureau.

DAKS: Well, when it was the U.S. Information Agency, we had our own area offices; that replicated, but on a smaller scale, the Department of State area offices. When I was, for example, the China affairs officer—at our height in USIA, there were three of us working on China. But over at the State Department, you had the People's Republic, and Taiwan, Mongolia desks, and you had many more people in the geographic bureaus. And of course, we had to go back to the State Department to get approval to do certain things.

Q: USIA has been folded back into the Department of State. I'm just trying to give people an idea of what the bureaus were like when you had an independent agency largely responsible for public diplomacy. So is there anything else that's remarkable about the Office of International Visitors that we should get in here?

DAKS: Well, the dedication of both the civil servants and foreign service officers who worked in that office was particularly commendable. For the majority of them, this was far more than a 9-5 job. I was honored to be one of their colleagues.

As for the program, as I've tried to explain, it depended on a number of distinct entities.

You had the USIS posts at the embassies identifying and nominating individuals or groups. Then you had the Office of International Visitors within the U.S. Information Agency coordinating the process in Washington, DC. And you also had what are called "program agencies", non profit organizations, also based in DC, that served as contractors, actually arranging and administering the visitor's program. So when the IV arrived in the USA, the initial stop and point of contact would be with a contract organization such as Meridian House.

Then there were organizations throughout the U.S., supported by a network of volunteers, who facilitated the program in their communities. These organizations often added a people-to-people element to the visit, such as through some type of home hospitality or at times even a home stay.

And finally you had either escorts or escort-interpreters assigned to support the program. They were individual contractors of the Office of Language Services in the Department of State.

Reflecting back, the term "escort"had a degree of ambiguity. In that regard, allow me to share a related anecdote that occurred more recently in this, my post-retirement period. For a number of years, after leaving the government, I took groups of Chinese around the United States for the National Committee on U.S.–China Relations. And in this role, I was an "escort". During this period, on a couple of occasions, late at night my wife would answer the phone, where a caller asked if certain services were available, prompting her to hang up immediately. So I looked up "Larry Daks" on the World Wide Web and found I was lumped with ladies, providing certain kinds of escort work in Northern Virginia. So, the term also had a meaning that was not intended, at least not on my part.

Q: Certainly. Well, I appreciate that. Let's break it off at this point. It's very exciting.

***

Q: Today is the 28th of May. Larry, one of the things I think we didn't get to in its proper heading was that in April 1984, President Reagan traveled to China. And he made a number of stops. And I recall that you said you had been called on to be on the advance team for the stop in Xi'an. Where were you at the time?

DAKS: I was in Bangkok when the USIS post in Beijing requested additional staff to support the public affairs aspect of the visit. And since I was already in the area, and spoke Chinese, I was recruited.

Initially I wasn't enthusiastic about leaving the bi-national center. And so upon arriving in Beijing, when a USIA colleague asked how I felt about being in China on this TDY, my response was to equate this experience as the equivalent of missing out on the first prize of a week in Philadelphia and instead getting second prize—two weeks in the City of Brotherly Love. To which my colleague responded, "Hey, wait a minute, I'm from Philadelphia!"

Nevertheless, despite this initial reaction, the time spent in Xi'an, where I was part of the pre-advance team, was a wonderful experience.

Now as the only USIA person on site, the post viewed me as the Information Officer on the ground, a public affairs advisor and spokesman. However, since there weren't any other members of the team with language facility, and little if any opportunity to interact with journalists until the President actually arrived, I wound up doing more interpreting, conveying to our Chinese counterparts concerns and goals, both in terms of goals and security.

The advance team was led by a couple of political types involved in the PR aspects of domestic Republican Party politics. Working with the various agencies, they were there to ensure that the few hours the President spent in Xi'an played well back home. To that end, they wished to build on Reagan's well-established image in terms of a champion of individual freedom, capitalism, a warrior.

In Xi'an there was a small free produce market, with vendors selling vegetables and various other items. So the thought was, as the leader of the capitalist world he should stroll through this example of entrepreneurship. However, the Chinese authorities were not particularly enthused about the idea because of a concern over his security. So while they let him go through a market, it wasn't at the actual site, but rather an artificially constructed market where the vendors and customers no doubt received special vetting. In other works, it was a setup.

Once one of the political types became aware of this, he asked me to convey to the Chinese his displeasure of having the President go through a "Potemkin village". Well,

candidly, my translation didn't fully convey his umbrage. And I remember him saying to me, that he could tell by his counterpart's reaction, that I hadn't translated his message exactly as intended. But after I responded, "You're a nicer guy than that", he laughed and let it go.

However, the main thing the US side wanted to happen during this brief, several hour stopover, which we pushed hard for, was to allow the President, when he went to see the famed terracotta figures, to go down into the excavation pit where they were located. Their idea was a shot of "one old warrior looking at another" would be a great visual. And, so during my three week time in Xi'an, we made near-daily trips out to the site and frequently raised the idea with the officials. However, the Chinese adamantly refused, pointing out no one ever went down there. They would point out that these figures were precious archaeological treasures, that only the experts could get that close. Well, on the day of the visit, at the last minute, as we're standing by the excavation site, the motorcade about to pull up, and all of a sudden we hear that the Chinese have agreed, President Ronald Reagan and the First Lady would be allowed to go done into the excavation pit. And I was very excited, so I expressed my enthusiasm to a Chinese journalist standing beside me, that this was "great...the first time that you've ever allowed this kind of thing." And his response was, "What do you mean the first time?" And he started listing VIPs, starting with the President of France, and all the other world leaders that had gone down there and stood toe to toe with those figures. And this was a reminder to me of how things often happen in China.

Also, during this TDY I struck up a friendship with a young Chinese woman who was acting as an interpreter for our hosts. Within a day or two after I arrived, we took a walk around the city after work. Subsequently, I saw her almost daily, for varying periods of time during down time. This went on for about two and a half weeks. However, a few days before the President's visit, she suddenly began to ignore me. Later, on the final day, she took me aside to explain that she'd been advised against this type of contact. And since she was hoping to continue her studies in Australia, she took this warning to heart. To this day I wonder what happened to her.

Now the US government has its own policy on "fraternizing with locals" in China. But in terms of my own behavior, nothing inappropriate took place, and if you're going to change perceptions, the best way is through personal interaction. In my view, when we get to the point where watchful security always triumphs over common sense approaches then we're doing ourselves a disservice.

Q: How many people were in this pre-advance delegation? You were saying two White House guys?

DAKS: Again, I seem to remember forty or fifty. Among others, you had the White House Communications Agency (WHCA), the Secret Service and, as I've mentioned, these political people.

There also were a couple of other things that I got involved with or heard about that were very interesting, even though they were minor matters. One related to the arrival of the president in Xi'an on Air Force One. Well, the plan was that President Reagan would be met by the governor of Shaanxi province. And in that regard, the Chinese suggested it would be appropriate for the two dignitaries to travel together in the same car to the initial stop. However, the suggestion was rejected, because one of the advance team members doubted Reagan could hold up his end of any conversation on the ride into town.

In addition to visiting the relocated "free market", the President was scheduled to have tea with the governor. And, in that regard, I was asked to translate that the water for the president's tea would be brought out and boiled by a navy steward from the White House. Now I expected blowback because my own, privately held, visceral response was, "Are you nuts?" However, our hosts passively listened and agreed.

Now just prior to having tea, the President was to briefly view a small enclosed exhibition and then walk out of the building to the location where that tea was to be served. The distance between the exhibit building and tea was again perhaps fifty feet. However, the Secret Service insisted that Mr. Reagan needed to "rest" prior to walking over and asked to see a room where he might do just that. Well, again, acting as the interpreter, I went along to look at the room, which turned out to be a small shabby area, piled high with all kinds of old clothes.

This prompted me to quietly ask why the president needed such a questionable space prior to taking a very short walk, which prompted one of the agents to pull me aside and explain that since the attempted assassination in which Reagan was wounded, the President needed to wear a bulletproof vest when in open areas. And that spaces as small as phone booths had been used in order to make this wardrobe adjustment, which brought thoughts of a real life superman to mind. And, of course, potential risk to the President, was the same reasoning behind the water and personnel provided for tea preparation.

Q: It sounds like the Chinese had their hands full. I mean, I can't imagine the Shaanxi provincial authorities being exposed to this kind of insistence?

DAKS: I think because of the terracotta figures, our hosts were experienced in handling high level visitors. But when you think about the size of the group that travels with the President of the United States, and even our advance team, it probably wasn't something they were used to dealing with on this scale. And, of course, add to that the logistics involved when even a Presidential limousine is flown out, the visit was probably somewhat overwhelming.

While the actual visit was only a few hours, it was certainly a memorable experience, and it gave me a foretaste of what would happen going forward when I wound up actually serving in China.

Q: Did the Presidential limousine come early and sit around, or that it was brought to Xi'an the day before? Hours before? I mean, how many presidential limousines are there?

DAKS: I have no idea how many presidential limousines there are**.** Let's put it this way. It was a vehicle, provided by the United States government that had all the accouterments or protections that our nation's leader might need. I don't recall seeing it beforehand. My guess is it was flown in not long before the President's actual arrival.

Q: That's interesting because it probably came in a U.S. military aircraft, and at that time, the Chinese weren't really very excited about U.S. military aircraft coming into the country.

DAKS: I do remember distinctly that he rode in a separate car, and I've just assumed it was the Presidential limousine. And now I just found several news articles that indicated that Reagan using both Air Force One and a presidential limo were "firsts" in China, and that the Chinese agreed he could use the vehicle for "long rides", which the 90 minute trip from the airport in Xi'an into town must have constituted.

Q: Anyway, that was China in 1984, your next assignment that we need to get to is Beijing in 1987. You're coming out of Washington. How did you get this assignment?

DAKS: Well, I had spent a couple of years as Deputy Director of the Office of International Visitors, and was ready to go overseas. While I don't remember bidding on it, I was interested in a Chinese language assignment. And the timing was right because the deputy director of the Press and Cultural Office at the embassy in Beijing, George Beasley, a former colleague, supervisor, and friend, was about to depart post. So the timing was right. I think I was approached about the job.
Q: Now, you arrived in the summer of '87, what did the Public Affairs Office look like? How many people?

DAKS: As I've mentioned, the USIS office in Beijing was called the Press and Cultural section of the embassy. And, I believe, this was the case for all of our posts in communist countries.

As for the overall embassy, there were three work-related buildings. There was the Chancery where the Ambassador and offices such as political, economic and the military attaches were located, and that was called San Ban, the third lot or compound. Then the second building, Er Ban, which was right down the street, had the administrative functions, and the Consular Section. And then a few blocks away was a compound on Guanghua Road, Yi Ban, or first lot, on a corner across from Ritan park. In Yi Ban you had the ambassador's residence, a medical unit below or adjacent to the residence and then another free standing building where the Press and Cultural section was later located.

Now at the very beginning of renewed contact, between the United States and China, you began with a liaison office, and that was all in one compound, Yi Ban. The status of the

director of that office was in a kind of a gray area, not an accredited diplomat, because we were yet to establish formal diplomatic relations, but however informally sought out because he was acting on behalf of the United States government. So at that point the chiefs of that office, such as the late President George H.W. Bush had his work area on the second floor of the building adjacent to his residence, in what later became Press & Culture, that is the USIS office.

Q: Well, when you arrived in mid 1987 the embassy was only about seven years old. So we're still building a relationship with the institutions in China. What did the program look like at that point?

DAKS: Well, you had a public affairs officer, responsible for overall management of the post, and a deputy, an executive officer doing the administrative work. Then we had a cultural affairs officer, an assistant cultural affairs officer, an information officer, and an assistant information officer. In addition, you had four branch posts, each headed up by one American, a branch public affairs officer, located within the consulates in Chengdu, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Shenyang. Finally, in Beijing there was a junior officer trainee, a new USIA officer who as part of his training program, undertook assignments in various sections of Press and Culture and a stint in another section of the embassy as well. So there were about twelve officers. And during that period, until June of 1989, and the Tiananmen tragedy, overall relations were improving, albeit in fits and starts.

When I arrived, the Ambassador was Winston Lord, who was very supportive of our work, He and his wife, author Bette Bao Lord, traveled as much as they could, reaching out to a broad range of academics, artists and intellectuals, something even some of the so-called “reformers”, who focused mainly on economic reform, didn’t always appreciate.

You can imagine that in those early days, many, many people wanted to get out to China. So, whether it was an author like Herman Wouk, actors like Gregory Peck or Charleston Heston, or the head of the American Publishers Association, former Ambassador Nick Veliotes, in addition to our ongoing programs, which were expanding, visitors presented wonderful targets of opportunity for reaching key USIS audiences. So it was a very exciting time to be a USIS officer in China.

Of course there was a much broader range of notable Americans who traveled to China, most for the first-time, with both a strong interest in and a dearth of knowledge about the country and our bilateral relationship. And because of this representatives of various sections of the embassy were often tasked with briefing these visitors. As P & C office deputy, and at times acting director, I participated in a number of these briefings.

At times, I recall colleagues complaining that these meetings took time away from their work. However, I felt differently, that we not only had an obligation to the taxpayers, but that anything we could do to help increase understanding of China, would in the long run make our work easier and more effective. And, on occasion, the visitor, unconstrained by preconceptions, might ask a very thought provoking question.

In that regard, I will never forget a visit by a delegation from the Council on Foreign Relations. Like other groups, upon arriving at the embassy, they had to go through the various security hoops, navigate a gated compound and encounter U.S. marine guards. And of course, in China, you had what our hosts might describe as security, and we would call surveillance, as well as locally hired guards. Then you are also meeting in a closed off briefing room. So, I'm sure this is what prompted one delegation member to ask "Do you view yourselves as a bridge or a barrier to better communication with the Chinese?"

Q: Now, you've just come from the Office of International Visitors? I assume that the program has gotten started in China, but probably not in a very smooth manner.

DAKS: You're somewhat correct. On the one hand, at that time it already was the largest IV program. I think there were eighty or ninety people a year who were visiting the United States each year. You even had the beginnings of the Voluntary Visitor Program, because it was increasingly easy for Chinese to travel abroad.

But at the same time there were barriers, although not uniform across China. Certain consulates had more challenges than others. For example, Guangzhou, as I mentioned earlier. Perhaps because Guangdong province was at the forefront of economic reform, there was an unspoken need to show the central government that this freedom didn't extend to the political arena. So when someone from that region, outside of the economic policy realm. was invited, very often the foreign affairs office tried to involve itself and select the visitors themselves, serving as a gatekeeper. We didn't welcome or accept this kind of interference.

The easiest places to manage the program were in Beijing and Shanghai, but in Chengdu and Shenyang, it was also more challenging. The authorities watched those consulates more closely. And of course, being even more isolated, the idea of these exchanges was probably newer to them, so there were difficulties as well.

Q: What was the quality and background of some of the IV candidates that came out of Beijing?

DAKS: The background of the International Visitors varied, because nominations came from officers in different sections of the embassy, who recommended key contacts. In general, the quality of the candidates was good. Most Chinese grantees took this opportunity seriously, as evidenced by their attentiveness at meetings and briefings, and the questions they asked. Another incentive was that Chinese government policy seemed to place value on exchange programs. Frequently you would hear that people who participated in these programs, whether it's the International Visitor Program or other exchange programs, would be promoted not long after participation.

As for my personal interaction with IVs and other exchange visitors, they tended to be with people in academics, the media, and publishing. In fact, following my retirement

from the foreign service, I had numerous opportunities to travel with visitors from China and personally observed them to be hard working individuals who took good advantage of the opportunity to learn about the United States through first hand experience.

Q: Now, the Chinese media field is quite different from Thailand, and whatnot, how would you rate the embassy's interaction with the local Chinese media?

DAKS: The embassy, and in particular the press and cultural section, had good but somewhat limited contact with the Chinese media. One hindrance was that even though we were all Chinese language officers, we generally dealt with English speaking members of the Chinese media, because they were the ones most likely to attend our talks or briefings.

Fortunately, with the International Visitor Program, of course, interpreters were available, and so that provided an opportunity to cast a wider net in terms of our contacts. So, we were able to identify and select people with various media outlets, whether it was print or television, who could benefit by participating in the program.

Of course, the Thai media had fewer constraints. It could and did criticize senior government officials, the only real constraint was in regards to reporting about the Thai royal family.

Q: Everything in China is new. And your foreign journalists' interests likely paralleled that of the embassy. What was it like working with some of the top names in American journalism?

DAKS: You had two types of foreign journalists who came to China, a growing resident press corps, and you had some very good people there, and then there were the media types who came from abroad when there were high level visits or some major event.

Among the resident press, a number of them had decent Chinese language skills and significant experience in the region. Most had a good relationship with the embassy, because we frequently arranged briefings and meetings for them, whether they were interviews for attribution or on background. And all three Ambassadors during my time in China were accessible. People like Mike Chinoy of CNN represented the best of American journalism.
The post's information officer was the main person dealing with the resident press corps.

Dealing with the media whenever there was an event of international interest, such as Tiananmen or a presidential visit was far more intense and challenging. These situations required involvement of the entire office. And also because these individuals might be more demanding.

Q: You mentioned academics, I would suspect that American academics would be very interested in coming to China. Were you able to facilitate introductions with American academics? Or did they have their own channels?

DAKS: By the time I arrived for my initial tour in 1987, there were already a number of exchanges initiated by American academics, as well as university to university relationships, established and ongoing, absent U.S. government involvement. These programs overshadowed what the embassy was doing through its official programs. However, American and Chinese academics still placed great value on federally funded exchange programs because they confirmed the importance and health of the overall relationship between our two countries.
So both sides welcomed and often expected our involvement, even if it was just to send an embassy representative to a reception or the signing of an agreement, and most definitely if it involved an institution of any note. And of course, on the American side, once an exchange was implemented, timely issuance of visas was crucial. At the same time, in comparative terms government funded exchange programs with China in comparison with most other countries.

In terms of exchanges, an extremely important organization that received and continues to receive significant U.S. government support is the New York City based National Committee on United States-China Relations (NCUSCR). This was the group that really kick started cultural ties when in 1972, it hosted a Chinese team in the U.S., in round two in what has been called “Ping Pong diplomacy”. This organization, which remains active and important to this very day, would send delegations of academics and people in other fields and in turn hosted and arranged programs for visitors coming from China. The National Committee received significant funding from the U.S Information Agency and other federal agencies, but the organization also received significant support from private foundations and the business sector. Usually when delegations organized by the National Committee came to China, it was more or less expected that the embassy would either brief, host or be present at some welcoming function.

Q: Now, let me get this straight. In the public affairs section of the embassy, you're the number two guy if you will, you're the deputy.

DAKS: Yes, and the Chinese promoted me even though the Americans didn't. Now in accordance with normal diplomatic procedure, the office head, the Public Affairs Officer, was listed as the Counselor for Press and Cultural Affairs or some such title. Then as next in line on the formal diplomatic list I was “First Secretary”. However, in Chinese I was known to my contacts as the “Fu Can Zan” or “Deputy Counselor”, even though there isn’t any such title.

Now, I'd like to once again go off topic because I think it's important to say a few words about our local staff, because in China, and other communist countries, at that time, diplomatic missions were not able to freely hire local citizens. Fortunately, now I believe this has now changed, at least in China.

At that time all of the Chinese employees of the embassy came through an organization called the Diplomatic Service Bureau, or DSB, which is part of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And while we did have veto authority to refuse to accept an individual

for our staff, or send someone back, the embassy couldn't go out on its own to hire. That applied across the board, whether it was the senior adviser to the cultural affairs officer or a driver.

So you were never quite sure if the individuals being sent were there just to work for you on programs, or to drive for you, or were they being asked to do other things? And that was always something that certainly we were aware of. My own feeling was that most of the time, the staff really worked hard on our behalf. But obviously certain of them were asked, or maybe pressured is more accurate, to report on what our activities and what we were doing. And that was part of the environment that we were working in.

At the same time, these same staff members were well aware that they only received a small portion of the excellent salary that we paid to the DSB on their behalf. At a lunch prepared by our Chinese employees for the entire staff, a member of the Diplomatic Service Bureau was invited. When this individual approached, to wax eloquently, about U.S.-China friendship, my driver, who was standing alongside me, repeatedly repeated the official's words "Chinese-American friendship", while at the same time patting my left rear back pocket in which I carried my wallet!

Q: Now, when you were there, you were saying McKinney Russell joined the team, as the PAO, what was he like to work for?

DAKS: McKinney Russell was one of the most senior officers in the USIA. He was an extremely capable, intelligent officer, presenting an image of what most would consider an unflappable diplomat. He knew a number of languages, several of which he spoke fluently. However, perhaps because he started studying Chinese at a rather late point in his career, he found the language more challenging, despite working really hard at it.

Now when McKinney arrived I had been acting public affairs officer for two or three months. And then all of a sudden, a boss comes in. Well, at that point I was used to doing things on my own. So initially, I resented him a bit. But that feeling didn't last very long. And I grew to recognize his ability and, more importantly, respect him. And that feeling was amplified after Tiananmen.

Following the events of June 4, 1989, relations between China and the U.S. deteriorated significantly and, as a result, the ability to conduct public diplomacy was limited by the measures and countermeasures taken by both the two counties. Now in such a situation, a very senior officer like McKinney could have easily pointed out that because he was no longer able to conduct a full range of programs, the office needn't be this large, and certainly not managed by such a senior diplomat. However, that's not what McKinney did. Rather he stayed on to complete his tour, grinding things out, staying to lay the groundwork for better days.

McKinney was also that rare senior officer who was serious about giving new comers to the foreign service, junior officer trainees, a meaningful experience, and not just having them take on meaningless tasks, scut work. Rather, he offered the newly arrived officer

real responsibility, as the individual rotated among the various sections, and helped him or her grow, and achieve full potential. He would also meet periodically with the new officer to monitor how things were going.

I was well into my career when I worked for McKinney. As such, I supervised other officers, yet one day I confessed to him the challenge I still felt in writing performance evaluations. And he shared his approach, writing evaluations "backwards", reminding me that the last question on the form was about the officer's potential in five or ten years. A big picture question. He said something to the effect of, "When I evaluate someone, I first think about what the main thing I want to say about the person? And once I clarify in my mind what they've done, for all that time, and answering that big picture question, everything else, the nitty-gritty, day to day work, falls into place." So I started to do that, to write these evaluations backward which enabled me to give a fairer, more complete portrait of the individual. Subsequently, I received several commendations by reviewing panels, because this enabled them to get a better sense of the officer.

So, McKinney was an outstanding person to work with and for. I learned a lot from him. And, overall, he was well respected by his colleagues in the embassy, including the ambassadors we worked for.

Q: Now, the embassy is so new, and it's always looking for ways to connect with the Chinese. You mentioned Ambassador Lord's wife, as a writer. I suspect she was able to suggest programs or people that you should cultivate or pay attention to.

DAKS: Bette Bao Lord had a lot of ideas about things we should do. And, in that regard, the cultural affairs officer and then secondarily myself were the people who worked with her the most on a day to day basis. And we tried to support her as best we could within the constraints of our post and mission's overall goals. Overall, it was, I think, very useful to have her there as a person deeply committed to the arts. She had broad contacts within the intellectual community in Beijing. And yes, perhaps there were occasions, where her commitment didn't square with one of our day-to-day program goals. However, having someone with her passion in our corner was, on balance, a great asset.

Q: And all the programs that USIA brought to Beijing during this time, what band? What orchestra? What actor do you think made a really important impression?

DAKS: Well, visits by actors Gregory Peck and Charlton Heston, and author Herman Wouk all come to mind.

But when I reflect on my time in Beijing, both of those tours actually, the first thing that usually comes to mind, in terms of personal satisfaction, is the responsibility I inherited from my predecessor, George Beasley, for the China book translation program.

Books would be identified, such as titles in the Library of America series, or other significant works by American authors, fiction and non fiction, that might have meaning for important audiences in China, but didn't necessarily have a large commercial market.

We would then approach a publisher in China, to solicit interest in producing a Chinese language version of the title. In a few cases, a title might be in the public domain, but generally our role, through USIA, was to obtain publishing rights, in Chinese. We would also purchase a portion of the print run for distribution to select audiences and, once the draft translation had been produced by the publisher, ask the USIS office in Hong Kong to review the translation.

From the get-go, I felt that program was important, and so it became a significant part of what I did as deputy public affairs officer, and I expanded that program tremendously. We worked with publishers throughout the country, so that by the time I left, we were probably working with fifteen or twenty different publishers, and had perhaps seventy or eighty books in the pipeline.

As mentioned, I went back to Beijing a second time, and once again was the DPAO. And I would say the biggest thing that influenced me to go back to that job was that I could once again run the book translation program.

Sorry, if I got off track in terms of responding to your earlier question.

Q: Now, didn't Heston come in and do a Caine Mutiny program?

DAKS: Yes, at the invitation of the then Vice Minister of Culture, who had translated the play, Heston directed a Chinese language production of the Caine Mutiny Court Martial. The production was very well received. As I recall, Herman Wouk also visited Beijing in conjunction with the production of the play, which he had adapted from his novel. Among other things, Wouk also visited a bookstore, where I had developed a relationship with the owners.

Shortly after I arrived in China the post received a message from Dr. Guy Story Brown, a political appointee at USIA in charge of support for our cultural centers. Dr. Brown had read a newspaper article about a private bookstore in Beijing and asked that someone go over there and learn more about the store, with an eye towards how USIA might support this pioneering effort. And perhaps because I perceived a connection with the book translation program, I took it upon myself to visit the place and met the owners, Liu Yuansheng and Li Shihqiang, one of whom had been ostracized and the other jailed during the Cultural Revolution.

After meeting Liu and Li, and seeing the bookstore, which included a small area where talks and cultural presentations were held, I concluded that both the owners and the facility were worth cultivating. And in the process, we also developed a relationship of friendship and trust which lasted well after my wife and I departed from China.

And so the post provided the bookstore with a modest amount of support to enable it to promote our translated titles. In addition, the site served as a venue for visitors like Herman Wouk and former Vice President Dan Quayle. And following the events of June

4, 1989, Ms. Liu was one of the first invitees to come to the United States under the International Visitor program.

Not surprisingly, the fortunes of the bookstore waxed and waned depending upon the whim of the authorities. The owner's contact with foreigners, particularly embassy officers from western countries, while not specifically forbidden, frequently resulted in visits by Chinese officials, who perhaps indirectly but clearly expressed official concern.

Q: Now normally, USIA posts really go all out to highlight the process and the results of an American presidential election. How did you handle the '88 election campaign in Beijing?

DAKS: Both in '88 and '92 we used hotels as election centers. I believe in 1988 we rented a function room at the Sheraton and in 92 it was at a hotel closer to the embassy compounds. While I can't recall all the details, I doubt if we asked for permission to set up an election center. However, the authorities were certainly aware as to what we were doing and, of course, the Chinese were our principal intended audience.

In addition to a large tally board in which the results of the election were posted in real time, we distributed printed materials about the election and the United States in general in Chinese and English.

I would also note that as part of the post's China Book Translation Program, a Chinese edition of "Looking Forward", then Vice President Bush's autobiography was released by a Beijing publishing house, and there several other pirated editions published as well. Then in 1992, we succeeded in getting a Chinese language version of President Clinton's filmed campaign biography "A Man From Hope".

Q: Speaking of President Bush, you mentioned that you did the Reagan visit in '84. The new President Bush came to Beijing in February '89 after attending the funeral of the Emperor of Japan. That was a very quickly put together presidential visit. What was the Public Affairs section's role in that visit?

DAKS: Well, we set up a press center to work with the media. However, what garnered the most publicity or notoriety during this visit was the Chinese authorities refusal to allow the well known dissident, astrophysicist Fang Lizhi and his wife, attendance at a banquet for President Bush, despite their names being included on the US-invitee guest list. So that caused a brouhaha. And, of course after Tiananmen Professor Fang and his wife would end up seeking refuge at the embassy.

But when I think of that visit, a personal anecdote is the first thing that comes to mind.

Prior to the establishment of diplomatic relations with China, President Bush had served as head of our Liaison Office (USLO). So when the President visited the ambassador's residence, where he too had lived, arrangements were made for him to briefly meet and shake hands with several longtime Chinese employees, who were there during his tenure.

And to ensure everything went smoothly a Secret Service agent asked my wife, the Embassy's Community Liaison Officer, to stand at the top of a flight of stairs and make sure that no one would come down while these greetings took place. Well, not one to let an opportunity slip away, Nongkran proceeded to go downstairs herself and stand next to the local staff. And being Thai, she blended right in, and so was thrilled to be greeted by the President, a moment that was captured by a very nervous local employee acting as photographer. The result, a clear image of four foot eleven Nongkran Daks receiving a warm handshake from the headless, six foot 41st President of the United States.

Fortunately, the White House official photographer was also on hand. So several months later she received another copy, all bodies intact. And that autographed photo hangs at the restaurant she founded, the Thai Basil.

Q: Now, as the Fang Lizhi event unfolded, how did Public Affairs handle it? Because the resident foreign journalists must have been very excited to get some information.

DAKS: Yes, they were. While I don't remember the details, we certainly would have complained to the authorities about his inability to attend the banquet.

While I don't remember the details, I was actually working in our office, which as mentioned was co-located in the same compound as the official residence. And we had access via closed circuit camera to what was going on in front of the compound. But regretfully I never caught an image of him when he came to complain about being denied access.

Q: Didn't the embassy give a copy of the guest list to the Chinese so they would have known?

DAKS: Yes, they did. And I think initially, my recollection is that there was no objection to his attendance.

Q: Now as 1989 unfolds, student demonstrations start up in response to Chairman Hu Yaobang's funeral? Living in Beijing, how did that event grow in your perception?

DAKS: Hu, former General Secretary and Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party died on April 15. The tragic events in and around Tiananmen Square occurred June 3-4, 1989, so we are talking about a six week interval of protests, demands and demonstrations.

Hu, a reformer within the communist system, had been pushed out of top leadership a few years earlier, but still held an important position, so that initially open mourning was tolerated. Students, intellectuals and workers in Beijing and several other cities, frustrated by the pace of political reform, and the growth of corruption, took advantage of Hu's passing to push for change, as the demonstrations soon took on a life of their own. Again,

this was a push for reform, not revolution, although the hard liners in the party didn't appear to see it that way**.**

In 1989, like most diplomats in China I lived in one of two housing compounds, off Jian Guo Men Wei, which was just a few miles down the same street from where the protests were ongoing and growing. I remember, on several occasions during this period going down to Tiananmen, and walking around, amidst large, peaceful crowds, many with homemade signs presenting their case for reform. And whether it was in the streets or via the media, younger people in particular felt freer to discuss their grievances, even after Premier Li Peng declared martial law on May 20. Even a few members of our Chinese staff not only supported but were involved in the demonstrations, even though they had been seconded to the embassy by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

I think there was a false sense of security, because statements of disapproval by the authorities, and even the declaration of martial law, weren't followed up by immediate consequences. In fact, the Party Chairman, Zhao Ziyang, actually appeared somewhat sympathetic, meeting with student-protesters, which led to his replacement.

Political changes in Eastern Europe and Russia were ongoing simultaneously with the events in China. And then, a visit in May by Russian President Gorbachev, to improve relations, brought front and center the idea that political change was possible. And while there was already a decent size press corps in Beijing, the protests and the Gorbachev visit drew leading print and television journalists to China, so that worldwide coverage of what appeared to be dramatic change in the making was covered live 24/7.

Few anticipated the manner in which these calls for reform would be violently repressed.

At the time a USIA specialist, either a library or an English teaching officer, was scheduled to arrive in Beijing for consultation about our program. However, given what was going on, he prudently sent a message, asking if it was safe to come, and could the visit be productive? And I responded optimistically, which is why on either the early evening of June 2 or 3, I was in an embassy vehicle being driven to the airport to meet this visitor, passing a large number of troops and various military vehicles parked along the side of the road. Given what we were seeing, I asked my driver, with whom I had a very good relationship, what he thought of what was going on, to which he replied, "Even a cat in China has more freedom" than we do.

A number of years later, when I returned to Beijing, after leaving the government, I had dinner with several of our locally employed staff, including this driver. When I brought up the events of that evening, asking if he remembered our discussion, he responded in Chinese (别提了), don't bring it up again, clearly indicating it was water over the dam, no use discussing.

Q: Well, now you're a Chinese language officer, you have pretty good language facility. Did you have opportunities to just go down and chat with the kids and chat with the demonstrators?

DAKS: Yes, I did. And because I had a friend, a law professor, and his wife visiting at the time, both of whom were very interested in these protests as well, this was an extra incentive to get out and see what was going on.

The students we approached were very willing to chat and interested in the United States. They made comparisons with what they perceived our system of government was and what they had.

You had a very large number of people, in close proximity to one another, together 24/7 in less than ideal conditions, yet it was all very peaceful. It didn't seem at all threatening.

Q: Give me a sense of your conversations or the background of the students that you may have chatted with.

DAKS: Well, I think the students, particularly the leaders, were from relatively affluent families, from more privileged backgrounds. Certainly, there was a passive acknowledgment of this when subsequent to the events of June 4, there was a disparity in treatment of those arrested. The arrested workers that I saw at least in the early media coverage were shackled, while the students who were arrested were unchained. And also there was a disparity in terms of the length of prison sentences between say factory workers and students, with the latter generally serving less time.

Q: Now, Tiananmen brings forth the evening of June 4, what do you hear? What was your response?

DAKS: Well, early in the evening I heard a fair amount of noise, and saw tanks and troops in the street in front of our housing compound. And I remember our administrative officer, Charles McLaughlin, who didn't speak much Chinese, asked me to go down and walk around with him, which I did. The Chinese troops didn’t object to our presence, but no one engaged with us either. Perhaps they were waiting for orders.

Then later that night, we began to hear noise, the sound of gunfire. And obviously, some things were happening that weren't good, but we didn't realize the full extent of it until the next day. Other embassy officers had far more harrowing experiences, including one person whose apartment was shot up while his children were at home, but fortunately no one was injured. The errant firing of weapons into the two international housing compounds in the area were occurrences that the Chinese never fully owned up to, claiming they were responding to the actions of a sniper or some such thing.

After the events of June 4, the USIS staff manned the office round the clock, monitoring the Chinese media, and checking as to how the signal of the Voice of America was coming through, because VOA was a rare, reliable source in terms of reporting what was going on.

At the time, the authorities intensified efforts to jam the signal of the VOA, BBC and other, what they viewed, as hostile international broadcasters. And in that regard, one of the things I was given credit for, was the suggestion to use a television signal to broadcast, because it was more difficult to interfere with. At the time, the U.S. Information Agency was in the infancy of directly utilizing television to broadcast content.

Another thing I remember clearly, is the evacuation of embassy dependents, which took place a few days later, on June 7. At the time, I was in our apartment, when we got a call from the marines, telling Nong and I to go downstairs to a central meeting point within 30 minutes, where arrangements had been made to transport dependents to a hotel near the airport, where they would overnight, prior to departure. We, the officers, could also join our family on the trip out to the airport.

Now the call came out of the blue and so there was minimal time to pack, and you really couldn't take many items. Moreover, at that point there was uncertainty as to whether we would actually be able to return to the housing compound. Would we be allowed? Would it be safe? And I think we may have had the option to stay elsewhere, although I never seriously entertained that idea.

Now being a creature of habit, in the midst of frantically getting ready, I turn attention to a must do daily task. So, as Nongkran was running around getting ready, I first felt the compulsion to make our bed.

What I also remember about that time is that most embassy officers could also have their tour of duty cut short, and that in terms of how long we would stay on in Beijing, it was kind of up to us. And, in fact, I wound up staying another couple of months, because in part I wanted to see what we might continue doing.

Now in response to China's actions at the time, our relationship took a serious downturn, and a number of programs, including those of USIA were terminated or put on hiatus. That included Fulbright exchanges and the International Visitor program. These and other actions were perceived as reaction or perhaps retaliation for what the Chinese government had done.

And while there was little support for continuing exchange programs with China, I'm not sure if that was the wisest policy, because these programs are in our interest, and not a reward. But there was a hiatus. However, one thing we could do, since Washington had not mandated otherwise, was to continue with the book translations, providing that on their part the Chinese didn't retaliate.

So once we were able to move around more freely, I made it a point of meeting all the book publishers. And, fortunately, we were able to continue with ongoing projects.

Now a few days before Tiananmen, I heard about a private restaurant in Beijing owned by a man who had been a POW of the United States during the Korean War, and when I

called about reservations, he proceeded to express his love of Americans. So I booked a table for June 5 or perhaps a day or two later, and invited several of our Chinese staff to join me. Anyway, when I called back to cancel, he seemed surprised we weren't coming, to which I responded by asking if I should drive over in a tank.

Q: Let me get a sense of this. The family members were evacuated, but the embassy was not. The officer level was not drawn down like in Laos? And what about American citizens and other foreigners in Beijing. How was that handled?

DAKS: That's right. There wasn't a big draw down of officers, although I think some of the officers left because there were fewer programs, activities and tasks. But mainly it was the dependents that were asked to leave, because there was a feeling that the security situation wasn't good. And that feeling was validated in one sense by incidents such as errant bullets that were fired into a diplomatic housing compound. Of course, for many Chinese the situation was even worse, very sad.

As for private citizens, the embassy urged resident Americans to leave, and large numbers departed, as did many residents of other countries. While perhaps a plane or two were chartered, my sense is that people departed largely on commercial flights. As for the Chinese authorities, they publicly said the situation was under control, but didn't make an effort to prevent people from leaving. As for our office, we were involved with people like Fulbright scholars and academics who had brought students to visit China. There was a great deal of confusion in the aftermath of Tiananmen.

Q: Now your responsibility here was to contact Americans who were in the journalist or public affairs areas to alert them and that there was an evacuation possibility.

DAKS: Yes. Our task was to let American academics, students and visiting or resident journalists know that we didn't think it was a good environment to stay in, and remind them of the travel warnings, stressing our limited ability to help if a difficult situation occurred.

Now of course, the journalists wanted to stay, because this was a great story to report on. So they weren't about to leave if they didn't have to. And while the Chinese weren't pleased at such a large media presence, and placed additional restrictions on what could be done, only a few were forced to leave. So journalists like Mike Chinoy kept reporting, but now under more restrictions. However, among those who were expelled were several correspondents with the Voice of America.

Q: You mentioned Chinoy who was a CNN Reporter at the time. Have you read his subsequent book about Tiananmen Square?

DAKS: Actually, I probably got post-retirement work because of his first book.

Shortly after leaving the government, I was hired as a consultant by the International Exchanges and Review Board, IREX, to help develop programs in China. And at a talk or

seminar on China in Washington, DC that I attended on IREX's behalf, I met Lyric Hughes, a Chicago-based entrepreneur who was in the process of launching a website called China Online to provide business information on the People's Republic. Well, I offered my services if she needed any help with this effort.

Subsequently, Ms. Hughes called and said she'd read about me in Mike Chinoy's book "China Live: Two Decades in the Heart of the Dragon" and like IREX had done, hired me as a consultant. So in excited anticipation of what prompted Chinoy to recognize the contribution I'd made to this very important relationship, I got a hold of the book.

And sure enough, "Larry Daks" was part of a contemporary "open door" policy, because I was cited as one of two people at our office entrance in Beijing to admit Chinoy when he visited to do an interview!

Q: Now, in the wake of Tiananmen Square, the family members are gone. Did they come back or when you left did you have to pack out yourself?

DAKS: I packed out myself. Nongkran returned to the USA, stopping briefly in Tokyo and Bangkok first. I left China in late August of 1989.

Q: Well, sorry, this has been good coverage of one trip. So why don't we save the rest for the next session?

***

Q: Good afternoon, it's Bastille Day, July 14, and we're returning to our conversation with Larry Daks. Larry, you were last in Beijing during Tiananmen Square and whatnot. But then you came to Washington to work at the Board of Examiners of the State Department, that sort of interest in the health of the foreign service, if I may put it that way.

DAKS: Yes, my time at the Board of Examiners turned out to be perhaps my favorite assignment in the United States. Now as to what motivated me to bid on the job, as the senior USIA [United States Information Agency] officer, among other things, was the opportunity it offered to get reacquainted with the United States. Among other things, examiners traveled to various sites to test applicants and, as I learned later, the position also offered the opportunity to speak about the foreign service.

Q: Well, to start with, how big of an office was it?

DAKS: The Board of Examiners was located within the Bureau of Recruitment, Examination and Employment. At the time, I think we had about thirty to forty people, including perhaps twenty examiners and eight or nine staff. Most of the examiners were State Department foreign service officers, but there were three USIA officers as well. The office was headed by an executive director. And the entire bureau was under the Director

General of the Foreign Service. Our office was involved with hiring foreign service officers for the Department of State and the U.S Information Agency. The Department of Commerce, the Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), had its own foreign service, and a separate examination process.

Q: Now, in coming to this position, what did you think it was going to entail?

DAKS: Well, I knew that it entailed testing people for the Foreign Service as part of the overall hiring process. However, I didn't realize that we would also be recruiting for the Foreign Service as well, and have the opportunity to speak at various locations, generally university campuses, but also sometimes at conferences or meetings. In addition, what I didn't realize was that the oral examination process was constantly being revised, and I got involved in that as well.

Q: Now, who are the other USIA officers with you?

DAKS: I remember a USIA foreign service secretary Bonnie Coates, and another officer, Ted Boyd. In addition, during my time at BEX another USIA officer was assigned there, but I can't recall his name. Anyway, I was the senior person from USIA. As for the Department of State, all of the career tracks for officers, within the foreign service, so called "cones", were represented: administrative, consular, economic and political/

Q: Who was the immediate boss?

DAKS: My immediate boss was Marshall Casse, a terrific manager, very dynamic. He was an economic officer. We worked very well together. And perhaps because I took the job seriously, after I had been there about a year, he appointed me as the deputy staff director, and so when he was absent, I was in charge of that part of the office. That was unusual. I believe I was the first USIA officer to be appointed to that position.

Q: Now, am I understanding correctly, that there's kind of two parts to this process, designing the exams, and then interviewing people?

DAKS: That's right. Well, of course, there's the written examination—and while we were not involved with its administration, we did provide feedback for the contractor designing the examination, by helping to identify the qualities necessary for success in the foreign service. I believe we called them "precepts". This included analytical ability, cultural sensitivity, interpersonal skills, leadership, and the ability to communicate clearly both in writing and orally.

Each precept was fleshed out by a detailed description. And when we evaluated the officers during the day-long oral assessment, we used their precepts in judging whether an applicant was suitable for the foreign service. Periodically, these precepts would be reevaluated by surveying a wider group of officers for their feedback on the knowledge, skills and abilities required for success in the foreign service.

Now during my time as an examiner, the assessment day began with two officers posing questions involving issues that might be faced by officers in the various cones or disciplines. This was followed by a written component to test communication skills. The final part of the oral assessment was a role playing group exercise in which the participants were part of a country team tasked with dealing with a foreign policy situation. The applicants were then observed by the four examiners as they attempted to deal with the problem.

Then at the end of the day, after deliberation, we would inform each applicant of the results. Those who passed would move on to the next phase of the evaluation process, a background investigation. Once the investigation report was completed, it was shared with the examiners. Our role here was to determine suitability for the foreign service. Issues that might cause a candidate to be rejected could be such things as drug use, credit problems or an arrest.
Now since completion of the background investigation might take many months, it would be unusual for an examiner to see an applicant during the day-long assessment and review the same applicant's file for suitability. In addition, in a situation where something really serious was uncovered, such behavior that might clearly endanger national security, my guess is that the report itself might result in the application being terminated. I make that assumption because in two years working at the Board of Examination the issues of suitability that I saw raised were never clear cut in terms of their seriousness.

Q: Now, going back for a minute, who designed the precepts that you were using to judge?

DAKS: Again, as I recall, the precepts were based on surveys of Foreign Service officers, asking what they thought was required for a successful career as an FSO, based upon their own work experience. But at this point I'm uncertain as to how these responses were turned into detailed descriptions of the various precepts we were asked to judge applicants on.

Q: Now, of course, when I joined the Foreign Service and went through this there were three guys behind a table, asking a few questions, that was it. The entry procedures that you're talking about, is a significant evolution from that. This simulation gaming thing, and then that three man table interview. Is that accurate?

DAKS: What you're talking about, the three man table interview, was the start. I think what you went through was probably pretty much what we did in the opening hour, there were questions, hypothetical situations posed as well as so-called substantive questions. For example, if you were a consular officer, how would you handle this scenario? If you were an administrative officer, how would you handle this issue? And a substantive question might be something like the implications of the Civil War for American society.

Earlier I referred to the written component of the day long assessment. While I was at the Board of Examiners, Marshall Casse asked me to oversee the development of a new written exercise, preparing a memorandum of conversation, following the applicant's

view of a simulation. Among other things, my role was to contact the television production side of USIA and get them to record this simulation, which wound up being produced at no cost to the Department of State. This was a new aspect of the assessment day, and like many first attempts, was perhaps noted more for the initiative taken than the results obtained. So I'm sure it's been refined many times since then and perhaps even eliminated.

Now I would like to add an observation about the performance of foreign service applicants who already had experience working or living at an embassy. For example, the individual might be the spouse of a Foreign Service Officer. Well when there were theoretical questions posed, like how a consular officer would deal with a problem involving an American abroad, and while there might be a number of acceptable responses, they were always rooted in solutions that reflected an ideal world in which U.S. citizens were provided assistance. However, these candidates lived in—experienced—the real world. So, for example, a situation might be described where an American has found himself in legal difficulty, or perhaps even in prison, several hundred miles from the Capitol. Applicants who had never worked in a resource-stretch embassy usually gave an ideal answer, stressing the officer's duty to provide assistance regardless of the obstacles. However, individuals who were familiar with embassies or consulates might focus on limitations due to lack of manpower, financial constraints etcetera.

So at times the precepts and the ideal dictated one type of evaluation when you knew that a different response was more rooted in reality.

Q: Now, you were saying you were able to do a fair amount of traveling, so I'm assuming that traveling was to go out and do these interviews, and to do some public speaking?

DAKS: Yes, during my time at the Board of Examiners, I was probably the most active speaker in the office. At times, I took advantage of examining at a location outside of Washington, DC, to visit a nearby university. In two years, I probably visited and spoke at maybe twenty-five universities and other venues, such as job fairs.

Now the Department of State provided us with materials about the history and functions of the Department of State and the role of U.S. diplomats. However, we were also free to develop our own material, which is what I did, augmenting what was provided to me.

Based on my own experience, I posed to my audiences a scenario where we were establishing diplomatic relations with China, discussing starting from the ground up. What would you need, what kinds of officers would you need? What would they do? And this kind of thing, and people seemed to be interested in that sort of real world description.

Q: Were you going to major cities or whole regions?

DAKS: Well, when we did the examining, we went to major cities in various regions: Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, Chicago, and we would stay for extended periods—that was for the examination part. And as mentioned, I would go out and speak before or after administering exams. However, again I also made a number of separate trips to speak about the Foreign Service. It was something I really enjoyed doing, so I not only sought out opportunities, but made my own arrangements to speak at certain venues.

Q: Now, in the olden days, a lot of Foreign Service applicants were right out of college, or right out of the Peace Corps. What would you say about the age and experience of the people that you evaluated?

DAKS: Well, they tended to be younger. But there were some older people who had done other things, had other life experiences. I suppose gradually—over time—the median age rose, because the trend has moved away from people finishing their education without interruption. Also, since it's increasingly common for individuals to have more than one career, joining the Foreign Service later in life isn't that unusual.

Now an ongoing emphasis up until early 2025, (as this transcript is being edited) has been how to make the Foreign Service more diverse. And the push for reaching out both racially, geographically, how to make it more diverse in a sense—and this is my view—we were already behind the times. Because in 1990, the American diplomatic corps, while perhaps not fully representative, was no longer a sort of old boys network. It had already changed quite significantly, but certainly not to the extent that it has now.

And perhaps certain barriers to having a greater pool of diverse candidates or officers have never been really fully recognized. For example, the whole hiring process took a couple of years. And so for qualified people from more diverse backgrounds might not have the luxury of waiting around one or two years to find out whether they could enter the Foreign Service. And so when other opportunities came up elsewhere first, those individuals might be likely to accept. To summarize, the Department of State was not nimble enough, in part because again, of requirements for things like background checks, but also the overall examination process took a fair amount of time. So that was one factor.

Q: Now, intake also depends on whether Congress gives state the budget to hire people.

DAKS: Yes, that's right.

Q: Were you aware of any restrictions on that part? Or were you working on the assumption of, okay, we're gonna hire one hundred and fifty people this year or twenty-five people?

DAKS: During my time at the Board of Examiners, I can't recall any freeze on hiring, but neither were we in a significant expansion mode. New officers were being brought on board.

In fact, as we likely will discuss shortly, following this assignment, I went and trained seventeen junior officers that were new hires for the U.S. Information Agency. So we were hiring, but the numbers were not large, and so it was extremely competitive.

Now, in the stream of consciousness mode I often find myself in, as I do this oral history, I'm going to wander off course to discuss a factor, I believe, affected efforts to promote diversity in the foreign service. This comes to mind because of the recent Supreme Court decision effectively ending affirmative action in college admissions in which some Asian-American students saw themselves as disadvantaged.

One of the precepts by which we judged applicants, especially during the role playing exercise where you had a country team simulation was quote unquote “leadership”. And while this attribute wasn’t the sole determinant of hiring decisions, it could have a very important effect.

We had a number of qualified applicants, particularly Asian-Americans, whose culture placed high value on politeness and avoidance of confrontation. And I remember on several occasions, where you'd have an Asian-American applicant who did very well in the oral interview portion of the examination, but during the role playing scenario completely shut down when challenged by someone displaying a brusque or aggressive manner, and then he or she subsequently hardly participated in the exercise. And what I found myself feeling is that, sadly, what you aren't able to observe, you can’t rate—at least not rate highly—because the person backed off because it was sort of in their cultural DNA to avoid conflict. So they were marked down on this exercise. And so I often wondered about whether or not this was a way to properly evaluate certain applicants.

Q: Now, this was the Bush administration and Colin Powell, was noted for pushing these ideas of diversity and expanding the Foreign Service—but that would be later.

DAKS: Yes. It was emphasized, it was something that we sought out and there was some success in this area. But there certainly was room for improvement.

Another thing I observed—going in a different direction—is that individuals perceived as being brusque were marked down and eliminated from consideration because of the perception of an inability to get along with others. However, I’ve often thought—just based on my work experience—that while a harmonious office is extremely important, if you do not have a small number of naysayers, people who—their own lives may be made difficult by this—but who will challenge and say things that maybe others would not, you won't always get to the best conclusion, or major issues will never really come to the floor because everyone will want to get along. So I found myself at times, arguing for people who were perceived as having a slightly abrasive personality—a bit difficult—saying, "But don't you see the other things that these people bring to the table?" And that was one source of some disagreement occasionally with colleagues, because obviously no one likes to work with someone who they perceive as unpleasant. However, my point was that—in my opinion at least—if you have a small number of people who

perhaps they will never get to the top of the Foreign Service, but they'll ask the tough questions, and yes likely pay a price, that's a healthy thing for an organization. That's likely where whistleblowers come from.

Q: So actually you're testing on knowledge, skills, and personality?

DAKS: Right. Knowledge, skills, ability, personality, and character, all of these things, although I don't think we had a precept specifically called "personality". One thing of course, I felt based on my time there, in terms of diversity—we did not—we never achieved what we set out to achieve, although we certainly did make some strides in that area. But one challenge was that, in my view, you had more highly qualified people than positions. And for this reason, at least I felt, it was difficult having to tell people that their candidacy would not proceed.

Q: Did you run into people who had repeatedly applied?

DAKS: Yes. And it was gratifying when someone who showed this kind of determination eventually succeeded.

I would tell those who had the time, to remain hopeful even if they weren't initially successful, pointing out it doesn't cost anything to take the test. Having been initially unsuccessful myself, I was able to offer this advice with some authenticity.

Now what I found very surprising, and somewhat disappointing, is that while you had a significant number of people majoring in international affairs, with an interest in the foreign service, it was fairly unusual for someone to call our office and ask to speak with an examiner about the examination process. And particularly for those studying in the Washington, DC area, that only perhaps once or twice did we request to meet and discuss the examination. Of course, we couldn't discuss specifics, but nothing prevented us from providing general guidelines.

So when someone did reach out, and the request came to me, I went out of my way to be helpful.

Q: Once eligibility is only one year, isn't it? If you get through—there's one year—you're on the list for one year. And if you don't get hired, you have to go through the process all over again.

DAKS: During my time at the Board of Examiners, I think there was more flexibility in terms of how long you could stay on the hiring rolls. But there was less flexibility, in terms of your ability to delay entrance into the foreign service, once you had been offered a position. However, that wasn't always the case.

When I joined the Peace Corps, one of my fellow volunteers was Darryl Johnson. In Darryl's case, he was offered a State Department position while in training to go to Thailand, but the offer was put on hold for two years, so he could first serve his Peace

Corps commitment. That in my view was a very wise policy, because the Peace Corps is outstanding preparation for the foreign service, at least I think so.

Q: Now, would you explain a bit more about speaking at various venues about the foreign service, including at historic black universities?

DAKS: I spoke at a couple of historic black universities and sought out minority audiences elsewhere. At these schools, if a speaker went out, one of our African-American colleagues was usually chosen. And certainly for mentoring this made sense.

However, I also thought that since supervisors in the foreign service still tended to be white males, I was representative of what the work environment might look like to a prospective minority candidate. I also hoped that my presence and presentation enabled this audience to see that the interest in a more diverse foreign service extended beyond what they might have expected. Also, through my presentation, I wanted to increase awareness of and interest in geographic areas of potential service beyond Africa, where black officers, especially as they moved up the career ladder, tended to find themselves.

Overall, I got a very good reception at these historically black colleges. In fact, in terms of dealing with potential minority applicants, the only time I didn't receive a welcoming reception, interestingly enough, was at the African Studies program at Northwestern University, my alma mater. The individuals I encountered at that office were not friendly, and wondered why I had contacted them. Fortunately, I was welcomed at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, its Kellogg School of Management, and the law school and was able to give talks there.

However, perhaps the most interesting experience I had was at the University of Chicago. Following my presentation, I was asked about job opportunities for dependents where a spouse was on assignment. In my response, I cited a dependent in Beijing with a PhD degree who got a security-related job escorting Chinese employees doing janitorial duties. Although overqualified, doing something that on paper lacked job satisfaction, this lady loved what she was doing, because she saw parts of the embassy that very few people had seen, and had the opportunity to use her Chinese in unanticipated ways. Upon concluding that this was a situation where someone "made lemonade out of lemons", a young student ran up and announced, "you're talking about my mother!"

As an aside, the dad, as I recall, this USIA colleague and friend, was disappointed that his progeny hadn't gone to his Ivy League alma mater and "settled" for the University of Chicago, which I as a proud product of the Windy City didn't fully appreciate.

Q: Now you start the board of examiners position in late '89. In February '92, you were asked to go over to USIA and run the junior officer training course. How did that opportunity come up?

DAKS: Well, they couldn't find anybody else to do it. So the head of foreign service personnel said, "Why don't we get Larry?" He knew me from the Peace Corps, because we were volunteers in Thailand during the same period, and we'd also served together in Laos.

At first I was upset, because I loved working at the board of examiners. But within a few days, I realized this was a great follow-on assignment, because I had been personally involved with bringing in more than half of the seventeen people in this new class of officers. Some I had examined; in other cases I had reviewed their security files for suitability. So, upon reflection, I was intrigued to get the chance to gain additional insight into the wisdom of certain hiring actions. Moreover, I welcomed even a small opportunity to perhaps improve the training experience of new agency officers, particularly if it facilitated integration and a good work experience with colleagues from the Department of State and other agencies.

Training for incoming officers at the Department of State and US Information Agency, at the time, in large part went along somewhat separate tracks. And, so I hoped, when the classes of new officers got together, as they did for an offsite exercise, the experience would promote solid, respectful relationships. It may have been a very small thing, but it always bothered me when someone said that a political or economic officer was "doing substantive work", reflecting in my mind a kind of psychological separation.

And of course, since the officers I trained were in the class just a few years removed from the return of the public diplomacy function into the State Department, I believed they benefited in terms of overall career advancement. And, in fact, a couple of individuals like Ambassador Philip Reeker and Scott Weinhold, for example, moved outside of the public diplomacy cone, undertaking other types of senior positions.
Q: Now the class that you were inducting and training, what would you say about their age and background as a group?

DAKS: Four or five were a little older. And there was one person in his 50s, an author of mysteries. There were also a couple of people who had joined as foreign service specialists, a librarian and an English teaching officer. One notable change or trend, reflecting not only the Foreign Service, but American society overall, was that even most of the people just out of college had either lived abroad or spent considerable time outside of the United States.

Q: Interesting.

DAKS: You also had at least one person who was a second generation Foreign Service officer and now I've just learned that this individual's son is also an FSO. So that's a three generation American diplomat family.

Q: What do they call it, legacy appointments?

DAKS: That's right, legacy. Legacy based on merit.

Q: Well, I'd like to break it off because the next step is you go back to Beijing.

DAKS: Right.

Q: I want to make sure we get into the comparison, sort of before Tiananmen and after Tiananmen. So, let me break this off.

***

Q: Today is the 17th of July, and we're returning to our conversation with Larry Daks. Larry, you are coming back to Beijing as deputy public affairs officer (DPAO) in the post-Tienanmen era. Let's start out—what did the office look like?

DAKS: Well, first I would like to talk about returning to Beijing as DPAO. As mentioned before, it's rather unusual to go back to the same job twice. Now Frank Scotton, the incoming public affairs officer, and I had known each other for some time. We'd first met in Taiwan, when he was a desk officer at USIA and visited me in Kaohsiung. Subsequently, we worked together. He was my boss for a couple of years during my time in Bangkok. So we knew each other fairly well.

Knowing of my interest in China, Frank asked if I would consider going back as deputy a second time. I told him I would, on one condition, that I could continue running the book translation program, in addition to whatever other duties I would have as deputy.

Frank was agreeable to that. So that's how I wound up going back. It's interesting, because as we know, in the Foreign Service, you're encouraged to have a broad, diverse career. Perhaps my supervisors within the U.S. Information Agency had already given up on me, although no one counseled me to say, "You're going back to the same job, and it may not be great for your career." But then again, I was the director of the Bi-national Center for five-and-a-half years, and it had been suggested I leave that job early a number of times. So, I guess they did give up on me. Anyway, I was pleased to return.

Q: Now, this tour is 1992–1994. Was the Press and Culture Office larger or smaller?

DAKS: At the point when I returned to Beijing, the office was in terms of personnel the same size. Of course, after Tiananmen, June 4, 1989, we weren't as active as before. Many programs were halted, but then gradually relations between our two countries had begun to thaw, and activities were on the upswing in terms of what we could do. And in fact, we were already starting to look at the idea of opening an office—a cultural center—outside of the embassy, which was a very big step.
The idea of opening a so-called "American center", with relatively easy access by the public, as we have in other places was a major undertaking, and of course something to which the Chinese were very sensitive, so this required negotiation, and commitment by USIA for additional funding and personnel. So shortly after my return, we began serious discussions with Washington about adding officers.

Q: Now did you reconnect with your Chinese counterparts that you'd worked with before 1989?

DAKS: Yes, certainly to a large extent among the publishers we had worked with, and in fact we also added new publishers to the program. I also resumed contact and cooperation with the owners of a private bookstore, the Sanwei Shuwu. While our Chinese staff still came from the Diplomatic Service Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, several had been with the Press and Culture Section for some time and, I would like to think, and believe, that despite the nature of the Chinese government, by-and-large these staff worked loyally on our behalf and contributed significantly to our program. They were our link to contacts within the community.

Q: Now, in your office, who were some of the other officers? Who was handling cultural affairs?

DAKS: When I arrived, besides Frank Scotton, the other senior officers were Gene Nojek, a classmate at the language school, who was the cultural affairs officer, and Lorraine Toly was the information officer. Both Gene and Lorraine had served in Japan and had had other Asian assignments, so they really had area expertise and cultural awareness.

In addition, I was really pleased that Scott Weinhold, who was in the junior officer class I trained, was assigned to Beijing as well. And his wife, Jamie, was locally hired as my secretary. I really enjoyed the opportunity to work with new officers in the field.

Q: Excellent. You're saying things looked like they were on the upswing. That's the Beijing side of it. Did you get out of Beijing to some of the nearby provinces?

DAKS: Yes. One of my responsibilities, as deputy public affairs officer, was to supervise our four branch posts, located within each of our consulates, which meant I needed to get out of the capital. And that was something I looked forward to.

Now my other supervisory responsibilities included day to day oversight of the cultural and information sections, an American secretary, and several Chinese staff. However, while in Beijing I spent more time supervising the cultural section while Frank's interests focused on the information side of the house. For even though Frank had been a cultural affairs officer in Bangkok, his leanings and preferences were much more on the information side, and my leanings and preferences, I would say, were more on the cultural side, so it was a sensible division of labor.
Q: Now, on the cultural side, on your first tour, you had play production.

DAKS: Oh, right.

Q: Was that openness available to you the second time around?

DAKS: We didn't do as much of that—we were absorbed with setting up the new American Center (the Beijing American Center) and expanding the Fulbright and the International Visitor program. And in addition, during my second tour, the mission, after an off and on again dialogue, the embassy started reengaging with the Chinese in serious discussions about establishing a Peace Corps presence in China. And while that responsibility was undertaken elsewhere in the mission, former Peace Corps volunteers like me were utilized in various ways to support the launching of a program in China. I remember this because the whole process was sensitive. Because in the minds of some, the origins of the Peace Corps were linked with the Cold War, and allegations that the volunteers were actually spies. So among other things, Chinese authorities resisted using the name "Peace Corps". Ultimately, it was agreed that volunteers in China, who would be English teachers, were members of the "US China Friendship Volunteers". Of course, at the working level things were different. When Chinese who worked on the program spoke, they used the name "Peace Corps" in English. Ultimately, when everything was in place, due to perceived Chinese-official sensitivity, initially the Peace Corps representative didn't want to issue a press announcement on the arrival of volunteers. However, I got personally involved and persuaded the ambassador to turn that decision around

Q: When did the Peace Corps finally come to China?

DAKS: In June of 1993 the first group of volunteers, serving as English teachers, arrived in Sichuan province. Bill Speidel, a sinologist and academic, was its first country director.

Q: Now, you're saying things were a bit on the upswing and the idea for an American center was bubbling on. Because you've got to convince Washington as well as Beijing for something like that, when did that idea start out?

DAKS: I don't have the exact date, but I guess it was probably bubbling up in the early 1990s. However, the idea was not discussed seriously until Frank Scotton's arrival, when relations were once again on the upswing, several years after Tiananmen. He certainly took the lead.

Working with others, he found a location in a newly built skyscraper—the Jing Guang Centre—that contained a hotel, offices and a condominium. It took a while to get the Chinese to come on board and agree to allow a cultural center to open outside of an embassy compound or office. Of course, allowing ordinary Chinese citizens easier access to information about other countries and cultures, particularly those in the West, wasn't necessarily just limited to the United States.

Q: What were the key elements, then, of the American Center? What kind of programs did it have?

DAKS: The American Center in Beijing opened after I departed post. However, my understanding is that it includes a library, student counseling services, support for English

language learning and instruction and as a venue for various lectures and seminars on our nation's culture, education, history and policies.

During my time in China, the Press & Cultural Offices were utilized for an occasional talk, but because of both Chinese and American security concerns, access was limited. And for a time there was a small reading room, which prior to the establishment of formal diplomatic relations, had served as the office of liaison office luminaries including President George Herbert Walker Bush. A Chinese librarian, hired through the Diplomatic Service Bureau, worked in that reading room during my initial tour in Beijing. When he was going to continue his studies in the United States, I suggested he write Bush 41, pointing out that they had both used the same room, and he would be happy to share space again.

Earlier you asked about renewed openness in our relationship with China. Well, I returned to China in September of 1992, when the U.S. was in the midst of a presidential campaign. It was Bush the elder running against Bill Clinton. And at the Democratic National Convention a campaign film called, "The Man from Hope" was shown to promote the party's nominee. You may recall, it started out with Clinton as a young man shaking hands with President Kennedy. The movie then related Clinton's life story. Well, once Clinton was elected, and prior to his taking office, I thought a Chinese language version would be a very useful way of introducing the new president to key audiences. However, there were difficulties, because USIA really shouldn't be in the business of airing partisan campaign films, at least not before an election. But shortly after the results were known, we went full bore to persuade Washington that this made sense, and eventually we were successful. The Agency produced a Chinese language modified version entitled "Entering the White House: The Man from Hope". The film was placed with a number of television stations and one hundred copies were sent to China's senior leadership. Subsequently, we received acknowledgment and confirmation that the film was in fact viewed by some very senior people. Bush 41 was more of a known quantity. Our key audiences were interested in this new, young, energetic new leader.

Of course, once again, we held an election center and invited key contacts. Some students were informed as well. This center, held in a function room at the China World hotel, drew far more people than the one we had four years earlier. We had a large tally board, and distributed literature about our election system and the United States in general. One of the embassy officers added to the atmosphere by dressing up as Uncle Sam. Now I don't believe that the embassy asked the Chinese authorities for permission to hold this event, but for a time it was allowed to proceed without interference. However, when people began scarfing up the printed materials, several local authorities came in and said there was a fire safety issue or some such thing, and an attempt was made to close the Center down. Ultimately, we were able to talk the authorities out of closing us up, but I'm sure the facility's popularity caused our gatekeepers some grief.

Q: Now, you're talking about how things were on the upswing. The academics point out that in the spring of '92, Deng Xiaoping made his southern tour, which was his return to

political influence and reform. But the relationship was not necessarily smooth. I noticed that in August there was a lack of agreement on trade practices.

DAKS: Yes, and you also had the fact that the new administration promised, and initially went forth with a tougher line on human rights. So that, along with disagreement on trade, contributed to a short period of additional difficulty and uncertainty in the relationship. But after a visit by Secretary of State Clinton, things began to turn around again. I think this is part of the cycle with China where new presidents took a very hard line on certain issues, and then you might say that reality sets in and there's a change of course, which is what happened again.

Q: Well, along those lines, the campaign candidate George H.W. Bush mentioned something about selling F-16s to Taiwan. I suspect that came to be. Something else—in October 1992, Japanese Emperor Akihito visited China. That must have been a very big event because the emperor doesn't go—

DAKS: Sales of military equipment to Taiwan by the United States or whoever, invariably results in criticism, protest and even threats by China. And more recently this has extended to the Chinese attempts at intimidation by flying their military aircraft into Taiwan air space.

Now as to the visit by the Japanese Emperor, I can't recall anything specific. However, what does come to mind is of course Chinese attitudes towards Japan, particularly those evolving out of World War Two and specific, horrific events like the Nanjing Massacre. Unfortunately, for Japan, its role in preserving aspects of Chinese culture has been largely overshadowed because of its aggression in the 20th century.

Contrast this with China's attitude towards the United States, despite disagreements and difficulties, because we didn't have the same historic role in terms of taking advantage of a weak China, and so in a sense our relationship may have benefited when contrasted with that relationship and that with several of the European countries that were at one point colonial powers. Of course, China and Japan retain a strong commercial relationship. But historic memory among Chinese is very strong.

Q: Now, as you said, a new administration came early in 1993, and Winston Lord becomes the assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs. Did those changes in Washington quickly reflect onto the operations of the embassy?

DAKS: I'm sure they did because Lord had very strong views on fostering human rights in China, colored certainly by his own experience in Beijing. He left just prior to Tiananmen. And I think it's fair to say that they were also colored by the experiences of Bette Bao Lord as well, and her disappointment, actually their mutual disappointment about what occurred in China, in terms of the crackdown following Tiananmen.

Q: Now, in a new administration, there's probably great interest in people in Washington coming to China—that would more likely be the political section rather than the public

affairs section. But how did you handle the Chinese press when, say, the secretary of agriculture visited?

DAKS: Well, you're absolutely right that following a change in administration, new appointees, especially those that came from outside the federal government, given the importance of the relationship, placed high priority on visiting China. And in terms of preference, those who focused on the PRC's political, economic and security activities would normally be among the first to visit. Now when a cabinet level person would come, the information officer had a key role in arranging briefings and or press conferences. As far as input into any briefing papers prepared prior to the visit, the role of the Press and Cultural Office depended upon who was coming. And it also depended on the view of the ambassador as to the scope of what public diplomacy entailed. In addition, on occasion, someone might be tasked with preparing for or handling an aspect of a visit that on paper at least was outside the scope of his or her work. So, for example, a USIS officer who was known to have good Chinese might be called upon to be a note taker at a meeting touching on human rights.

Q: And as Chas Freeman visited in November of '93—at that time, that would have made him the highest-ranking DOD (Department of Defense) official—he was the assistant secretary for East Asian affairs in the Pentagon.

DAKS: I remember that visit very well because after attending a dinner that Ambassador Roy hosted for Chas I couldn't help but reflect on how much wisdom about China was present in that one room. Their remarks reflected a depth of knowledge about this important relationship that, in my view, is lacking today among our current policy makers.

Q: All right, as those kinds of visits come up, how does a public affairs section—what role will it play?

DAKS: It depends on the visit, but usually we would be asked to organize press conferences, perhaps draft press guidance, based on policy talking points, and arrange both on the record briefings and background briefings. We'd also have to respond to requests for interviews and access by both visiting journalists and resident foreign press. Both wish to and have a need to cover the visit. And of course, particularly where you have a cabinet-level visit, if there's traveling press, they will often win out in terms of getting prime access because the visitors are very attuned to what U.S. audiences are going to be hearing. In addition, the information and or embassy press officer needs to be mindful of the interests and needs of local media. This can be challenging because once again the visitor is usually focused on how the trip will play back home, and less mindful of its effect on public opinion through coverage by the domestic media.

Q: Now, would the public affairs section be providing feedback to the embassy? Thoughts on how policy was going? And what I mean by that is—I noticed in August of '93 you had this Yinhe incident, in which the U.S. alleged a Chinese ship was carrying chemical

weapons for Iran. And that became a big to-do between the two countries. Would you be following the Chinese press and what they were saying about it?

DAKS: Yes, the information section would be monitoring what the Chinese press are saying. They would perhaps be writing up summaries, particularly as it affected U.S. policy. There would be people, translating things from the local press. And in China, at the time, our public affairs officer, Frank Scotton, had an unusually strong interest in defense policy and things like that. So he cultivated contacts beyond the range of usual USIA contacts and frequently met with them, both in informal situations, and perhaps through calls, and I'm sure he shared what they were thinking with other elements within the embassy. So this is an example of where an officer's personal interests stretched beyond the scope of traditional public diplomacy.

Q: Now, President Jiang Zemin goes to Seattle for an APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Commission) summit in November '93. I'm assuming that the public affairs section would be picking up U.S. coverage of that and trying to feed it back to the Chinese media?

DAKS: Yes, I think so. We had a wireless file that we received every day that contained both news and things that would be prepared especially for both worldwide use and regional placement—articles that were written by people who worked for the U.S. Information Agency, and perhaps some things that were broadcast over the Voice of America. Placement of this material was given high priority and so too, of course, was sending this material to key Chinese offices and audience members.

I have to interrupt with an anecdote about that, because not everybody understood the function of the wireless file or appreciated it. During—the second tour—there was a security team that came out from Washington, DC. It was from a foreign affairs agency other than the Department of State. Anyway, the team went around to various offices within the embassy, and when they toured press and culture, got to where the wireless file was received, and saw our local employees working with it, questioned our allowing Chinese staff to see this material. And I had to tell them that this was the whole point of the wireless file, that we wanted people to see the material. It wasn't something we were trying to restrict.

Q: Now, something like Jiang Zemin going to the APEC meeting, I assume he'd be taking his own journalists with him? Was he aware of who those journalists were? Or did he have prior contact with them?

DAKS: Well, he may not have been taking his own journalists, since several PRC media organizations had correspondents based in Washington, DC. And, in fact, one of the functions of the U.S. Information Agency was that, in our nation's capitol, within the National Press Building, we had an office, the Foreign Press Center, where we specifically worked with resident foreign journalists from all over the world. That included journalists from the *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, and *New China News Agency*, and other media outlets from China. So in this case it is likely we would have been working with the Chinese press on coverage of this meeting, insofar as we would provide

the U.S. position on various issues. During my time, the Foreign Press Center was staffed by several USIA officers. Fortunately, so far at least, the Department of State has retained this office.

In terms of programming to host country media, we had other tools as well. In addition to the international visitor program that I discussed earlier, we also invited television teams to visit the United States in order to focus on a specific area of interest in our relationship. That might be, for example, Chinese students in the United States, or something on U.S. economic policy. As I recall, the visit, called a "TV Co-op" was facilitated by the television branch of the U.S. Information Agency. A USIA officer or a civil service employee was assigned to accompany the team to various locations, where arrangements had been made to facilitate coverage. Subsequently, the team was expected to produce a piece or series on the subject.

Now invariably the Chinese team would be exposed to various views on the issue being covered. In particular, you couldn't control what people outside the government would say. But that was one of the things that you felt proud about in terms of sharing the American experience: that we have diverse views. When a program was arranged, while we want to get certain points across, we don't tell non-governmental people what they should say—they are free to express their views. And sometimes those views, to the consternation of some colleagues in the embassy, might be at odds with what the official U.S. government line might be on a particular issue. But while we couldn't control the final product, believing in what America has to offer, we trusted that they would produce something positive that would enlighten their audience and have broad placement. And this also applied when we would invite speakers from academia, business or other sectors to speak to audiences in China and at all our other posts around the world.

Now when programming in a country like China, with restrictions and centralized control, it was challenging to expose a broad audience to views that differ from host government's policies. However, in terms of China's leadership, even when travel was limited, and there weren't ways around censorship, such as now found on the Internet, there was and remains an internal service called "Can Kao Xiaoxi" (Reference News) in which ranking government and party members could access international media.

In addition, when titles, such as ones whose translation and publication were facilitated by our book translation program, touched on a controversial area or topic, the publisher might add an introduction that would state something like, "Well, we don't agree with this...Our society is different, but we think it's important for you, the audience, to read and understand what people in the United States are thinking and saying on this issue." That of course, gave the publisher a little bit of a pass or breathing space if the authorities were to question, "Why are you putting out something like this?" And speaking of these translations, as mentioned earlier, our post in Hong Kong, reviewed the text for accuracy and to ensure there weren't significant omissions or the meaning mistranslated or manipulated in some way.

Q: Now, you were mentioning earlier that the Clinton administration returned to human rights as a main policy objective, and I see in October '93 the assistant secretary for the Human Rights Bureau—John Shattuck—visited Beijing. I see that the then foreign minister Qian Qichen met with Secretary of State Warren Christopher in January, and then Christopher came to China in March, and one of the events that came out of that was an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) on prison labor. I have to assume those things are connected, and you were involved in publicizing and interpreting those events?

DAKS: What I remember about that—with Warren Christopher—I think that was the point in which the relationship started to change, again, in terms of—prior to Secretary Christopher's visit, everyone was talking about how it was fraught with peril because of the hard line the U.S. had taken. But I think after the visit, as I recall, it was viewed that the Americans had backed off, because we were interested in getting Chinese cooperation in certain other areas. On the Chinese side, there may have been some give because of their strong interest in accession to the World Trade Organization, which took a number of years. The Christopher visit was, as I recall, a turning point. It was controversial and drew significant criticism.

In a situation like this, it is challenging for any press guidance or talking points that the embassy or Washington might issue to significantly affect public perception.

Q: Let me go to some other responsibilities you were mentioning. There are a number of consulates in China. Were you able to visit each one?

DAKS: Yes, I visited each consulate once or twice a year, because at each location we had offices headed up by a branch public affairs officer. In Shanghai, our office was physically separate from the consulate compound, although as I recall in walking distance. In the other three cities, the press and cultural section was located within the consulate. Now, while our relationship with China affected public diplomacy in every location, there were individual differences in ease of access. Shanghai, in particular, was a place where it was easiest to arrange programs and reach audiences, while the work environment at the other three consulates was relatively more difficult. As I mentioned earlier, Guangzhou was very easy in terms of programming on economic topics, but in the political area, the local authorities seemed wary of anything that might cause the central government to restrict their ability to liberalize economic policy. Working in Shenyang and Chengdu was even more challenging.

Q: So, the problem was reflecting on what the local Chinese provincial officials felt they were comfortable with?

DAKS: Yes, that's right. There was, however, fairly easy audience access when you got into areas of mutual interest, like study abroad or teaching English.

Q: At some time during all of this, there was a North Korean–U.S. kerfuffle over the North Koreans withdrawing from the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). Would any of that have blown back at the Chinese media?

DAKS: Most likely it would have. And resident foreign media in Beijing would likely be actively covering this story, because at that point in time, and even today, Beijing and Seoul were the two best places to monitor events in North Korea. Our information officer would have been the point person on this.

Q: I was noticing that you mentioned Winston Lord was the assistant secretary who came in with the Clinton administration. But in your China experience, you have served with three different ambassadors. How would you compare and contrast their styles?

DAKS: From my perspective, during the early years following renewed contacts between our two countries, great care was taken in the selection of our ambassadors and, prior to that, to the heads of our liaison office. While there were a mixture of career and non-career people, I think overall the choices were outstanding. As for the ambassadors that I worked for, Winston Lord paid the most attention to the cultural aspects of public diplomacy. In this regard, he was strongly influenced in this area by his wife—Bette Bao Lord—an author of Chinese descent. Mrs. Lord had broad contacts within the arts community in China, and since Ambassador Lord did not speak Chinese, he seemed to rely on her judgment in this area. The couple were also avid film goers, something I surmised after learning that from time to time they would relax by spending an evening viewing several features on video at home.

Jim Lilley, on the other hand, given his intelligence background, was I believe personally more inclined to take a tough line in dealings with the Chinese. However, Ambassador Lilley seemed to me someone who was able to separate support for policies that promoted our national interest from his own strong personal views about the nature of the regime. This is not to say that the other Ambassador's didn't have that characteristic, but when I think of personal integrity, Ambassador Lilley comes to mind. He may not have assigned the highest importance to the work of USIA, but he was receptive to listening to ideas and suggestions.

Then you had Ambassador Roy. Now, Ambassador Lilley and Ambassador Roy both spent their early formative years in China, spoke excellent Chinese and so had valuable life-experience when looking at the Middle Kingdom. And Roy in particular—the breadth of his intellect, his nuanced understanding of China, and appreciation of the big picture in terms of American interest never ceased to amaze me.

Another thing that impressed me was Roy's understanding and appreciation of technology and how it might be utilized at the embassy. Now, we were in the early days of computer-related activities, and even though I had no background, Frank Scotton quote unquote "blessed me" with being sort of the point person on things like the local area network. And for this reason, I found myself in a couple of phone conversations with Ambassador Roy on technology related topics, where fortunately his enthusiasm for the subject did not allow enough time for me to fully display my ignorance. And in this regard, what I remember about Ambassador Roy goes far beyond the U.S. Information Agency or even working in an embassy. He said something that to me was so profound,

to the effect that, “Those who understand the technology cannot make the decisions, and those who can make the decisions do not understand the technology.” Of course, the Ambassador himself was the exception to that rule.

Now, once again, I’m going to go off subject, to share a somewhat related anecdote. One of my functions as the USIA representative on automation issues in Beijing was to attend a monthly lunch, involving expatriates—Americans, other Western countries involved with technology. Attendees included embassy types and business people, several of whom had been in China for quite some time. Now at one of these lunches, there was a young woman, newly arrived, perhaps in her early 30s. And during the course of the meal, she asked one of the long-time residents, “What is it like working in China?” To which he responded, “Welcome to the Klondike!” Upon hearing this the gal remarked, “Well, I know the candy bar, but I don’t understand the reference.”

Q: In these two years—post-Tiananmen Beijing—were there other people in the embassy that you worked closely with?

DAKS: Well, Scott Hallford was the Deputy Chief of Mission, as I recall. I would work with him on occasion. There were people in other elements, of course. When I would go to the branches, I would meet with the counsel generals. They would be responsible, along with myself, for supervising the branch officers. Depending on the situation—I worked with a number of people in various sections. The political section—as I recall, Jon Aloisi may have been there at the time, and we had a fair amount of contact because we shared a friendship with the couple that owned that private bookstore I’ve referred to. The Americans that I tended to work with and gravitate towards were those who were also Chinese language officers—they were the ones at the embassy at the time.

Q: The International Visitors Program at Beijing—did that seem to operate in the same way that it’s operated in other places? What was the process for picking international visitor nominees?

DAKS: Well, in theory it did operate the way it did say in non communist countries. First of all, we would look at what our goals were in terms of the country plan and the mission’s overall goals. Then various sections of the embassy were invited to nominate people in these categories, individuals who they felt would further the U.S.–China relationship, were fairly early in their career, and had the potential for further growth. Overall, as I recall, the nominations were pretty good—in fact, they were very good. But depending on where the location was, the Chinese government would involve itself in a way—or they could involve itself in a way—that would not be very appropriate. This was particularly an issue outside of Beijing and Shanghai. In the two cities I just mentioned, we had more leeway to nominate people, so they could usually get a passport and go on their program without any interference. But in Guangzhou, Shenyang, and Chengdu the local officials would at times suggest people or put the brakes on certain other nominations. This was particularly difficult in Guangzhou.

And in that regard, in all my time in the Foreign Service, when I served as a supervisor, one of the greatest challenges I had was down in Guangzhou because there was an officer who took the Chinese refusal on IVs personally. Without consulting anyone, he unilaterally threatened local officials with shutting down the program, which I did not think was the wise thing to do, counseling the individual attempted interference wasn't directed against us personally, as individuals, and so a more measured approach was appropriate, because the program was in the U.S. government's interest. So that became a point of contention in our relationship and even went on after I retired in terms of his filing a grievance.

***

Q: At the end of your tour, how would you evaluate the trends?

DAKS: I think the overall trend was good. We had added several officers—or we were going to add several officers—we had an American center, and there were many possibilities. Looking ahead it was very promising. Going forward, both through the end of my time with the government and the years after that in which I was still working—actually, I would like to say that while my career with the U.S. Information Agency was thirty-some years, my career in unofficial public diplomacy continued another almost fifteen years because I got involved with similar things that I really loved after retirement, including exchanges. There was an upward trajectory in public diplomacy with China. So I left on an optimistic note.

Q: One last thing about the American Center—was it in place by the time you left?

DAKS: Yes, it was in place at the time I left.

Q: And who was assigned to run it?

DAKS: Elizabeth Kauffman, who was one of the assistant cultural affairs officers at that time, had the role ad interim, shuttling back and forth between our office and the center. Then Ed Loo took over as the first full time director.

Q: Thank you, I appreciate your before and after.

***

Q: Good morning. It's August 6th, and we're returning to our conversation with Larry Daks. Larry, we left you—you're coming in the summer of '94 to the East-West Center. How did you get this assignment?

DAKS: So when I saw the position of diplomat in residence advertised, I bid on it. I thought the opportunity to spend time at the East-West Center would be a great chance to put my background in East and Southeast Asia to good use. And I got the job. However, not long afterwards, I received notification that while my service with the government

was appreciated, since I was not selected for further promotion, my time in the Foreign Service would end six months into the assignment. Or to put it more directly, I was "selected out". Now I was also told that if there were a particularly good rationale, the Director of Foreign Service Personnel might extend my tour for an additional year. Now normally, when I think of an exception like this, something like serving a tour in let's say Kabul would have been where a year extension might be granted. However, I made my best argument, and somehow an extension was granted. Oh, I guess I should add that the extension was granted by a Peace Corps colleague and friend, who was also a foreign service colleague in Laos. So I wound up spending 18 months at the East-West Center.

Now, as you well know, one of the principles of the Foreign Service is worldwide availability. But if you look at my career, it couldn't be described as anything resembling worldwide availability. And there were opportunities to go elsewhere. In fact, prior to bidding on the East-West Center job, I was encouraged to bid on the position of branch public affairs officer in São Paulo, Brazil. Also, some years earlier, I had also been encouraged to cut my tour in Thailand short to opt for greener assignment pastures. And taking one of those roads may have extended my career a bit further had I demonstrated more flexibility in terms of a willingness to serve elsewhere. However, I really wanted to stay in or continue to do work involving Asia, and I did—and I don't regret it. At the same time, I can't dispute the wisdom of a policy of encouraging geographic flexibility based on the needs of the foreign service.

Q: What were your duties as a Diplomat in Residence?

DAKS: Within the center I was assigned to the Institute of Economics and Politics headed up by Charles Morrison. Although there were no specific duties, other than serving as a source of information on diplomacy, research was encouraged. Knowing this, while still in China, I came up with several topics for research.

One particular subject that I believe would have been both challenging and interesting, and which I probably should have undertaken, was entitled "The Culture of Name Cards". That is, I proposed to look into how business cards are used in various Asian countries because—for those of us who've served in the region, most would agree that, for example, in China or Japan, they're given far more importance than they are in Southeast Asia and certainly more than in the United States. In some countries, business cards are sort of the first step in sizing someone up.

My failure to follow up, and actually conduct research and write on this topic, reflected my lack of discipline. I do much better with challenges that have specific timetables and easily defined goals.

Now when I arrived at the East-West Center, a well known China scholar, the late Mike Oksenberg, was the director. And coincidentally around that same time, former *Baltimore Sun* correspondent, John Schidlovsky, who ran a journalist exchange program within the center, the Jefferson Fellowships, had resigned. At that point this privately funded

program's participants for 1995 had already been selected and so there was a commitment to move forward.

So Mike got the idea that given my background as a USIA officer, I should direct the program that year, even though that's not the role of a diplomat in residence. While initially having misgivings, I took on this responsibility. Now as I recall, this didn't create an issue within USIA, but there was at least one East-West Center scholar who thought it was inappropriate for a government official to be running this program. Subsequently, I wrote an article about the experience, using the title "Fox in the Hen House" alluding to the criticism.

Participants in the eight week program included 13 journalists, almost evenly divided between Americans and individuals from various Asian countries. In total I spent nearly eight months on the project, from November 1994 through June 1995.

As for the actual program, about one month was first spent at the East-West Center. Then the American journalists went off to Japan and China, while the journalists from Asia traveled to the mainland of the United States. At the conclusion of this travel, the two groups returned to Honolulu to compare and share experiences. As part of the program, each participant also undertook a research project.

Now one goal of every exchange program is to promote understanding, but the reality doesn't always match the ideal. Two participants, a broadcaster from Taiwan and a newspaper writer from Beijing, sharing a common language and culture, got along very well while in Honolulu. However, during the group's travel to the mainland of the United States, comments by Americans casting doubt about the future of Taiwan, greatly upset the broadcaster and tensions arose between these two participants and the new found friendship faltered beyond repair.

Another participant from Asia I'll always remember was Lasantha Wickrematunge, a journalist and human rights activist from Sri Lanka, who due to threats arising out of his work had relocated to Australia for a period of time. Sadly, in 2009, he was assassinated in Colombo.

Q: How were each of these journalists selected for this program?

DAKS: Well, the individuals applied. Given that it had been going on for a number of years, there was an existing network of alumni and media contacts who helped publicize its existence both in the USA and throughout Asia. Our embassies, particularly the USIS offices, in various countries also served as a resource in terms of reaching out to potential nominees. The nominees' employers, unless the individuals were free lance, had to buy in by agreeing that the participant could take leave. And, as I recall, at least on the American side, there may have been some cost sharing.

Q: For the Asian journalists who went to the States, did you design their program? Or how was their program designed for them?

DAKS: Since the Jefferson Fellowships had been an annual program for many years, there was a record to draw on for program ideas, and alumni who willingly helped make arrangements. However, I also drew from my own experience and network of contacts to add what I felt was worthwhile substance. For example, I arranged for the American journalists to meet with officers of the Thai consulate in Kunming, in Yunnan, believing it would be beneficial to get the viewpoint on China of a close Asian partner. As for the Asian participants, the time I spent in Washington, DC administering the International Visitor program left me with a decent awareness of resources within our own country. I also had contact with individuals living in Hawaii from my service in the Peace Corps and time spent at overseas posts, who helped enrich the participants' experience.

Q: You mentioned at the end of the program, after the travel portion had concluded, the participants reconvened to share experiences. That must have been interesting to hear.

DAKS: Yes, it was. It was very interesting. And in fact throughout the program there were points where one side or the other were faced with ideas, or had their preconceptions challenged, by a presentation or aspect of the program. In that regard, a talk by Koji Ono, a journalist with a Hiroshima newspaper on "The 50th Anniversary of the Dropping of the Atomic Bomb" and then immediately afterwards a visit to the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii and a film on Hawaii's Japanese-American World War II experience, the incarceration, and the 442 Japanese American Regimental Combat Team had to be eye opening in different ways for both the U.S. and Asian participants. Also, in terms of the American participants, unlike how many like to portray the mainstream media today, the participants had a broad range of personal political philosophies. One person, who is still active, falls into the MAGA camp, while another now deceased journalist held more traditional Republican Reagan-like views and then there were others of a more liberal ilk. Nevertheless, during the various discussions, unlike today, most everyone shared a broad spectrum of common ground.

Q: Now in particular, what sense did you have of what the Asian journalists got from the program?

DAKS: For most of the participants from Asia, this was their first time in the United States, and I believe the visit was an eye-opener, particularly for the participants from more closed societies like China and Vietnam. And it was equally eye opening I believe for the Asian journalists to learn from one another. Regrettably, impressions are difficult to confirm, since unlike the International Visitor program, for example, there were few opportunities for in person follow up, after the participant returned home. This is because in many cases the individuals were unknown to the embassy, and the East-West Center did not have representatives in the region.

Q: Now, did you have an opportunity to run a class or be a resource person for a political science class?

DAKS: Yes, but not in any formal, structured sense. However, I did give several talks about the U.S. Information Agency and the role of public diplomacy, usually using my time in China when citing specific examples. In addition, I was diligent about going to my department at the East-West Center every weekday, spending time with resident scholars, particularly individuals focused on China such as Author Anne Thurston and Dr. Yu Bin.

Not long after I left government, I was encouraged to apply for the position of director of the Jefferson Fellowship program, but I declined and recommended someone else. So I suppose I'm not too immodest in saying that others felt that I made a positive contribution during this pre-retirement golden handshake period.

One last point. During my time at the East-West Center, I heard criticism of Center President Oksenberg. One former foreign service colleague expressed dismay that Dr. Oksenberg was proactive in encouraging the center to seek out the involvement of more African-Americans in its programs, the implication being that he was encouraging unqualified individuals. During my time in the foreign service, in order to reach the senior level, foreign service officers who were members of minority groups, seemed to focus on making a name for themselves by serving in Africa. Encouraging these individuals to broaden their horizons, and consciously offering opportunities to develop expertise and serve elsewhere expands and strengthens our talent pool, and in my view should be celebrated. Judging individuals, by putting them in preconceived theoretical boxes does us all a disservice.

Q: The military command CINCPAC (Commander in Chief Pacific) is in Hawaii. Did the East-West Center have any interaction with CINCPAC?

DAKS: Yes. One point of contact was through both the Department of State's Foreign Policy Advisor assigned to CINCPAC and his counterpart, the U.S. Information Agency advisor to the command. Officials from CINCPAC would from time-to-time participate in Center programs, such as conferences on US-China relations. And, as I recall, we had a speaker from CINCPAC meet with the fellows, and I believe the group visited the command.

Now one other thing I should mention is my involvement with the World Conference on Women in Beijing that took place in the midst of my time at the East West Center. Once again, I was pulled out of an ongoing assignment, because USIA needed additional people to provide support. And so I was tapped to go out and wound up either running or helping staff, can't remember which, a press center at the China World Hotel, where many of the participants and journalists were staying, providing assistance to U.S. media and others.

The official conference was held in Beijing. However, the more highly publicized aspect of the event, the NGO portion of the event, was held in Huai Rou some distance from the city.

Q: Now, that conference was September 4th to 15th in 1995. You're there that whole time?

DAKS: Yes.

Q: You must have got there early, too.

DAKS: Yes, I arrived a few days beforehand to help prepare.

Now as to personal involvement, my most vivid memory involved a middle-aged African-American woman in her late 50s, who stopped by the center, after normal business hours as I recall, to ask about conference registration, and where the various events were scheduled. When I saw her signature on the sign-in sheet, I asked if she was the noted person her name indicated. And, indeed, it turned out to be Dr. Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X's widow. Actually, my question was vague because at first I couldn't determine if it was Betty or one of her daughters.

Anyway, I answered her questions and we had a very nice chat. And I guess she felt I helped her because subsequently, when I went to the dining room for dinner, she was there, and invited me to join her and a friend. Actually, we had two meals together and much of the conversation was about her life and interaction with other progressive leaders like Bella Abzug, from whom she had purchased a house. These conversations, while not work related, were interesting and personally rewarding. Sadly, a very few years later she died tragically, in a fire started by a grandson.

Q: At the press center now, were you the only officer there or did they bring in others? Or was an embassy officer also assigned?

DAKS: In terms of staffing the center, I can't recall specific details. Obviously, at an event of this importance, where the official delegation was headed up by the Secretary of State, and the First Lady is in attendance, many embassy officers would be involved. What I do recall quite clearly were complaints by people staying at the China World hotel, because their activities were being monitored by surveillance cameras, and perhaps elsewhere. In fact, even though the NGO part of the conference was held outside the city, in Beijing delegates' movements were tracked, leaving an impression that China had once again regressed in terms of openness. This in my view was an overreaction by the authorities to the possibility of visiting foreigners posing some kind of a threat to the regime. Here you had an event, the unofficial portion of which was held some distance from the heart of the capital, where virtually none of the participants spoke Chinese, so whatever was said and done would have little effect on China's internal situation. Unnecessary steps were taken. China was and is I believe often its own worst enemy.

Q: Did you have much of an opportunity to interact with your embassy colleagues?

DAKS: Well, I visited my former office and chatted with a number of my American colleagues. And I got together and went out for meals with several Chinese staff. And on

each subsequent trip after retirement, I would also get together with our Chinese employees. It was fascinating and encouraging to observe the significant changes in their lives, in terms of their rapidly improving standard of living. However, more recently I have received messages sharing discontent over Xi Jinping's crackdown on various freedoms.

Q: Now, you retired after this assignment in early '96. How had you planned your retirement? Where were you going to go?

DAKS: Actually, I hadn't planned anything specific, but wanted to stay active. However, I hoped that whatever I wound up doing would relate to China and or Southeast Asia.

And candidly I was very worried as to what lies ahead. However, a friend, a Chinese language classmate, who I was stationed with in Beijing, when he learned I was about to leave the Foreign Service said, "My guess is you're going to wind up initially being very busy. And that gradually things are going to wind down over a period of time in terms of your activities." And I guess you could say that's exactly what happened.

Now the State Department has a marvelous career-transition program. This is a course to prepare Foreign Service officers and other employees in the foreign affairs field for what lies ahead. Counseling included how to identify and obtain future employment, if that was desired, financial planning and actual retirement. Spouses could join the program and Nongkran did.

Attendees included people who had voluntarily retired and those, like myself, who had run into a time in class situation. And understandably you had a wide variety of reactions to the ending of their employment. There were people who were bitter about being asked to leave the Foreign Service, who initially at least were dwelling on that. And there were others who knew exactly what they wanted to do. And then there were individuals like myself, who were in the middle—concerned but also able to move forward. And I worked very hard during that period, including writing an article for the program about what opportunities might lie ahead. The people who ran the program thought enough about my brief essay to share it with future participants.

Then shortly after retiring, I heard that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had a public affairs component. A colleague from my time in Thailand, Bill Lenderking, was working there and he filled me in, telling me a bit about the work, which involved being spokesperson for FEMA, usually at disaster sites. So I applied, was accepted, and attended a course at the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, Maryland. And, once again I really applied myself, and while there weren't any grades, it's fair to say that the staff were quite pleased with me. In addition, the fact that I spoke Chinese was considered useful, since not everyone affected by a natural disaster could communicate well in English, so foreign language fluency was considered a plus. Anyway, the FEMA training was excellent, lots of useful simulations, and very practical.

In addition, a pet peeve from my time working elsewhere in government, was dealt with, because the person running the training shared my distaste for acronyms. And so he'd fine participants each time an acronym was used—because he wanted everyone to appreciate that—and I found, throughout my career in the Foreign Service—newcomers could easily lose track of a discussion if everyone was casually throwing out in-house abbreviations. I recall, several times, even in country team meetings, I would interrupt a discussion with, "Excuse me, tell me what you're talking about." I used to worry about that. But I found that other newcomers would tell me, "Yes, we didn't understand either."

Shortly after the training program, I had an opportunity to go into the field because of a hurricane or some such natural disaster. But somehow I had doubts and declined, but then FEMA asked me if I would then work in headquarters during this period, which by the way was adjacent to USIA headquarters. So I did, but once I started working there, I quickly realized that this was not for me. I felt like a lost soul, and really couldn't figure out what was going on.

And so after a few weeks, I told my supervisor at FEMA—and this is how life can be very funny—"I'm sorry, I've got an opportunity to do something in a field. I'm more suited for" —and so I left. Well, I had nothing going at that moment, but lo and behold, within a week, my first PAO in Beijing, McKinney Russell called. At that time he was a consultant to the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), an organization whose genesis was to promote dialogue with the former Soviet Union, and was looking to expand the scope of its programs. McKinney told me, "Larry IREX wants to get into China, do you want to do some work as a consultant?" And I accepted. Again, at the time I left FEMA—I had no idea there were other opportunities on the horizon.

That gig started me out on nearly twenty years of various stints, mainly but not solely for non profit organizations, involved with China. So I was back to doing what I really loved and most of that time, although I held various somewhat impressive titles, I really was involved in the nitty gritty aspects of programs.

Now I've often heard officers who've reached the managerial level within the Foreign Service say, "I would really love to do what I did at the beginning of my career. I regret not having the opportunity again." But my perception at least is that they've never really given serious thought to once again working where the rubber meets the road. However, that's what I wanted, and that's what I did for fifteen or twenty years—organizing programs, accompanying and caring for visitors, using my Chinese in everyday, less than glamorous situations.

Over the years, I worked for a number of organizations as a consultant. The first, as mentioned, was the International Research and Exchanges Board. Then I was involved with a project for NAFSA: Association of International Educators. I also did work for the State Department, working on the public diplomacy aspect of training, and I acted as an interpreter, taking a lawyer from Taiwan and an environmentalist from Thailand around the United States under the International Visitor Program. I also served as an escort for

quite a few delegations of educators from China, under a Fulbright exchange program administered by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations.

Other assignments included work on an intellectual property project in Shanghai on behalf of the Seattle-based National Bureau of Asian Research. And then there was my one private-sector experience, with a Chicago-based start up called China Online, where I would occasionally represent the company in the Washington, DC area, help put together conferences and, perhaps most importantly, recommended the hiring of the individual who became website site's editor, former USIA colleague John Thomson.

Now please allow me another diversion to share an anecdote. The first project I worked on at the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) was to develop a training program in "asset management", helping Chinese state-owned enterprises realize some of the efficiencies of the private sector. Ultimately this resulted in a seminar in China, conducted by two business school professors from the University of West Virginia, then a visit by the participants to the United States. Later, I arranged for one of the Chinese contingent to return to Washington, DC, and conducted research as an IREX fellow.

However, the first step was to learn what "asset management" meant in the Chinese context, and so I traveled to Beijing and Shanghai and called on businesses and factories to hear about their situations. And naturally in these meetings the people I would meet usually learned I had been a diplomat in China.

Now in Shanghai, one state owned enterprise I visited was a factory originally established by Lever Brothers, that still manufactured personal care products. As the meeting was concluding, I was asked about U.S.-China relations? And as I recall, at that moment the relationship was again in one of those difficult patches. And so I responded in a somewhat wordy, evasive diplomatic way, repeatedly stating that one has to take the "long view". Well each time I stressed the need to take the "long view" my hosts nodded with increasing enthusiasm. Then upon the meeting's conclusion, I was presented with a beautifully wrapped gift that was described as "very meaningful". Now in Asia it's common practice to accept but not open a present right away. And so I told my host, "When I get home, I will give it to my wife", knowing a beauty product would please her. Once again, I was told to keep this very meaningful meeting in mind, which I certainly did, upon seeing the gift I presented to Nongkran was a pair of binoculars!

Now the participant in the asset management training program we brought back to Washington, DC as an IREX visiting scholar was Wang Zhiping, an unusually open and progressive individual who taught at the Party School of Shanghai municipality. And as a side note, those who have been most effective in pushing for change in China have generally been reformers with the Communist Party, as opposed to dissidents.

During this period Nong and I really got to know Wang, his wife and preteen son, because a neighbor of ours provided them with housing. Upon arrival, we learned the Wang family traveled lightly, with one exception. Concerned about falling behind back home, the boy's school textbooks took up one entire large piece of luggage.

In addition to conducting research, I was able to make arrangements for Wang to speak at a conference and do some traveling around the United States, in one case utilizing the good offices of the Chicago-based community organization that supported the International Visitor Program. And I went with him and stayed in a small, very conservative farming community in Illinois, where among other things we went to church.

Other academics that came to IREX as visiting scholars focused on areas such as U.S. China relations in a historical context, China-Russia-Central Asia relations and issues relating to economic reform.

In addition, on two occasions, I traveled with international visitors around the United States, as an interpreter, although I wasn't fully qualified. However, special circumstances arose, and the visitor had sufficient comprehension of and ability in spoken English so between the two of us we could figure things out.

In one case the visitor was a lawyer from Taiwan, who was involved with the then principal opposition party, and a supporter of Taiwan Independence. Initially the Department of State Office of Language Services assigned an interpreter from mainland China. And so there was resistance to that on her part and I was asked at the last minute to take on this assignment. On the other occasion, I acted as an interpreter for a European educated young Thai environmentalist involved with ocean management. He spoke some English, but still wasn't confident in terms of his ability to express himself. And again, my interpretation was hit and miss, hopefully more hits than misses.

Perhaps my favorite gig involved delegations of Chinese educators who visited the United States under that portion of the Fulbright Program funded through the U.S. Department of Education. Administered by the National Committee on U.S.-China relations, there was a two-way exchange: American teachers would spend a summer learning more about China, so they could more effectively teach their students upon returning home. And the Chinese in turn would send delegations of educators, selected by its Ministry of Education, to the United States to learn more about some aspect of American education. An interpreter, capable of either consecutive or simultaneous translation, and someone called an "escort" accompanied the group. And I was the escort for eight or nine of these programs.

My job as escort was to ensure that the trip went smoothly and that any problems that might arise were dealt with in a fair, effective and culturally sensitive manner. In addition, from time to time changes in the substance of the program were warranted and I was responsible for alerting National Committee staff of the need to make changes. Since relatively few of the participants spoke English, practically all my dealings were in Chinese, an opportunity and a challenge I relished. Upon completion of each visit, and in fact in practically all the post-retirement programs I was involved with, I was tasked with writing a report, evaluating the project and making recommendations. I took the report

writing very seriously, despite knowing that absent some future budget support and dedicated staff, there would be little if any follow on.

As I mentioned earlier, these trips were thematic, dealing with education at various levels, from preschool to university, with stops ranging from large cities to small rural areas and almost always beginning in Washington, DC. Accompanying these delegations was a more intense experience than what I generally experienced as a diplomat. Because when serving abroad one might have just a half dozen meetings and social get togethers over a year period with key contacts. But as an escort for the National Committee on US-China Relations, I was spending two weeks with each small delegation 24-7.

Being together in professional meetings, sightseeing, during home hospitality and staying in the same hotels, where I was on call regardless of the hour, I both gained many insights and also had the chance to share my thoughts about our country and way of life. These trips definitely had an impact on the participants, for me, were also quite rewarding.

Years later, working on an unrelated project for IREX, involving training student-journalists in Lanzhou, Gansu province, I saw positive instances of how Fulbright delegation members' experiences in the United States positively affected perceptions. Calling at a high school where the principal had joined one of the first education delegations I escorted, I saw prominently displayed on the school walls articles this administrator had written about his experiences visiting some of our most renown education institutions and his trip to Walden Pond. Then I also met with the principal of another high school, who based upon his observations on a different delegation told me that he didn't agree that the Chinese government's strict policy about wearing student uniforms had much to do with the quality of education received. So, there was synergy between the various things that I did in terms of exchange programs. And that pleased me.

Sadly, with the accession of the current leadership in China, and in my view our own shortsighted view about the utility of exchange programs, programs like the ones described above are at this point merely of historical interest.

Also, from 1999 to 2020, my wife, Nongkran, was the executive chef and owner of a Thai restaurant in Chantilly, Virginia. In addition to running the Thai Basil, she wrote cookbooks, appeared on radio and television and taught cooking classes, conducted demonstrations and lectured. While I was not involved in the day-to-day operations of her business, utilizing some of the skills honed in the foreign service I managed the marketing and publicity for the restaurant and Nong's various activities.

Q: Now, your career was being stationed in Beijing, up to and including Tiananmen Square, and then you went back again a couple of years later. And now here in retirement from '97 on, you're coming back and forth from China—you were saying you had an opportunity to talk to some of the Foreign Service nationals at the embassy and gain an impression of how China was changing since your retirement. How would you characterize those observations?

DAKS: Well, my Chinese colleagues at the embassy had their nose to the grindstone in terms of taking advantage of the new economic space they had. Whether it was side jobs or new positions each and every one of them seem to be prospering. And they were also willing to criticize things that were happening on the local level. But if you wanted to bring up matters like Tiananmen—as one of our former drivers told me, "don't bring it up." Now here he was running a garage, doing okay—just didn't want to think about the past. So, there was increased economic opportunity, and more freedom within a certain sphere, as long as you didn't go near the third rail of criticizing those in high positions or questioning the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.

More recently, a former Chinese colleague has sent me several emails expressing strong dissatisfaction with what is currently going on in China. Last year (2022) he wrote that the holiday letter I had sent him took eight or nine months before he received it. It had been opened and there was a note inside saying, due to COVID, sanitation was done on the letter, along with a warning to be careful because of the possibility of germs. He went on to rail against what he felt was an overreaction by the Chinese government. (A note: Chinese proficient in English evade government censors through the use of certain VPNs, Virtual Private Network, to bypass the government firewall.)

To answer your question, perhaps more succinctly, during those periods when I was still going back to China, which ended about 10 years ago, things were increasingly hopeful in terms of what people were able to do.

One other interesting, positive development that occurred in 1993 is that embassies were no longer required to go through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs affiliated Diplomatic Service Bureau to hire local staff. They were free to hire on the open market. Now the employees who came through the Chinese government under the old system only received a relatively small portion of the salary that the embassies paid to this government agency. Well when this change was made, existing employees were allowed to choose whether they would stay with the old, Chinese government controlled system, or switch to the free market system, and receive a significant bump in salary. And, interestingly, several of those who were already on board in our office, declined to switch because apparently they also had significant, vested fringe benefits.

Q: Wasn't there a U.S. program, where if you were an employee, a local employee of the embassy, for an extended period of time, you are eligible for a visa, immigrant to the U.S?

DAKS: Yes, it's the Special Immigrant Visa. Local employees with at least 15 years of service that were deemed noteworthy, could be nominated and, with the approval of the Department of State, this visa would be issued. As mentioned earlier, I successfully nominated one staffer from Laos for this program. And this was particularly beneficial because unlike refugees, he and his family members could work right away and were subject to fewer legal restrictions. I don't recall nominating anyone from China being nominated under this program. Perhaps as long as they came through the Chinese

government, such a nomination wasn't even possible. However, several of our Chinese staff, working on both the cultural and information side have resettled in the United States, a number initially coming as students and then transitioning to successful careers in education and business.

Q: You're reminding me, you were in Laos at a very difficult time. Have you had the opportunity to go back and see what it looks like these days?

DAKS: Yes, I've been back to Laos twice. The first time was in April of 1981, when I was working in Thailand. At the invitation of the Political Counselor, Peter Lydon, I returned to Vientiane with my daughter for a short visit. Now just after we departed Bangkok, there had been an attempted coup, known as the "April Fools coup. And so the Lao I encountered, in the market for example, were joking, "You see, Thailand's much more hazardous than Laos." At that time changes appeared incremental and not necessarily positive. People were still fleeing the country from time to time. And, in fact, I met with a young Sino-Lao on that visit, not long before he crossed the river. During his life in post revolutionary Laos, if his story was to be believed, he was involved in the resistance movement, and getting some support from Taiwan. Subsequently, after he moved to Thailand, we met on a couple of occasions. And at some point he started working for the Radio Free Asia office in Bangkok.

Then my wife and I returned to Laos, this time Luang Prabang, the old royal capital, the year before COVID came on the scene. We spent several days enjoying the city and sightseeing. And I was impressed but not that surprised. Impressed that the communist government's presence did not seem to be very heavy-handed. People we spoke with were open in their comments. But then I reflected on the nature of the Lao people. And it seems obvious that the version of the communist state in Laos would be more relaxed than its Indochinese neighbors or of course, China. And naturally, after an extended absence of hostilities, people were doing much better. There appeared to be a far amount of economic development, even extending to a degree to the ethnic Hmong in the area. Of course as a tourist hub, you would expect it to be more economically developed.

What was also evident was increasing resentment towards the growing Chinese influence. And you could say, of extraterritoriality there, whether that's from running casinos, perceived environmental degradation caused by Chinese investments or the establishment of a Chinatown on the outskirts of Vientiane. But of course the picture is more complicated than that, because Laos benefits as well. So attitudes regarding China can be contradictory.

I know this is the case in Thailand, where, on the one hand, the economic development that China can provide through things like the Belt and Road initiatives can result in desirable high speed rail lines running the length of the country. But, on the other hand, as part of that development, the Chinese negotiate for the economic rights along both sides of the railway. And people I know are unhappy about that.

In Thailand, you have large numbers of ethnic Chinese who on the one hand take pride in the ascension of China, its culture, things like that. At the same time, many of these same people are active in the business sector, and there's a lot of concern about the Chinese taking over and pushing out small- and medium-sized enterprises—and also the establishment of, in effect, within Bangkok, of a new Chinatown, where local businesses have been pushed out or taken over, and where you can exist without speaking Thai. And in Laos you have the same thing, although on a much smaller scale. However, the Lao are in a less fortunate position in terms of their leverage to negotiate. So, I think there's a fair amount of resentment by ethnic Lao. On the other hand, being realistic and knowing the history of Thailand and Laos, I would not be surprised if when the Lao met their Chinese counterparts they complained about the Big Brother superior attitude of the Thai, how they think they're the be-all and end-all of Southeast Asia.

Q: Let me wrap this up by looking at the function of USIA over the years and now its demise. How do you rate—how would you rate American projection of its image and fellowship these days as opposed to the USIA that you knew?

DAKS: Whatever challenges exist in terms of projecting America's image abroad, and there are issues, aren't just because the independent agency managing public diplomacy was abolished and the responsibility subsumed into the Department of State. Yes, a larger bureaucracy may not be as nimble. But, on the other hand, within the Department of State now, public diplomacy officers have greater influence than they would have otherwise, in terms of the overall functioning of the State Department. A number have reached ambassadorial and other senior management positions who may not have otherwise been that successful.

I feel that a number of individuals whose voices were the loudest in terms of regretting the demise of USIA assumed that the agency's officers were innately more culturally sensitive and attuned to the needs and interests of key audiences overseas. My own experience is that this sensitivity and ability isn't confined to any one function within the foreign affairs community.

Technology has advanced greatly, and this is marvelous in terms of being able to reach large numbers of people or conversely targeting selective groups. However, I think we have gone too far in devaluing the one-on-one interaction that, during my time, and even more so before that, characterized public diplomacy, whether that was through individual meetings, English teaching or libraries.

There's also been an increasing tendency to focus more on the elites, although this maybe is starting to change now. But I think that some of these programs, particularly on the cultural side, that do not produce immediate results, have been given short shrift. I would argue that in public diplomacy you need to have a long view—and I'm not talking about binoculars here. Yes, there's the information side, quick responses are important. But this is only one approach in the public diplomacy arsenal.

Another thing that must be recognized, is that if a government has policies which are viewed positively, that make sense, then telling America's story is much easier. If you have an administration, which is insensitive to the outside world, no matter what you do, you really can't move the needle that much. Also, we have to recognize that even though we may be the most advanced country economically, the people we're dealing with, at least in my experience, are sharp. And if you tell them, this is black, but they know it's white, they're not going to follow you, if that makes any sense.

Painting an accurate, nuanced picture of our great country, strengths and flaws, is the most credible weapon in the public diplomacy arsenal.

Q: Well, Larry, I appreciate your observations, all these sessions we've had. I want to thank you very much.

End of interview

A post interview note by Larry.

Editing of this interview took place over a lengthy period of time, ending in the summer of 2025. Up until recently, regardless of the administration or its philosophy, decisions regarding the practice of diplomacy, and policies, were in my view overall made with good intentions, in a largely thoughtful manner. However, over the past six months, destruction seems to have been equated with reform, and the foreign service writ large has been willfully decimated.

In April 1994, an American president passed away. At that time the embassy asked for volunteers to take shifts at the ambassador’s residence while mourners came by to sign a condolence book. I immediately volunteered, although the individual being mourned was my least favorite among the office holders up to that point in time. My motivation. Respect for the institution and the confidence that at some fundamental level even this leader recognized the guardrails of decency.

Hopefully, at some point in the not too distant future, reason will prevail once again, so that the foreign service of the United States of America can once again serve the national as opposed to the personal interest.