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

JOHN DICKSON

Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is Friday, August 27th, 2021. We're beginning our interview with John Dickson. John, where and when were you born?

DICKSON: I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1954.

Q: Did your family stay there? Did you grow up in Cincinnati?

DICKSON: I grew up for nine years in Cincinnati, and then we moved to New Jersey. My father was a businessman, and he ended up moving around a little. After New Jersey, he went back to Indiana; then he worked in New York. So, I had a few years in each place. But I would say my growing up was in Cincinnati and New Jersey. That's where I spent the most amount of time.

Q: How large is your family?

DICKSON: We were a family of five children. Like many families in the Baby Boomer generation, we were a lot of kids. All my friends had big families. So, that was the way it was back then. I had three brothers and one sister.

Q: How did your parents meet?

DICKSON: My parents met at Princeton University. My father grew up in Brooklyn, a Depression child. His father was unemployed for 12 years. Then, during the war, he went into the Coast Guard. When the war ended, he got a GI (Government Issue) Bill and got accepted at Princeton. My mother happened to be living in Princeton. Her father worked for Gallup. They met at the library in Princeton and got married at the chapel there. My father was a man on the move, so he finished in three years and wanted to start making money. After living through the Depression, he just wanted to get out.

Q: Did he study business? What were his academic interests before he started in business?

DICKSON: He was in what was then called the Woodrow Wilson School of International Policy, and his thesis was on labor policy and the Taft-Hartley Act. His real interest was working. He was the ultimate overachieving, hardworking young man.

Q: Type A.

DICKSON: Yes, he was a Type A guy, and he paid for it, in the end. But he said that he had three full-time jobs at Princeton and was married and had a baby. So, as soon as he graduated from Princeton, he went to work for Procter & Gamble in Cincinnati; he said he took a pay cut. He had so many jobs at Princeton that working full time for Procter & Gamble was less than college work right away. So, that was him.

Q: Now, you mentioned that your mother's father worked for Gallup. Did she work as well?

DICKSON: She did not. She had gone to college in Minnesota, Carleton College. Her area of interest was geology. She'd spent a summer out in the Tetons doing some field work. We heard about that our whole lives. Then she had five children, and she was a volunteer. One interesting thing to note is that one of her heroes was her mother. She was a feminist before feminism, at the turn of the century. She actually went to work for the Defense attaché in Switzerland during the First World War. I have a bunch of documents from her when she was a secretary in Switzerland, working for Defense intelligence at the time. So, that was interesting. She traveled through Europe on her own. She was just totally unusual for an unmarried woman at the time. Then she met my grandfather and they settled down.

To me, being in the Foreign Service and finding out that my grandmother worked for Defense intelligence was an eye-opener; I was given her passport and her journal of that era, from before World War I, traveling around Europe… That was interesting.

Q: Remarkable. So, Cincinnati is your elementary school. Are there recollections from that era that still stand out in your mind?

DICKSON: Sure. I kind of say that of the five children in the family, I was the one who left my heart in Cincinnati when we moved when I was nine. A few things stand out. One was friends in the neighborhood. I was very upset when we left. I didn't like moving. I never knew what it was to move, but I didn't want to move. The other was that when I was six or seven, the Cincinnati Reds won the pennant. So, when your home team wins at baseball whether the Red Sox win and you're seven or whatever… I became a lifelong Cincinnati Reds fan and can't get through that. But also, I liked the Bengals and other teams.

Another thing I remember – and I don't know how old you are, but I remember going down to get the paper at the bottom of the hill because I wanted to see the scores. I would bring the paper back to the house and open it up. I could barely read. But the banner headline was "Reds Around." I thought it was about the baseball team, but they were

talking about the Soviets. This was a very right-wing newspaper. This was the Red Scare. I remember doing the drills, the duck under your desk drills, and seeing the maps on the front page of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* of the missiles. They could reach my hometown. I do remember being confused and wondering why the Reds were on the front page every day.

Q: Before we follow you to New Jersey, I meant to ask, since you mentioned your grandmother, have you done any other ancestry investigations?

DICKSON: So, I have, at the instigation of a friend, done a little. I do a lot of local history and history projects, so I am a member of Ancestry. My father's family is Scottish, and my mother's family is English. I found on both parents' sides Scandinavian ancestors as well. I did the DNA (Deoxyribonucleic acid) test, and it came back interesting, too. That was the *National Geographic* DNA test. My mother's family came out of Africa and went right to the British Isles. My father's family… It's funny. There are pictures of my father where he's very swarthy looking. But his family, *National Geographic* has on the map that they head over towards Iran and then headed back through Italy. You know how they do the DNA. There are tracers that are more similar to the Iranians or the Italians. That explained a lot. Even though his mother was Swedish, he had black hair and swarthy skin. So, anyway, that was just an interesting side note. I was always curious where he got this dark complexion from.

Q: Where did you end up in New Jersey?

DICKSON: We lived in a town called Chester, New Jersey. It's in western New Jersey, a very small farming community. My father worked in Morris Plains. So, it was a nice, easy commute for him. We lived there for five years. He then moved on to Indiana. Now, one of the reasons I put New Jersey high on where I grew up is, after eighth grade at my school in New Jersey, I did go to boarding school in New Jersey. Lawrenceville. So, I spent four years at Lawrenceville and then four years at Princeton. That was eight plus five, so 13… I'm a New Jersey guy.

Q: What was farm life like at that time?

DICKSON: Not traditional farming, as we know, with… We did not farm. There were farms around us. We had 20 acres, and we had big tractors, and I learned to cut the grass with the big tractors. We had a barn and stable, but the stable had collapsed and there was nothing in it, so it was just an old thing.

We lived, quite frankly, a life of White privilege; there's no question about it. My father would leave a list of chores on the table, when we were home in the summer or on weekends, and we'd come down to breakfast and he'd have each of us do chores, whatever it was. That kind of scarred us for life. You'd go out there and work probably 15 minutes, picking up sticks or raking or cutting the grass or whatever, and you'd think you'd been out there for eight hours. He was the one who was out there for eight hours on weekends or before work, just trying to keep up with the maintenance of 20 acres.

Q: Lawrenceville is, at least in New Jersey, a well-known boarding school, often a feeder for colleges. Did it have a unique curriculum or approach to learning?. What were your memories of that time?

DICKSON: First, an important piece of my growing up that straddled grade school and Lawrenceville was that I spent seven summers in a camp in New Brunswick, Canada. I did three summers as a camper. One of my teachers in grade school ran the camp, and he convinced a few parents to send their children up there. Then, after that, I spent four summers as a counselor up there. The reason I really put this as very instrumental or moving me in two directions… One was that the man who was the head of the camp was a history teacher, and he just was super energized about history. He just loved it, and he showed us that love. My father, as well. He was a Lincoln collector. Some of the items he collected and passed on to me are on the walls of my study.

But the other thing was, being in a foreign country at a very young age – even a country like Canada – I was very shocked to hear what Canadians thought of the United States. I grew up flipping through *Time, Life,* magazines and books. We were the greatest nation on earth, and when Kennedy died, people around the world were crying. To go up there and hear people… They weren't harsh, but it was just shocking to me that, oh, this is what you think of us? We are rude? No, we're not. So, at a pretty young age, I was trying to show that Americans weren't like what a lot of Canadians' preconceptions were, necessarily. It also put me in touch and immersed in a foreign culture, with Canadians, and I fell in love with Canada. There's no question about it. To go back seven summers to the Maritime Provinces, now called the Atlantic Provinces, and then to be really fortunate to have my final overseas – Canada's not really overseas – tour in Ottawa for three years was just a wonderful opportunity. So, that was really a formative event. Even when I started in the Foreign Service, I'd already had this experience of interacting with foreigners and seeing how foreigners think of the United States.

Q: You're right, that is really interesting. How large was the camp? How many kids would you typically manage?

DICKSON: It was small. The biggest year might've been 80, and the smallest year might've been 40. The second year I was there was the largest contingent, and then for one reason or another, the camp director lost interest and stopped recruiting heavily. I think the year after I left might've been the last year that it was in operation. Anyway, it was a great place to spend a couple of months every summer.

Q: Okay. So, now, to Lawrenceville. In high school, did you already have specific interests? Were you more just kind of feeling your way through?

DICKSON: I would say that my number one interest all the way through was sports. There was a sports camp, and when I got to school, I played soccer, basketball, and baseball. Academics came easy, and I have to think that a lot of that was my mother and father kind of pushing it. So, I never really struggled and did very well.

From a young age, my father's life changed because of Princeton. So, Princeton was his thing. I kind of knew from an early age that I was going to Princeton. I didn't know that it was hard to get into. It was just like, okay, I'm going to Princeton.

So, even at Lawrenceville, I was working just enough to do very well. I didn't do well on the SATs (Scholastic Assessment Test), but I kind of knew, because of sports and other activities, that this was really attainable.

Q: The other question about high school is, aside from sports, were there other interests? Did you begin foreign languages or public speaking, debate and so on?

DICKSON: Foreign languages were a big part of it. I did Latin and French when I got to Lawrenceville. I did French all the way through. My last two years I dropped Latin and started taking Russian. History was a big interest of mine. I tried to steer away from the sciences and math. As soon as I finished my requirements for those, I dropped them. It was an all-boys' school, so, to me, being able to play sports all the time was interesting. I was in student government as well.

Q: At any point, with Lawrenceville, was the counterculture an influence there, or any of the protest movements and so on?

DICKSON: Yes. My brother had gone there a year ahead of me, and you were beginning to see people with long hair. I did not fall into that, but I do think that high school is where you're experimenting with identity. So, the pressure to be cool at that time was rock and roll and drugs. I didn't do that, but certainly long hair and rock and roll and all of that were there. The coolest kids were the kids who were doing drugs. It was really hard. I remember one of my teachers, later on, who was my soccer coach said, "You have no idea how hard it was for us to catch up with what was going on. We had no idea how to act or interact in this new environment."

We pushed things at the school to make changes, from the rigidity of uniforms and going to chapel every day and disciplinary committees involving students. So, there was a lot of change while I was there. But again, it's prep school, boarding school. We were five miles from Trenton, where there were serious civil rights issues, protests and burnings. After Martin Luther King died, there was the Summer of Fire in New Jersey, and Newark and Trenton were on our minds. A lot of the work staff was from Trenton. Even some of the students were. This was a bastion of White privilege, and we were aware of it.

Q: The other thing I was wondering about in high school was, were there opportunities for other kinds of international exposures, maybe Model UN (United Nations) or maybe visits to locations that had international activities going on?

DICKSON: There were international students there, students from Mexico, but other than the foreign language, I really have to be honest with you that my area of interest was U.S. history. Outside of the Canada experience, it never occurred to me, even though I was

taking French, that this was something that would be of interest to me. That extended even all the way through college.

Q: Once you're accepted at Princeton you go from a relatively small boarding school to a big university. Was there a little bit of culture shock?

DICKSON: Not really. Part of that was because we lived in New Jersey about 45 minutes away from Princeton. My brother went to Lawrenceville and Princeton. As kids, we would go down and watch Princeton football games. I knew the campus. So, that was, again, part of, "Oh, this is where I'm going." I say that knowing that three of my siblings didn't go there, for one reason or another. But it was always in the cards for me.

I had a roommate who had gone to a public school on Long Island. He was an All-American soccer player, a gifted athlete, and he said that you could tell the difference between kids who'd gone to a boarding school or prep school. They were so confident. The kids who were thrown in from public high schools were just trying to keep their heads above water, even though they were valedictorians or class presidents. This was him saying it. "You guys just walked in like you own the world." I roomed with a friend of mine for four years from Lawrenceville. There were 11 of us from Lawrenceville at Princeton. So, there wasn't much of a culture shock. The only culture shock would've been, oh, there are girls. Yay!

Q: To set the chronology, what year did you start at Princeton?

DICKSON: 1972. I graduated in 1976. The other thing I would say, both at Lawrenceville and because of my interest in history and the influence of this director at camp, is that I wanted to be a teacher. I was a good camp counselor and I thought, oh, I can do this. So, I wrote my application essay for Princeton saying I wanted to be a teacher, and I wanted to go to Princeton because they had a teacher preparation program where you could be certified to teach on graduation. So, this is what I wanted to do. I didn't have grand ambitions beyond that. I thought, I'm good at it and that's what I want to do.

Q: Well, at least you had a goal from when you started. Does that begin to change as you continue through university?

DICKSON: Not at all. I finished thinking I wanted to be a teacher. I took education courses. You didn't have to take a lot. I think you had to take four or five through your whole career. Then I did student teaching my senior year, and I majored in history. So, I wanted to be a social studies teacher. I did not take any foreign language at Princeton. That was to my great regret. I had taken the French AP (Advanced Placement) class and was able to get out of French. So, I never took it. I probably could've and should've, but I didn't need a language and I was focused on that.

Q: During the college experience, did you work either part-time or in the summers?

DICKSON: I worked part-time on campus every year at different jobs. A lot of jobs were in the cafeterias, mopping floors or as the cashier. I got a couple of jobs with professors doing some of their gritty research that they didn't want to do. I remember one econ professor I got a job with, and he was doing some research on articles in economic journals and how often they were cited. This was pre-computers, so I had to go through every journal and write down citations of other articles. That was his research. He didn't want to do it, so he got a junior in college and paid two dollars an hour to do that. It was very boring. I'd much rather mop the floors in the cafeteria and see my friends.

Q: Okay.

DICKSON: In the summers I worked at that camp. I worked as a camp counselor. Then, one summer I got a job at a fishing camp in Alaska, at Glacier Bay. So, I went up there. I thought it would be very glamorous. I was supposed to be helping out on the docks, but when I got there, they needed someone who could drive a manual shift truck, and I couldn't. So, I ended up being a dishwasher and a nightwatchman. I could've done that anywhere. But I was in Alaska on Glacier Bay, and there was pretty fantastic geography for that summer. I played soccer at Princeton, too.

Q: Of course, Princeton has various overseas programs as well. Did those ever tempt you?

DICKSON: No, they didn't. I had two roommates who did summers abroad in France, and one of those roommates went on to do the Princeton in Asia program. I knew people who did Princeton in Asia, and that changed their lives. We may be jumping ahead too soon, but in February of my senior year, I remember going by the student center and seeing a student table for Peace Corps and Vista. So, I thought, oh. I had always admired Kennedy and thought of it in the back of my mind, so I went over to apply for Vista. I didn't want to go overseas. So, I filled out the application. It was just a one-page thing, or maybe two pages. The guy looked at it, and he said, "Do you mind if I throw this in with the Peace Corps, too? You've got French."

I said, "Go ahead, sure, but I'd rather do Vista." I was thinking I'd rather go to West Virginia and teach or Arizona or something. So, that was evidence of me not wanting to go overseas, filling out this form and somebody casually throwing it in the Peace Corps file.

May comes along – and again, I may be jumping ahead a little too soon – but I had seen three older siblings' graduations where they graduated without a job, and I saw the reaction of my father. I did not want that at my graduation. "Well, John, what are you going to do with your life?"

I got a call from the Peace Corps three weeks before graduation, on a Friday, and they said, "We've been looking at your application. Would you be interested in joining the Peace Corps and going to Gabon?"

I said, “Oh. Where’s Gabon?”

They said, “Oh, it’s in central Africa, south of Cameroon.”

Well, I knew enough not to ask the next question, which was, “Where’s Cameroon?” That was certainly on my mind. So, they said, “You have until Monday to tell us yes or no.” Again, international work was the furthest thing on my mind. The heaviest thing on my mind was my father’s reaction to my graduation without a job. So, I accepted on Monday the Peace Corps. That was my introduction to international, overseas careers, other than these seven years in Canada.

Q: In a way, it came out of nowhere, because you hadn’t been planning for it. Let’s go ahead. In the Peace Corps, obviously, you have a little bit of orientation, and then they send you out. So, how did all that work?

DICKSON: Oh. It worked very well. So, I think it was three weeks after graduation. I got on the plane and went to Atlanta, Georgia for a three-day orientation and then off to Africa. We were going to do our training in Cameroon. The PanAm (Pan-American Airlines) flights used to stop at all these airfields along West Africa, in Liberia, the Ivory Coast, and on to Cameroon. But somehow the plane broke down in the Ivory Coast on our way in.

My ignorance of Africa was just monumental. I was shocked that there was this big city, Abidjan. We were stranded there for a weekend. It was thriving. There were skyscrapers and stores. I went into a store and saw… It just was not my image of what I was shown. Even though I’m an Ivy League graduate and I should’ve known and could’ve known, I didn’t know. I didn’t even bother trying to find out, really, that much before going over there, which I should have.

We ended up in Cameroon, and I remember flying into Cameroon after this weekend of culture shock in Abidjan. The people who were training us, met us at the airport in Yaoundé. We were greeted so nicely by these Cameroonians who were going to train us. I was really just taken in from that moment on. This is really important for embassies and Foreign Service. I kept this for the rest of my life. The initial impression of your arrival and reception is so important. Right away, I had the international bug. I was there for the long haul. They were just so nice and so accommodating, so welcoming.

It was dark out; we couldn’t see anything driving to the little school where we were going to be training. People were really nice, and I was just super enthused. The training was in a town south of Yaoundé. We did French training, and we did a little bit of teacher training. Teacher training was going to start when we got to Libreville, Gabon, but we got French training. We played soccer with the teachers, and we did outings, and we did all the exotic things. We went to little restaurants and ate exotic foods and stuff and learned French.

So, it was just, as many people have in their early post-college lives. (I think of my father at Princeton and other people in the military.) Your first time out on your own, you're super enthusiastic and seeing the whole world. It didn't matter where. I might've had that if I'd gone to Vista in West Virginia or Kentucky, but I certainly had that in Cameroon. I spent a wonderful five or six weeks there.

Peace Corps training is the best training. We went from there to Libreville for teacher training. I had done four years of Princeton teacher training, and the six weeks I got through the Peace Corps was so much more valuable. I remember writing to my parents saying that this was great training, and it's so much better than what Princeton had to offer. I kind of laid it all out. It was very concrete and practical. This is what you do when you're standing in front of a classroom. Princeton was doing the sociology of education and the financing of education. You don't need that if you're standing in front of a class. You need something practical.

I got a letter, after a couple of months, from my father saying, "Oh, I sent your letter on to the teacher preparation program at Princeton." I was like, oh, no, I'm in big trouble now. They really took it to heart, though. He gave it to the dean. Oh, my goodness. Anyway, I'll still stick with that and say, again, that Peace Corps training was excellent.

I later met my wife there, and she also had teacher training there, and she said it was the best she ever had of any teacher preparation. They do a good job. I don't know about the other training, how they do that, whether it's for community development or fisheries. But I know that the teacher training was superb.

Q: So, you were selected for teaching English, I imagine?

DICKSON: That's right.

Q: So, you get through the six weeks. The next stop is Libreville.

DICKSON: So, we get to Libreville, and there are seven of us in our little cohort. We go through another six weeks of training. There's a lot of bonding and, again, outings with people. I made good friends with my Gabonese French teacher. He took me to his home and to the markets. Again, the welcome was just over the top.

All seven of us were tight. In fact, one of the seven is visiting here right now today. We're tight. We all stayed through the two years, and we're all good friends. So, it was that kind of bonding experience.

Q: Remarkable. So, from Libreville, were you actually teaching in the capital, or did they send you out to the hinterlands?

DICKSON: We did a little student teaching that summer. They had a four-week summer school in the capital, and we stayed at the *Ecole Normale* (Normal School), the teacher's school in the capital. Then, we all got assigned to different interior schools. I was

assigned to a small… they called it a town, but it was really barely a village. They had a middle school there that they called a *collège.* It was really grades six, seven, eight, and nine. There had been Peace Corps teachers there for three years before I got there. So, I was at a great advantage. There were students who were learning English and loved English, and I kind of just stepped in and just had to not mess up all the work that had been done. So, that was a great advantage. But once again, it was just a very welcoming and open place. Because of the experiences of other teachers before me in the town, they knew Peace Corps, and they liked Peace Corps there, and I was welcomed.

Now, Peace Corps women in Gabon had a much different experience than men. There was a respect for men automatically. Women were chased and sought after. I never experienced that. So, they had a whole side of trying to fend off people from trying to take advantage or start relationships. I never had that.

But it was, again, a wonderful experience. There were four teachers at this school of 300 children. There was the principal, who taught social studies, a math teacher, a science teacher, and me. So, I taught 300 students. There were eight classes. Sometimes there were 70 students in a class. The smallest class had 40. So, it was really hard. It could have been a terrible, disciplinary nightmare, but the kids were so well-behaved. They were starving for education. The way we were taught to teach English was a lot of roleplaying, a lot of English only. That's how you learn a foreign language.

So, for them, without television or anything at home, this was their entertainment. The other classes, science and math, were all rote, and they'd be sitting there and copying. Then the English teacher would come, and they would play and sing songs. So, again, they really knew English. The kids loved walking around and saying, "Good morning, how are you?" So, that was fun. Now, that's not to say that I didn't have my issues of discipline over the course of two years of teaching. It was exhausting work, because I taught every day from eight am to one and then came back and coached in the evening. Just to be on for five straight hours in front of classes of 70 kids was exhausting work. I also had to do the planning and the correcting and stuff. It was endless work. I never thought the end of the term would come, but it did. Everybody told us, "Just get to Christmas in that first year. When you get to Christmas, when you leave and come back, you'll think that this is home, and you'll recognize people."

So, I learned a little bit of the local language. Everybody spoke French, so I could speak French, but people also appreciated me trying to learn the local language, just greetings and stuff. So, it was a heady experience, in terms of living immersed in a foreign culture and loving it. But it was hard work. We worked hard, and, as I found out later in life, we made a little bit of a difference.

Q: During the two years, did you go back to the U.S., or did you just use your time to see other places in Africa?

DICKSON: We got paid the equivalent of 300 dollars a month. We didn't have to pay rent. Gabon is a very expensive country. But still, with the 300 dollars, I was able to save

a little money. So, in between my first and second year, a friend and I took off by road and went all the way up and across Cameroon, through Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Ghana. So, we had saved enough for that. For transport, we'd hitch rides on the back of trucks. Every now and then we'd have to pay for a bus, but it was cheap. We lived in youth hostels. We managed to stretch it out and have, again, a wonderful experience.

What I noticed was how different every country is from each other. As soon as you cross the border. These were countries that were only independent for 15 or 16 years by the time I got there. It was not even 20. But the difference between Nigeria and Cameroon, Nigeria and Togo, Cameroon and Gabon, was just marked as soon as you crossed the border. So, these borders that were artificially drawn really developed different cultures and societies. That was one of my early learnings, that there's no one Africa. There are 50 different countries in Africa. Nigeria is as different from Gabon, maybe not as say the U.S., but there are just so many differences between these countries. Just crossing the border showed me that.

I stayed a third year in Gabon. I went on to be a volunteer leader in the capital and worked at the Ministry of Education as a curriculum coordinator for English teaching, doing some teacher training and writing some curricular materials, as well. There, I was asked to teach in the evenings at the American Cultural Center that was attached to the embassy. We knew of the cultural center. Even when I was in the interior, they gave us materials to take out. There were no copy machines or xerox machines or anything, so you would find something you'd want to read with the class, and you'd write it up on the blackboard. You'd run into the class and write it as quickly as you could, and then you'd teach it, and then you'd erase it.

So, some of those reading passages came from the USIA (United States Information Agency) or USIS (United States Information Service) library in Libreville. So, I knew of USIS. I did teach there in the evenings. This was my introduction to what I thought was the Foreign Service. I didn't even know what the term "Foreign Service" was, at the time, but I knew USIS. I knew about cultural centers. I thought, wow, this is great. I would love to do that. You go into the library and get to read the papers that were two weeks old and see what the baseball scores were. What greater job could there be? So, that was really the planting of the seed that this was a place I'd like to work. I was already hooked internationally, and I thought, oh, this might be a place that I'd like to aspire to.

I knew the PAO (Public Affairs Officer) there, a man named Duane Davidson. Duane came to our practice schools at training. He would hand out certificates. So, he was involved with Peace Corps, as was the ambassador, who invited us over to his house. It took great courage to have these hungry, poor, loud, and obnoxious Peace Corps volunteers who were so happy to see anything American at the time that we went over and overstayed our welcome, I'm sure. But they were very generous and patient with these 20-something year old kids in their swimming pool. They didn't do it a lot, though, I have to say.

Anyway, after my first two years, I did come home. Because I was going to stay a third year, they were going to send me home. Towards the end of my second year, somebody in the little town I worked in got a radio message saying, "Your sister is undergoing heart surgery next week. Your family wants you to come home." So, I ended the school year kind of rapidly, just before the end of the school year. It was probably a week or 10 days early. I went home. My sister had been born with a heart defect, and she was a year older than me. She had finally reached the point where her life was deteriorating so that the only alternative was to have an operation. She had tried to write me and let me know that this was happening, and I never got those letters.

So, anyway, I landed at JFK (John F. Kennedy International Airport) and I called up my father. It was a terrible phone call where he told me that she had died on the operating table. So, I wasn't able to get back in time. It's an example of the differences in communication at the time, compared to what we have now and what we're used to. She had been trying to reach me, and I had no idea. The only way to get a hold of me to let me know was from this radio in the small village that was hooked up to the capital.

Another time happened the previous year. After my West Africa trip, I got back to Libreville, and I opened up a letter from home. It was from my father, saying, "I'm feeling much better. I'm out of the hospital." I was like, what? He had written, and I was gone for six weeks on this trip. He had had a massive heart attack. Like I said earlier, I told you he was Type A and he paid for it dearly. He was 54 years old. He never worked again after that because of this. He did well. He lived a long time, and he figured out how to live, but again, for seven weeks after he had a heart attack, I had no idea. They didn't know how to reach me. I didn't tell them I was in the Ivory Coast or Togo. They would never have been able to reach me if he had died. But that's the difference between then and now, and it's not that long ago, really. People could be out of touch easily.

Q: Now, the years you were in Gabon were '76 to '79? Did any of the world events going on have any effect on you in Gabon during that time?

DICKSON: So, one of my links to the outside world was shortwave radio. So, we listened to Voice of America. They had programs in Special English, which I didn't want to listen to, but they had news. They had some cultural programs. Every evening they had a pop music program with Yvonne Barkley. I still remember her name. But some of the other people we know of in Voice of America, like Roger Guy Folly and Georges Collinet, who I later met with USIA. These were heroes in Africa that you listened to on shortwave radio on the cultural scene.

But the two things that I remember in terms of world events. Again, I learned about Africa by listening to the radio and news every evening there. The first thing was the 1976 election where Jimmy Carter won. I didn't find out right away if Carter had won. I was a huge Carter fan myself, and right away, from the very beginning when there were still eight candidates, I thought to myself wow, I like this guy. I like his smile; I like his personal approach. So, I was really happy that he did win, but it was a drawn-out affair. I was listening to it on the Voice of America. So, that was one event I do remember.

The other was the constant drumbeat about apartheid in South Africa. I heard it on the Voice of America, and I think it was during that period that Rhodesia got its independence. It was also the period I remember when Mao died. I should say that one of the things Peace Corps did that was smart – and I think they're still doing it – is that they would subscribe for us to *Time Magazine.* So, we all got a weekly magazine of these events. I could stay abreast of things. I remember the Three-Mile Island was a big event that I read about. I probably heard about it on VOA, but I read about it in *Time Magazine.* But it was apartheid and listening to African voices of concern over this major human rights issue on the continent that was overwhelming everybody.

One other thing I would say– My colleagues were also listening to their own radio, whether it was French radio or what have you. The science teacher at school was a Beninois from Benin. I remember him coming over, and we were talking about Watergate and Vietnam. He was very aware of the U.S., and he said to me, unprompted – and this stuck with me to the point where I put it in my book – "Only in America could you expose yourself, as you expose yourself with Vietnam and Watergate, to fix something, Watergate particularly, and then grow stronger through it. You open yourself up to criticism, to self-criticism. You become embroiled in it as a nation, and you grow out of it. You're stronger for it."

I was just listening to him, but it struck me, in this very small village, that this was the view of the United States from a man on the street. He was educated, but certainly not a foreign policy guy by any stretch of the imagination. But he knew America, because he lived next door to America. Everybody did. So, that was one of the things that stuck with me, this view of the United States as being willing to look inward, be introspective, fix things, and come out of it stronger. I'm hoping that's a trait we still have as a country.

Q: Certainly. Now, you mentioned, and it's intriguing, that you did get to see some benefit of your teaching later on.

DICKSON: In my Foreign Service life, or just…?

Q: Well, after you had completed these three years of teaching in Gabon, you mentioned that you had an opportunity to see that you had made some impact on Gabon.

DICKSON: Oh, yeah. It's every Peace Corps volunteer's dream – or at least it was mine – to go back to your village. So, I went back to Gabon. My first overseas assignment was Nigeria. I married a woman who had also been a volunteer in Gabon. So, when we were in Nigeria, we knew we were going to go back to Libreville and visit. So, we did, and that was nice. It was probably five years after we had left Gabon as volunteers, and we saw friends, but we didn't go into the interior. We didn't have time, and we had small children. So, we weren't about to get on a bush taxi and head down there.

But after I retired in 2010, it occurred to me in getting together with some of our cohort that we were all pretty talented people and had pretty important life experiences. We got

that way because, really, we were introduced to the international world through Peace Corps. Some of us worked for USAID (United States Agency for International Development), some of us worked for Family Health International as public health people. Some of us worked for the Defense Department. Some people worked for the Agricultural Department. There were engineers. We were all reaching retirement pretty successfully and had free time. So, we organized ourselves into a very small NGO (non-governmental organization). We affiliated ourselves and incorporated ourselves in the state of Massachusetts, and we went back to Gabon to do some projects there.

There were two main projects when I was in Gabon. One was in school construction, and the other was teaching English. We decided to renovate some of the schools that had been built even before we got there, in the 1960's, that were built by volunteers and were in total disrepair. So, the first year, we went to this village where the school was just an absolute wreck. We bought materials and hired local people and went and worked side by side with them for five weeks and fixed up the school. So, it was dramatically different than when we left.

In the course of those return visits, I had reached out to some volunteers who had built the initial school, and they sent me some photos of themselves as young, 22-year-old people. This was 2015. We're sitting on the veranda of our little house in this village of 150 people, and we befriended a woman who said she was a young girl at the time. I said, "Oh, you might be interested in these pictures."

I went and got the pictures, and she looked at them. She pointed to every single one of the seven men and remembered their names. This was 50 years later. She went through: "This is Gerry. This is Tony. This is Sam." It was such an impact that this group of Americans had in this village that she could remember playing with them, and they all… Everybody in the village knew this one guy, Jerry Anderson, as Monsieur Gerard.

It took me a few more return trips to go back to my village. I got off the train. There wasn't a train when I was there, but they had built a train to the village where I was. So, I got off the train, and I was met by some former students of mine who were all old and big and fat. Somehow, their names and memories instantly came back to me. We talked, and we went down the main street and got a beer and some brochettes. This man walked up, and somebody said, "That's your English teacher." He blurted out, "Dickson!"

Then we walked over towards the school and another guy came out. A bunch of students were walking by, and we spoke with them. Then a guy who was watching us came over, looked at me, and goes, "Dickson?"

This is just incredibly dramatic, Mark. There is a kid who I had taken in in my second year in this small village. He had no place to stay. He had been kicked out of his house. He was from an even smaller village and had come to the town where I was to go to college. He couldn't pay anybody, so he asked me if he could stay at my house. I agreed and he stayed for half a year.

So, I finally got a hold of him my last year there, which was 2019. His name was Daniel, and we agreed to meet. I have this picture of him and me on the veranda of my house. He's looking at it and he goes, "Who's that kid with you?"

I said, "That's you!"

He was a teacher and a school principal at the time. He showed me a picture and said, "You know who that is?"

I said, "No."

He says, "That's my son. Do you know his name?"

I said, "No, of course not."

He said, "His name is John Dickson."

I was like, what? He named his oldest son after me. It was unbelievable. So, I know Peace Corps changed my life and was so instrumental. I met my wife there. It moved me in the direction of a life overseas. As I said, I had no interest in international affairs before. It moved me in a direction. But I had no idea that I had an impact on other people's lives there that they would remember me as I remembered them. But that was certainly the case. So, I'm a big fan of Peace Corps. I do a fair amount of it right now with my Gabon cohorts. There's no longer any Peace Corps in Gabon, but I feel strongly about the organization. It's not an aid organization, necessarily. They do some development, but it's primarily also about the relationships that people build, just as much and even more so than the Foreign Service, I think.

Q: Yeah, because you're actually living among the people.

DICKSON: Yes. It's a different set of people. When we were in the Peace Corps, we used to look down on people in the embassy. "Oh, you don't know what's going on. You guys are out of touch. You're living in a bubble." It was only when I worked in the embassy that I realized that the embassy people have different priorities. They're interacting with a different level of people and doing different things. It's not that they don't know what's going on in the country. They might not know what's going on in a small village, but they don't care. Well, it's not that they don't care; it's just that they have a whole different set of requirements and understandings that they're supposed to be attending to. It's very different from the Peace Corps.

Q: In Gabon, were there noticeable differences between ethnic groups or linguistic groups? Was there any noticeable hostility?

DICKSON: Yes. It didn't manifest itself in violent ways. Gabon was, I would say, a very peaceful society for the most part. It's very different from a lot of other African societies in a number of ways. One was that there is a lingua franca. Most people speak French.

You don't find that in many other African countries. People know their family dialect, their language of birth. If they go to school, they might know a little bit of English or French, but in Gabon, pretty much everybody knows French. There were only a few people who I could not speak to in 2019 or in 1978. So, that's one difference with other countries.

I think one of the main reasons for that is that there were so many small ethnic groups. Nigeria had three main ethnic groups; there did turn out to be a civil war between the Igbo and the Yoruba and the Hausa, but in Gabon, just in my small town, there were two main ethnic groups. This was a town of maybe 2,000 people. So, it was divided. Everybody spoke both of their languages, Badouma and Banjabi. The Banjabi people would always say, "Oh, I don't speak Badouma well enough," but they understood everything that the Badouma would say. But everybody spoke French, too. There were other little pockets of communities, as well. Because there were so many, the need to have a lingua franca like French was there.

There is one dominant group in Gabon, the Fang. The hostility was more one of, "Oh, I don't like these people," or prejudice against these people because they were too aggressive or whatever. There's no out-and-out hostility. People intermarry. But there is a definite awareness. It's interesting. One of the things – and I see this in other ethnic or strongly tribal groups – is that every time people would go in to visit someone or meet someone, they would kind of run through the family members and see what the connection was. This is the cousin, you're the friend of my cousin. They would figure that out and then have a conversation. Even if there was nothing like, you're the friend of my cousin's aunt, they would certainly go through the greetings and figure out the connections that were there.

It was such that when we hired people when we went back to Gabon in one community, even though we had great workers, we couldn't take them to the next community because the next community needed work. They had workers there too. They spoke the same language, but they still said, "Hey, I'm a carpenter. Why are you bringing this carpenter over from this other town?" So, it wasn't, like I said, in other places in the world where you get these outright battles and violence.

There was violence in Gabon, but it was mostly directed towards foreigners. There were a lot of West Africans who came there. Gabon is a wealthy country with a lot of resources, oil and timber and manganese and uranium. So, they would hire people from West Africa. Once, when I was there, they had this purge of the West Africans. They expelled everybody from Benin. But that was really the only violence I noticed.

Q: Okay. So, now, at the end of the Peace Corps experience in 1979, you're already married?

DICKSON: No, I met my wife there my final year. Then I came back to the U.S., and she stayed one more year. She finished out her year, and I went back to visit her. We traveled

around West Africa as she left Gabon. We came home, and three months later, we were married in the States.

Q: Now that you've had this international experience and you've got the bug, so to speak, what do the two of you decide?

DICKSON: So, I came back a year ahead of time. We were already committed to marriage and a life together. My eagerness to get home was to start this life and get set up so that we weren't both coming back at the same time and struggling to look for something to do. So, I came home, and I wasn't sure I wanted to teach. So, I had this very heady experience, an important experience, where I had mastered this other culture. Then I came back, and nobody gave a shit. I'd go in and talk to people for jobs, and they'd say one question about the Peace Corps and then they did not want to hear anything else. They had other things on their mind, whether it was the Rangers' hockey game or whatever. You know it, because it happens to us in the Foreign Service. You get a glazed eye look. "Oh, here goes Mark again with his story about Costa Rica."

So, that happened with us, and I had as much culture shock coming back and facing the indifference as going abroad. It was like, oh my goodness, you have no idea what I just went through for three years and what I was able to do. It didn't matter. So, anyway, I was home a couple of months and didn't really want to teach, but that was what I had to fall back on to work and make money. So, I went back and got a job teaching high school social studies in New Jersey. I was a permanent sub. Then, when that ended, I was not guaranteed another job, but before my soon-to-be-wife came home, I had already landed a job in New Hampshire at a public-school teaching English. So, when she got back here, we both moved to New Hampshire. I went to work immediately teaching up there. I taught English in one school for a year and then moved to another school teaching social studies.

When I got home, after the Peace Corps, I right away took the Foreign Service test. So, I was working while I was waiting. So, I took the written test, and to my great surprise, I passed it. Then I took the oral test and failed miserably, principally because I didn't understand the inbox test, I think. So, I just goofed up on that totally. I remember they gave you an inbox, and you had all this paper. The guy says, "Go through this paper," and I thought he said, "Don't throw anything away," so I would scribble on a piece of paper, "No, I don't want to do this," and instead of throwing it away, I put it back in the envelope. There was all this trash in the envelope. Anyway, that's my excuse for failing the oral.

So, I was disappointed, but I knew it was hard anyway. But then I was pursuing a career in public education. My wife came back and got a master's degree in special ed, so she started working as a special ed teacher. We were both working in the same school. Then I took the test again. I also applied for a Fulbright teacher exchange. I was just really interested in going overseas and doing that. But for the Foreign Service, I did pass the oral after three years.

The difference from the first time I took the test was that I had started taking a master's degree in educational administration, thinking this was the career path for a teacher to become a school principal or whatever. So, little did I know, at the MED (Master of Education Degree), they borrow a lot from MBA (Master of Business Administration) and they do a lot of organizational work. They do a lot of finance and stuff. They actually did some simulations of inboxes, kind of like an MBA course of case studies. So, when I took the oral the next time through, I had a real understanding of what administering was meant to be. So, I think that's why I was able to pass the oral the second time through. It was largely because of this master's degree program I was in the process of finishing. I finished about a month before I joined the Foreign Service.

Q: The only question I have about this period is, you begin teaching in New Jersey. Don't the connections to Princeton help in some way, as a Princeton alum, to find places that you would actually want to work in and so on?

DICKSON: Absolutely. I would even go further than that. Certainly, when I started looking for work, I let the teacher ed program know, and they would send me what the openings were in New Jersey. I was certified to teach in New Jersey. So, I landed my job through them, or they at least advised me that there was an opening in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. So, that's why I applied to interview there.

I would say this, Mark. Princeton has opened doors for me my whole life. Period. I have no doubt about it. It's a recognized name around the world, in the Foreign Service. Again, this is the privilege of that kind of education, and I recognize that I have it. I didn't do great there. I kind of eked by with a gentleman's C, but when people hear the word Princeton, they hear Princeton.

Q: I'm also curious. What made you choose New Hampshire? Was there some advantage to that?

DICKSON: What I would say is that it was just this romantic view of New England. My parents were living in Connecticut at the time, and I just had this image of a New England town square, a beautiful white steeple. After being in New Hampshire for a couple of years, I heard people say, "You know, New Hampshire's not like Vermont." People come to New Hampshire thinking it's Vermont, but it's not. Still, we had a great time.

I worked at a great school. Both of us did, in a little town called Deerfield, New Hampshire. It was experimenting with a four-day school week. The town meeting had turned down the budget for the school, so the administration came up with this idea. Because of the energy crisis, they decided to save money by not heating the building and not driving school buses one day a week. That way, they would extend the workday a little. To me, this was an ideal work experience. I had four days a week of teaching. Teachers work all the time. Teachers work on the weekends. This allowed every teacher to have at least one day off on the weekend to recharge. The same went for the students; they were in the same boat.

So, for three years, I taught in this school that had four days a week, and the student test scores went up. They did better. Certainly, morale was higher. We had a wonderful leader, a school principal who I thought could be secretary of state. He knew how to negotiate remarkably. I also had great colleagues and so forth.

So, we ended up in New Hampshire by a fluke. Like many of our choices, we ended up backing into things, and they all seem to work out one way or another. Again, we've kept up with friends who were teachers from those three years at that time over the many years.

Q: So you take the oral exam for the Foreign Service, you pass it in 1983, and by 1984 you're beginning your career.

DICKSON: That's right, I entered as a USIS officer based almost exclusively on having been in the cultural center in Libreville and reading newspapers and thinking, ah, this is a wonderful place to work. That's where I wanted to work. I knew a little bit about some of the other cones, but not enough. I scored highest on political and USIA, on those sections. They called and asked which one. "You've been accepted on the consular or the USIA track." It wasn't even a question. I knew right away. I didn't even know what consular was. I said, "Yeah, I'll do USIA."

Q: Had your wife wanted to become a Foreign Service officer at that time?

DICKSON: Never, no. She was interested, and she also had the international bug. She got the international bug well before I did. When she was in college, she went and did a year abroad in England. So, this was something she wanted to do. She was very encouraging of me. If I had gotten a Fulbright teacher exchange, she would've tried to do that and come with me. We both loved being overseas.

Q: Now, you finish out the school year and go down to Washington?

DICKSON: Yes. We didn't know that they would move us, so we piled all our stuff in a car. We rented a station wagon or a rent-a-wreck and drove ourselves down, Beverly Hillbilly-style, to Washington. We left a lot of stuff at my parents' place. My first day, they said, "Fill out these forms to get reimbursed." I thought, what? Reimbursed? They want to pay to move me? So, it was very much a different way of operating, obviously, that I was unaware of at the time. This was summer of '84.

Q: That's interesting. I entered in June of '84, not in USIS but in the political cone.

DICKSON: Oh, wow. We must've overlapped. We did a couple of things together, the State people and us. I remember some of them went on to Lagos. I remember John Sequeira was in Lagos with us. He was a former Peace Corps volunteer from the Philippines, and I remember meeting him right away during those times we overlapped. I

think we went out to Airlie in Virginia for a weekend as two groups. So, you were in that. I think Harry Thomas was in the class and a few other stalwarts who kind of stuck out.

Q: Yeah. Of course, the thing I remember most about that orientation was the USIA skit with Patrick Linehan leading the group in a parody song of "YMCA" (Young Men's Christian Association) as "USIA".

DICKSON: Oh, that's interesting that you remember that, because I don't. But my USIA colleagues remember that, those who were in the same class. Patrick was a graduate of Gilbert and Sullivan plays out in Wisconsin and was a very wonderful and funny guy.

Q: That's fine. What was your orientation like?

DICKSON: We had approximately the same amount of training in Washington during that JOT period that you did, and we overlapped for a few weeks. It was an introduction to the Agency and different offices and things like that. Then, people moved on. They got their assignments. They were called JOTs, at the time. You would then spend whatever time you needed for language, and then you'd go off to your first post. Sometimes, you would spend a year just doing rotations in that post. Some of my fellow classmates did that. They went to Uruguay and Brazil and went through the embassy offices, a month here and two months there, and then moved on right away to a different post as a press officer or cultural officer.

My experience was a little different. I don't know how you did your bidding during your assignment, but they gave us a list of like 27 posts. I wanted to go to Africa, and there were five African posts on it, four of which I really wanted to go to and the fifth being Lagos. I had been to Lagos. I knew the chaos of Lagos. But I thought that I couldn't say, really, I wanted to be an Africanist and not put Lagos somewhere higher than last. I have a feeling that one of the reasons that they decided to have us rank order was that they really needed a junior officer in Lagos. They knew that nobody would put Lagos in their top five if they only had people rank five. So, I put four African posts, one, two, three, four. I think I put Lagos as 11, 12, or 13. Everybody else put Lagos 27. So, for my great Peace Corps sins, I got Lagos. We were disappointed, to say the least, and scared, quite frankly. Again, I had spent a week in Lagos on my trip after the first year of Peace Corps. It's chaotic.

We went there for a first tour, and it worked out. It was one of those things, like I said, where we backed into it and we had no idea. It was a great assignment. It was chaotic, and our best stories are from Lagos, in terms of just, can you believe that happened? It didn't all happen to us. People used to say to us, "What was your favorite post?"

My wife had the best answer. She said, "We liked them all. We worked hard to embrace them all and where we were living, to find out what was unique and interesting about that post. We embraced it. We had to. We were living there for years." So, we did that in Lagos, and what was unique about that… Maybe we're going ahead further than you wanted to today, but the Nigerians are incredibly talented, very open and honest and

aggressive people. We had dinner parties where Nigerians would be standing up shouting at each other, almost at fisticuffs, arguing. They loved an argument. It was almost like lawyers who argue just to practice and hone their skills. Then they'd sit down and have a meal together and walk out arm in arm as best friends. But they would go through this discussion.

It was very rich culturally, historically, socially, and an incredibly vibrant country. Difficult? Yes, on a number of levels. We didn't realize how the embassy would protect us and we'd be living in a bubble. They brought in a water truck twice a day and pumped in water so that we would have running water. We had generators. I had no idea that that was going to be part of the score. They took care of us, no doubt about it.

Q: Just one question before we go into any more detail about Nigeria. As part of being a Junior Officer Trainee in USIA, did they also send you around to the different offices in Washington for a few weeks to see how backstop officers work and so on?

DICKSON: Not necessarily. One of the odd things… One of their requirements was that everybody who was in Washington had to be off language probation before you went to your first post. Now, I went to Lagos, and I didn't get a 3/3 in French when I tested. I had a 2+/2+. So, they gave me six weeks of French to just get up to 3/3, even though I never used French in the Foreign Service until the end when I was in Canada. Very rarely did I have to use any French in Canada. It was important to have, for obvious reasons, given how sensitive the Quebecois are. But I had six weeks of French to get off language probation.

Then, Mark, what happened was that we had showed up to training in June, and on our way to training, we found out that my wife was pregnant. What I was later told by the man who ran training was, "Had we known your wife was pregnant, you wouldn't have joined that class. We would have waited." So, there's a fait accompli: we're there with an 18-month-old son and a pregnant wife. They waited for her to give birth and waited just long enough. The waiting period between my finishing French and our departure was about three months, and that's when I went and did some TDY (temporary duty assignment) in both the AF (Bureau of African Affairs) area office and in the predecessor of ECA (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs). I spent some time there.

Q: Interesting.

DICKSON: We were the only people in our class with a baby. So, you know what that's like. We were consumed by having this 18-month-old baby. I have my daughter here now with an 18-month-old son. You can't do anything else. We made good friends among our classmates, but we were in two separate worlds. People were doing things together that we couldn't possibly do. It wasn't that we didn't try to, but every time we would go someplace with an 18-month-old, he naturally limited our interactions. I remember that at the swearing in ceremony, my little boy threw his milk bottle at the director of USIA who had just sworn us in. He threw it on the floor, and it came this close to hitting him. That was Charlie Wick.

So, anyway, some of our classmates – and you'll appreciate this – used to call us the "walking Planned Parenthood couple," because they would look at us and say, "Oh, we're not going to have kids if that's what it's like." They all went on to have kids, but that was our nickname for our training.

Q: I completely understand. Everyone in the early years of their work in the Foreign Service knows couples that have infant children. They are just barely managing the first few months to come to work and deal with the baby and all of that. Yes, it's very difficult.

DICKSON: One thing we noticed throughout our career was that the people who are our closest friends in the embassies, and even outside, were people who had children our children's ages. So, our best friends in Lagos in the embassy were people who had babies. One of them, in fact, was Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who's now the UN ambassador. She was our next-door neighbor. She had a two-year-old, and we had a two-year-old, and we were tight friends for a year and did a lot together, obviously never knowing that she would serve in the Cabinet. We kept up a little over the years. We'd bump into each other every now and then. When we went to Peru and our kids were in middle school, our best friends were parents of middle school kids. It just worked out that way. We see it now with my son, who's in Brazil at the embassy. He's got small children, and his best friends in the embassy are people with small kids.

The adjustment from teaching at a small school in New Hampshire to working at a large embassy in Africa was a little abrupt. I really had a wonderful teaching experience in Deerfield at this four day a week school. It was hard to break away. I loved the teachers. I thought they were the best in the world. I said this principal could've been Secretary of State. There were tears when I left.

Then we're in Lagos. We're living in a five-story apartment building with two babies. There's just no green around. My son almost fell out the window of this apartment, one day. He had crawled up on a bureau. My wife was more than miserable. I was going off to work. In this, we get a letter from my school principal. This was a year after we had left, the summer of '85. He says, "You're welcome to come back." Like, wow. "Just say the word, and the job is yours."

We went over to the embassy and tried to place a call to him to say that we were coming, and we wanted out. We both went to bed that night thinking we were leaving, but in the course of the night, we each changed our mind. We both woke up saying, "No, we'll stay." So, we're happy we never made the call, and the call didn't get through. That was an international telephone, at the time. But it was such that we were ready to hang it all up right away. We did not know, as we did not know many things, that they would've made us pay back the year of training, a year of moves, a year of all of that. That wasn't part of the equation. Had it been, we wouldn't have ever considered it.

Shortly after, we moved into a different compound where there was grass and trees and a playground, and things worked out. But in those initial weeks, it didn't work out. So, that's the story I would leave it at. We almost left, and we're glad we didn't.

Earlier you asked about Junior Officer training, and I had mentioned that I did language training for six weeks to get off language probation. I neglected to say that I also joined a two-week area studies class. I enjoyed that very much. I remember the man who ran it. His name was John Collier. He was a good academic. He did it for many years and brought in a lot of academics. I was going to Nigeria, but this was all Africa area studies.

Nevertheless, one of the things that struck me, towards the end of my career, was really how inadequate the area studies was. He did the best job he could in the circumstances, but to try to prepare people going off to Foreign Service jobs, whether it's officers or specialists or people from other agencies, it's just not enough to really have a good background. It's two weeks on the whole continent. I was going to Nigeria. I don't remember any specific class about Nigeria. It was a survey class on economics, foreign policy. One of the things that I became interested in and noticed towards the end of my career was how little history we as officers and me particularly – I can only speak to my personal experience – did have.

I went to Africa. I went to Lagos. I had served in the Peace Corps for three years, and I read a lot in the Peace Corps. I thought I was Mr. Africa when I joined the Foreign Service. I knew a lot about it, but I knew only one piece of it, one slice of it. There was so much more. Obviously, I was not an Africanist by any measure, in terms of study. So, again, he did the best he could. He gave us reading lists. He expected, as the Foreign Service does, that each of us would then continue our own investigation, research on our own. I think it's hit and miss. As I learned later, once I got into Nigeria and thought about things many years later, it was very hit and miss. There was a lot more that could've been done had we been given either more than two weeks or a little more time to delve into the history of U.S. relations in each of the countries we went to.

Q: Since you mentioned it, you served in the Peace Corps in French-speaking Africa. Of course, the French had been the colonial power. Then, you moved to Nigeria, where the British had been the colonial power. Looking back on that now, what were, if any, the most important or salient differences left over from those two different colonial backgrounds?

DICKSON: That's a great question. All I can do, Mark, is give you impressions, impressionistic experiences and not related to any formal study or deep dive. So, my experience was, in the French countries, in Gabon with the Peace Corps and then in other countries, the French were still there and still present. In many ways, they were kind of behind the curtain running big pieces of the country. In Gabon and a few other countries that I did travel to, there was a sizable French military presence. I worked in the Peace Corps in the Ministry of Education for a French man who was running the curriculum development at the Ministry of Education. So, they were there and present. You saw them. They had their little oases of French culture in the capital, whether it was certain

restaurants or beach places that they would go to. You'd go to some of these hotels on the beaches on a Sunday, and they'd be just packed with French.

Now, in Nigeria, I did not see or remember much of a British presence at all, outside of the British High Commission that was there. We had very little contact with them. The Nigerians were definitely in charge. In every ministry, everybody we were in touch with was Nigerian. They had been for a while. So, I think there was much more of a handover in Nigeria. I saw the same thing in Ghana during my travels. Whatever all of that meant, it meant difficulties, transition difficulties. In Ghana, there was a serious – and in Nigeria, too – financial crisis. The French-speaking countries were tied to the French franc. Their Central African and West African francs were tied to the French franc, so they floated, but in Nigeria, there was a black market in currency. There was an official exchange rate that nobody except the American embassy abided by.

So, there were those kinds of big differences between the legacy that I saw. Again, this was only impressionistic. Certainly, you get out of Lagos and there's no British presence at all, as far as I could see. There were other things that were, I think, different in Nigeria. There was a rollicking press, aggressive, elbows out. In French-speaking countries, there was one paper that was government-run, and it was like that for newspapers, television, radio. In Nigeria, it was a free-for-all, and it was a wonderful climate for that, even though, at the time, it was military rule. They had had a flirtation with democracy before, in the late '70s, and then the military took over because of some of the chaos. It did not return to democratic rule until much later, in the '90s.

There were other vestiges. There was a very good university system. There were great universities. The other vestige that I noticed was that everybody had a family member who had been to the U.S. I didn't know what was going on. But in the 1970's, when Nigeria was an oil-rich country, many of their university people had their own very good universities, but they also sent students to the U.S. So, I remember traveling in the interior of Nigeria and going into somebody's house. They invited me in as I was walking down the street, and they showed us a picture of their son who was a graduate of a U.S. university. It turns out that in the late '70s, prior to the Ayatollah taking over the Iranian Revolution, the Iranians and the Nigerians had the largest student populations of any foreign students in the U.S. Then, when the naira (Nigerian currency) crashed and the oil bubble burst, all of that ended to a large extent for Nigeria, for sure. Obviously for Iran, after the revolution, the number of students coming to the U.S. was much lower.

Q: Let's begin your tour as a junior officer in Nigeria. What were your responsibilities?

DICKSON: So, after training and that rotation that we talked about, three months of rotation, I ended up being an assistant cultural officer in charge of programs. We had a pretty large cultural section; there were three Americans, three ACAOs (assistant Cultural Affairs officer) and a CAO (Cultural Affairs officer), a cultural attaché. We divided it up between exchanges, a library/cultural center, and programs. Halfway through my tour, I ended up taking responsibility for the programs and took over the cultural center. It was not the library, but the center. In the center we had a big multipurpose room with a big

auditorium, and we would do programs there of all kinds. We did plays, music, video conferences with our satellite dishes that we had installed. So, three or four times a month, there was some activity going on in the cultural center. For the programs, we would invite Americans to come to Nigeria, like academics. They were called American Participants, or AmParts, and they were on speaker programs. We brought over academics who were Africanists in political science. We brought over journalists who taught journalism. We brought sculptors, artists, and theater people.

Q: What about sports?

DICKSON: I was also the sports officer. It was really a very lively, hard-working job, principally because the phones didn't work. So, to organize anything meant getting in the car, going out to the university once a week or so, and hoping that people would be in their offices. Then I'd say, "Oh, we've got this journalism professor from the University of Missouri who's coming out. Would you be interested in us organizing him to come out and do a little lecture for your class or your department?" I'd go out with three or four of these and catch two people in their offices, organize something, and then go back again the next week and hopefully catch the other two people.

But it was kind of fun, because we had cars and drivers for USIS. Everybody was doing the same thing, so I'd go down and try to get a car to take me out to the University of Lagos and there'd be nobody there. Or, I'd just hop in my own car. It was a great way for me to see and find my way around this very chaotic city without GPS (global positioning system) and backroads, trying to figure out shortcuts and so forth. And I did, and that was nice.

Q: Lagos is notorious for terrible traffic.

DICKSON: Yeah. There were certain bridges I knew to avoid, and I had workarounds. You know, one thing, Mark, that happened in the very short time I was there – I was there a little more than two years. To get off the main island and onto the mainland, there were a couple of bridges. What had happened was that there was enough of a depressed economy that people gave up driving. The number of cars on the roads was less. It made it easier for me, but it was a lot harder for Nigerians. But still, there were times of day that were very chaotic.

The USIS building and cultural center were housed on the main island, Lagos Island, right in the middle of a big traffic center. It used to be the embassy building and was the center of Lagos Island. There was an intersection right outside without any traffic lights or policemen directing. It was just amazing that it actually worked, and you could get home. Traffic was crossing. But it was right outside my window, the cars honking and the hawkers shouting. We did have air conditioning, but the noise came through. It was a beautiful old colonial building right in the middle of Lagos, and it was a great spot for a cultural center, for people to pop in and go to the library. It was a very active library and center. We did a lot of, as I mentioned, programs, but they were fully subscribed.

Q: One thing I found in countries with hot climates is that if your cultural center or library had air conditioning, you would have a much higher level of attendance.

DICKSON: Yes, but the clientele is not always the one you want. That's an issue for U.S. libraries as well, particularly up here in the northeast. People who have no heat or are homeless end up in the public library during the course of the day. So, in Nigeria, we got a few people like that. But overall, it was surprising how many other people came into the library and how many testaments we had from professors who first were introduced to the United States in that library as children and learned and went on to study in the U.S. and then came back and took up positions of responsibility in Nigeria.

Q: From Lagos, did you have responsibilities outside in the countryside, in the other provinces?

DICKSON: Yes. We had branch posts in Kaduna, in Ibadan, and in Kano. While I was there, they closed the post in Kano, which was, I think, mostly a budget and a little bit of a security issue. But there was no other American official presence in Kano, so it was a difficult decision, as Kano is an important city and was not anywhere near the kind of security risk that northern Nigeria has now. There weren't those kinds of problems. But we had a consulate in Kaduna. Ibadan was a branch post largely because they have one of the most important universities in all of sub-Saharan Africa, which was the University of Ibadan. So, that had been a traditional place for a small American library and presence, as well.

They had responsibility there, but I would work with them on programs if we had a speaker coming in. They might say, "Oh, I'll take someone who's coming. If he's coming to Lagos for a week, add on two days and I'll program him or her up here." But in the east of Nigeria, where just a few years earlier there had been a civil war – that had been the focus of the civil war – we had no presence at all there. So, one of our efforts was to do a lot of programming in eastern Nigeria. There were, again, very important universities and important people, both to the independence of Nigeria and in Nigeria's academia and literature. Chinua Achebe taught at one of the universities.

So, we did a fair amount, which meant a lot of travel for me in all different kinds of things, from the arts to political science. We did, one week, an American week out in Enugu, which is the capital of one of the three or four provinces out there. So, we took out a sculptor and a theater group. We had an art opening. We had a music group out there, bluegrass music, if you can imagine. There was actually an interest in bluegrass in sub-Saharan Africa. So, that was, again, a tremendous amount of work to set up because of no phones. It meant a lot of air travel ahead of time just to organize things. But people were very eager and hungry for American things, connections and contact.

Q: How did you evaluate the programs?

DICKSON: So, a lot of it was anecdotal. Evaluation has always been, as you know, because you were in Public Diplomacy, a tough thing to really get a handle on. It wasn't

any easier then, but people were always trying to figure it out. We would evaluate by the numbers of people who attended. I would put comments in the evaluation. I was very honest. I kind of got a reputation for showing the good and the bad of any program and speakers, people who didn't connect. I think an evaluation is important for that, too. If they brought someone out who really had nothing to say or was a drone, they didn't want to send that person anywhere else.

I talk about, in the book that I wrote, George Foreman coming to Lagos. I kind of backed into being the sports and youth officer because I was young and I was interested in sports, so they threw it my way. I enjoyed it very much. It really opened up a wonderful side of Nigeria to me, and I thought it was a great way to connect with large numbers of Nigerians. Sports had started out as a program principally over the boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980, and then the Soviet boycott of the LA (Los Angeles) Olympics. So, all of a sudden, we started interacting with these international Olympic teams from all around the world to try to convince them to come to LA and not join the boycott by Moscow. One of the ways we sweetened the pot to convince them was that we would send coaches over to help as they trained their athletes.

So, I didn't get to Nigeria and start until 1985, after the LA Olympics, but by then, the sports program was up and running. We had a very small office in Washington doing this. We kept doing sports programming, reaching out. It was important for other reasons, too. The head of the Nigerian Olympic team was a wonderful man, and he and I connected really well. His name was Abraham Ordia, Chief Abraham Ordia. He was also very active in the anti-Apartheid movement. So, at the time, this was 1985 and 1986, right at the height of constructive engagement with South Africa. He hated our policy, and we just had tremendous arguments, but very civil arguments. Afterwards, we'd do sports. He would not miss an opportunity to go over race discrimination in South Africa every time we met, but we had a great relationship. He was a friend. He was many years older than I and very well-respected.

But my point is that you use something – and you know this, Mark – like sports to talk about other areas of interest in both countries. He was very influential in the anti-Apartheid movement in Nigeria, as well.

Q: Now, at this time, did your wife want to work, and did she work?

DICKSON: We had a two-year-old son, and we had a six-week-old daughter, when we arrived. So, she was working, raising these two children. She ended up actually doing some tutoring while we were there, but it was out of our house and just for a couple of hours a week. She was a special education teacher, and she had strategies to help students who were having a hard time learning, so she found a niche there and in other places as well. Then, she and some of her baby group friends actually started a small preschool there. We were involved with that. My son was four by the time we left, so there was a small preschool we were involved in organizing and getting off the ground.

Q: Interesting. Yeah. Were there large VIP (very important person) visits that you had to help assist?

DICKSON: Yes, but I was enough out of the mainstream that I did not get involved. So, George Schultz came to Nigeria when I was there. Because I was a cultural officer, because there was a large enough embassy, and because it wasn't a presidential visit but a short secretary of State visit, they had enough people to draw on and tap into. This often happens, Mark, and you will know this, these fly-in visits. Schultz was wonderful. We all know that George Schultz is one of the great secretaries of States. But there are oftentimes these incidents that happen with these visits long after the secretary or the president has left. There was one here that was totally embassy responsible.

There was an altercation at the airport between an embassy control officer and the Nigerians. The embassy officer was a military guy. He was so adamant that some airport movement had to be done his way, whether it was the departure of the secretary or where they put the stanchions or something, that he actually punched a Nigerian, his counterpart. So, many times on these visits, the Americans leave and think, oh, we got a lot accomplished, but then for three or four weeks afterwards, we're cleaning up. Again, in this case, it was totally self-inflicted on the part of the embassy, but it soured an otherwise very good visit.

Now, I watched that from afar and was aghast that that would happen. But it helped later in my career when I was involved in many more visits. I remember specifically George W. Bush's advance team, in the last meeting before the president arrived, said, "This is our plan. It's not going to go like this, and it doesn't have to go like this." So, they said, "Remember, this is about the good relations between the United States and Mexico. Don't do anything to make this plan work if it's going to sour relations." I thought that was incredibly mature and flexible. Sure enough, right away, when the president landed that day, the long motorcade departure from the airport was doing figure eights on the tarmac. It was just chaos. But nobody got upset, including the president himself, as far as I knew.

So, that was my only real big visit, except for George Foreman. I write about George Foreman in my book as one example because as interested as Nigerians were, they were also holding him to a higher standard in the visit. This visit was in between Foreman's boxing career. He had a first and a second career. At the time, he had lost both to Ali in Kinshasa, the rumble in the jungle, and he had lost a second fight. Then he dropped out of boxing and kind of hit rock bottom, and he ended up starting a storefront church in Houston as an evangelist preacher at a very micro level. That's where our sports office in Washington found him. They thought, oh, here's a guy who can give clinics. Not only could he give clinics, but he could talk about, not religious things, but personal responsibility and taking care of yourself and dusting yourself off from defeat and all of the above. He did that, and he was great that way, combining the boxing with this other message. He gave that message to youth groups; he gave it in churches; he gave it to schools. Then he had some clinics.

But the very first day, as often we did with these visits, we had a press briefing. We introduce our speakers to the press to kind of drum up interest. People already knew he was coming, and because of that fight in Kinshasa, he was a well-known figure already. Of course, the Nigerians don't talk about boxing. They bring up race, and they bring up South Africa. So, in the first briefing, they asked a few softball questions, but then they asked him what he thought about politics. They kept trying to trap him in criticizing Ronald Reagan's constructive engagement, and he wouldn't go there.

Finally, he got frustrated, and he said, "I've been around boxing for 20 years. There's been a lot of improvements in gloves and equipment and training. But you know what hasn't changed? The press. They still want to find…" He started criticizing the media in a way that wasn't really harsh, but anybody who does a lot of media knows that you don't get into fights with the media right in front of you because you're going to lose. They've got the pen. Then he went on to say, and I quote him, in my book, "I'm not a Black man or a White man. I'm a human, and that's the way I look at it." Well, the next day, the headlines were, "Foreman: 'Not a Black man'." So, that was the quote they took out of it mischievously because he wouldn't criticize constructive engagement or President Reagan.

So, in the book, I go into how the Nigerians were really at a different level of understanding our history, the American history, than I was. There was another incident. This was the time when the Martin Luther King holiday was approved in the United States. It had been a long effort to get it approved (much longer than for Juneteenth this past summer). It was many years in the making with many people involved. So, once it was approved, and on the eve of the very first Martin Luther King holiday, we thought, what are we going to do to mark this holiday here in Nigeria and really showcase it? So, we thought we would do one of these satellite video conferences with Stevie Wonder, because he had been very involved in advocating for the holiday and had written and performed a song about the holiday. So, he agreed; he was more than happy to do this video conference with Nigeria. So, we had a little press conference ahead of time saying, "This is what we're going to be doing for the holiday, including this video with Stevie Wonder. We're so proud of the United States for setting aside a day for the country to mark and honor King."

Then, one of the Nigerian journalists interrupted and said, "Well, why do you push King? Why don't you push Malcolm X." Uh oh. First of all, they knew Malcolm X, and secondly, what I didn't know at the time – and could have and maybe should have – was that Malcolm X had actually come to Nigeria in the early 1960's. He had made a huge splash in Nigeria. King never went to Nigeria, as far as I know. One of the things that I later found out, when I was doing my graduate research, was that one of the messages Malcolm had in Nigeria was, don't believe American government officials talking about progress on race in the United States. That was exactly what we were doing with the Martin Luther King holiday. We were government officials talking about progress on race in the United States. They remembered Malcolm X and his visit. So, because I didn't have that background, and none of my colleagues did either, as far as I knew. Such an experience was, to me, what I would later come to call a bit of a history shock. I was

shocked that they had this history, and I did not. It really got in the way of what we were trying to accomplish with our Nigerian counterparts.

Well, the Stevie Wonder thing went off smoothly and was just a huge hit, so it wasn't a long-term issue, but this Malcom X and King conversation we had kind of stuck in my mind. We were dealing with people who remember different histories.

Q: Even with the Martin Luther King holiday, a lot of the opponents… Well, there were opponents to the holiday, and some of the opponents said, "Oh, he had a communist as one of his advisors, so King was actually a crypto-communist," and that was why he didn't deserve a holiday. That was at least one of the arguments. Even when Reagan signed the holiday, it was grudgingly. I remember him saying, "Well, maybe he was and maybe he wasn't. History will show." I was in my 20's at the time, and I thought a president could not be more begrudging in signing a national holiday than that.

DICKSON: Yeah, I remember that, too. I remember that he had opposed it, I think, for many years. I wrap it all up in the anti-Apartheid issue at the time. Why did he approve it? Maybe it was to burnish his credentials, because he had this constructive engagement policy. Why did we promote it in Nigeria so hard, as we did? Because of national pride, but also because we wanted to show Nigerians that while there were race challenges and issues in the United States, we were moving in the right direction, and we shouldn't be put in the same boat as the Apartheid regime in South Africa. There was a way to move forward after a difficult and contentious racial period. So, those were our subtexts, at the time.

Again, people loved the program. The place was packed for Stevie Wonder, and he was great. Just by chance, the satellite connection worked. Nine times out of 10, it didn't work and was always a big disappointment and very tense and stressful. But it worked, and he sang a little and talked a little. So, it was just a wonderful experience, all in all. But there was this precursor incident. It wasn't a big thing, but something small that I held in the back of my mind.

Q: Yeah. I've asked you about the usual general things, but often, in a first tour, officers have unique experiences outside of their usual responsibilities. These could be as a duty officer, or just something out of the clear blue sky that you wouldn't have expected.

DICKSON: Yes, there are anecdotes like that. We had a wonderful group of junior officers because it was such a large post. People from our class, your class and my class, were there, and there was just a steady stream. It was kind of a training post for many people. Our next-door neighbor – we moved to a compound – I think I mentioned was a second tour political officer named Linda Thomas-Greenfield. She had a two-year-old daughter who was our son's age, and we had a year together there and a lot of interaction as parents. So, that would be one thing, just fun things we did together. She now talks about gumbo diplomacy; well, she had George Foreman over for gumbo diplomacy in her house, as well as a number of other gumbo fetes.

The one anecdote I remember – and this really showed my ignorance – is that it took me several tours to really realize I wasn't in the Peace Corps anymore. I was a State Department officer. We had a little bit of a vacation, so my wife and I decided to go back to Gabon. We had a friend who was in Congo-Brazzaville, so we did a couple of trips with West Africa or Africa Air or something back there. So, on one trip, we got back to Lagos after a wonderful long weekend away, and we were the last flight in before they shut the airport and there was a coup that night.

So, I didn't know. We got home fine. We had an embassy car pick us up and take us home and woke up the next day to Linda knocking on our door. She said, "There's been a coup." She was a political officer. I thought, wow. She said, "Nobody's going in to work. Just stay home. This is a day off." I thought, oh, wow, I could get some work done. So, I went into the office. The roads were clear. I drove right in and spent four or five hours working at what was then our Wang computer terminal.

A little bit later, my boss comes in and says, "What are you doing here?"

I said, "Oh, I just thought that this was a good opportunity to catch up on some work. I was away."

"Go home. There's a coup!"

It was a bloodless coup. There were no cars on the streets, so it was great traffic, getting back home. So, it wasn't anything like that. But as a stupid first tour officer, I just did not know. When there's a coup, you don't know what the ramifications could have been in that kind of thing. So, that was one anecdote that I remember learning.

The other thing was this business of being a Peace Corps volunteer and being a State Department officer. I just remember opening up our house to Fulbright students who were coming in from the interior, and it was kind of… That's what we did in the Peace Corps. You took in people who were in need. In fact, I was at the embassy one day, and there was a guy at the gate, an African American. He looked at me and said, "Do I know you?"

I said, "I don't know."

He said, "You were in Gabon just a couple of months ago."

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Yeah, I was there. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Gabon, and I've just gotten robbed in Nigeria and I'm trying to get out. What can I do?" So, we invited him home. This kind of open house we took as par for the course in the Peace Corps, but it took us a while to realize that it was probably not the smartest thing, security-wise. We wanted to be nice and helpful to people. But anyway, that was just one example; there were other examples of wanting to be Peace Corps when I was really representing the country in a very different way.

Q: Yeah. Okay. So, you're there. It's a two-year tour, but you begin thinking about where you're going to go next relatively early.

DICKSON: Yeah. My wife and I had both had African experience. We liked sub-Saharan Africa and we wanted to spend our career there. So, we only bid on places in sub-Saharan Africa. I was assigned as PAO (Public Affairs officer) to Bangui, Central African Republic.

Q: I'm sorry, this will be what year now?

DICKSON: It was '86 when I was assigned. So, at about the same time of being assigned, we noticed that my son was having health issues, and we didn't really know what was going on. He would wake up in the night having trouble breathing, coughing. The doctor, a very good embassy doctor, said, "Let's get him back to the U.S. It looks like asthma." So, my wife went back with him. He was medevaced, and sure enough, he had asthma. When the embassy in Bangui found out that this four-year-old boy might be coming with a healthy case of asthma, they said, "No, we don't have the medical wherewithal to help if there's an attack," and so forth.

So, they pulled my assignment, and they said, "Here are some other places where you would be eligible." Specifically, they said PAO in Lesotho and branch PAO in Durban. Not really wanting anything to do with Apartheid, we put Lesotho down as our preference, and they assigned us to Durban. Quite frankly, that made all the difference, career-wise, for us to be in South Africa. Sure, Nigeria was the stepping stone for us to get to Durban and run this small cultural center in Durban, at a time of tremendous upheaval in change in South Africa. People couldn't believe that they put me down there as a second-tour officer, but somebody must've taken a risk.

So, we came back. My wife had a third child in 1987. We left Lagos, and they wouldn't let us get to Durban right away. The man who was in Durban wasn't going to be leaving until March of '88, so we had this long eight- or nine-month period when my wife gave birth and I had time to wait for this man who was PAO in Durban to leave. So, I spent time in the area office of USIA on the South Africa desk working with the desk officer. She gave me a lot of good projects to dig my teeth into, and also, I did my own background reading into this very complicated issue of Apartheid.

I talked to a lot of people in and out of government about going to South Africa, colleagues. I specifically remember one man who had been a cultural attaché in Pretoria. He said, "Don't go to South Africa thinking anything is going to change. Nothing will ever change there." So, I was scheduled to arrive in March of '88, and I thought, okay, that's good advice. Sure enough, on the plane down, after eight months in the U.S., they had opened parliament in Cape Town and Bishop Tutu had led a march opposing Apartheid in general. They greeted the march with water cannons, and Tutu who was a Nobel recipient at the time, and others, and they arrested people left and right. So, this was what we kind of walked into, knowing that there were all kinds of anti-Apartheid and

government action to prevent any change when we arrived, for sure. It was also right in the middle of the policy of constructive engagement, although there had been a very strong anti-Apartheid disinvestment campaign in the U.S., marches in front of the embassy and here in Washington.

So, it was very much on the radar screen in Washington. In fact, Congress had passed sanctions on South Africa over President Reagan's veto. He had vetoed it, so they passed it over the veto. Right before we had arrived, again, one of the things Reagan did to try to blunt this anti-Apartheid movement in the U.S., to take pressure off the political hit that he was taking, was to appoint an African American as our ambassador to South Africa. He first looked to a man named Terence Todman, who was our ambassador in Denmark. He turned it down and was very vocal; I was surprised. He was very public about saying that he would not take it. Then, Edward Perkins took the job and just did an unbelievable job in a very difficult environment, representing the United States at a time of sanctions against the country with a White-run government. He really straddled everything very well.

Q: Now, when you arrive in Durban, what's the size of your operation?

DICKSON: Very small. We had a consulate and a cultural center on the same floor of the 29th building in downtown Durban. So, we had these magnificent views of the Durban harbor and all of Durban. It's a beautiful city; people called it the Miami of South Africa. There was a lot of surfing. There was a consul general and two other Americans on the consulate side. I was in an office and library through a side door. I was the only official American in the public diplomacy office. We had four South Africans working on our side – a librarian, a cultural assistant, and an admin assistant, and a driver/jack of all trades kind of guy. There was a local hire American who did educational advising a couple of days a week.

We ran a lot of programs there, but we were small enough that we really had to focus on just a handful of areas that we would work on. I remember that one of them was education, and another was the arts, and particularly jazz music. We also worked on whatever we could do that was related to civil rights at the time. So, those were my three areas of concentration. We did a lot in those areas.

It was a good time, Mark, because in the beginning, there were bombs going off in the city. There were anti-Apartheid meetings. They would call up the consulate and say, "We would like somebody from the consulate to come over and just be present," so that if they saw diplomats in the crowd, they wouldn't try to run roughshod over the people who were protesting in one form or another.

One of the areas that was really off-limits for repression were the churches. So, the churches kind of became a site for anti-Apartheid protests. A lot of times, there would be meetings in churches that had nothing to do with religion but everything to do with people voicing their own opinion. The government, whether it was the military or other forces, kind of left those things to happen. Church groups ran organized demonstrations

in the city. But they wanted a member of the consulate there. So, I remember going to a lot of these activities all along, throughout the first year and a half we were there, when it was really pretty strict Apartheid rules.

Q: Lesotho is quite close to Durban, and I had heard that at that time, a number of Lesotho citizens came for work in Durban. Did you work with our mission in Lesotho?

DICKSON: No. It was really quite a world apart. Lesotho was a mountainous regime and almost inaccessible from the Natal province. It was very difficult to drive there to get into the mountains. I'm sure there were passes, but they were almost impassable for large parts of the year. People who went to Lesotho, even from Johannesburg, were flying in. Did you ever serve in South Africa?

Q: No, I've interviewed a lot of people from USAID (United States Agency for International Development) who worked there and learned some of the development issues that way. They had always talked about how, even during the Apartheid era, Lesotho citizens would go into South Africa for work. South Africans knew that, and there was tension sometimes.

DICKSON: Yes. It wasn't just Lesotho. That was from all over the other countries in South Africa because of the mining operations specifically in other areas. There wasn't a lot of mining in the Durban area, but there were hostels for factories. These were single men hostels. I had only one occasion, really, to have anything to do with them, but you would pass by and see them. You knew they were working in the local factories, whatever those factories were.

That was just a wonderful, incredibly memorable evening, Mark, because you will know that Ladysmith Black Mambazo, which Paul Simon pulled into international recognition but was already very much a nationally recognized group that nobody knew about. That was the incredible thing about Apartheid. It was very successful in keeping races apart. There was this whole movement of choral groups out of the single men hostels that worked, and this is where Ladysmith began. Ladysmith is part of Natal; it's a city in Natal, and a lot of the people were Zulu speakers.

The one time I got into a hostel, I was invited, as a member of the consulate, to go watch a competition of these choral groups that was run by Joseph Shabalala, the head of Ladysmith Black Mambazo. He was the judge and organizer. Mary and I were there until the wee hours of the morning, and we still left way before anybody else. This would go on all night long, these competitions. It was just beautiful, these groups that would come in. They were all factory workers, but they would be impeccably dressed with jackets over their heads, singing and dancing and everybody trying to outdo each other. It was very much appreciated in this very huge hall, with everybody watching, as a capella groups would come in. So, that was my experience with these single men hostels.

That was probably after Mandela had been released, that that took place. Before he was released, I'm sure there were competitions, but they might not have been as prominent,

because this was after Paul Simon and Graceland, when I went. But what we did in USIS, music was a big part of. I think it was a way to address anti-Apartheid issues in a way that was nonconfrontational.

The university had a music program, but they had just set up a jazz department, and they hired Dave Brubeck's son, Darius Brubeck. So, he was in the town when I arrived. He had been working to teach jazz to all races in this university. So, I thought this was a real angle for the cultural center during a cultural boycott when some of the other things we tried to do culturally would run into the cultural boycott. "Why would you do this? You're breaking the cultural boycott." But he was somehow able to maneuver his way to have this program, and we brought musicians and teachers of jazz to his department. We got involved with the jazz scene through him. We quoted Thelonious Monk who said, "Jazz is freedom."

So, that was, again, an exciting slice of what we were doing in South Africa at the time. And I think it helped. I think it did help, ultimately.

Q: South Africa is very far away in terms of you being able to get people to come down there and do things from the U.S. Was the developing telecommunications getting better for being able to do things by satellite or television and so on?

DICKSON: It's a great question, Mark, because USIA, at the time, was still very eagerly trying to put up satellite dishes in all of the cultural centers. Right when I arrived, they had put their focus, because of the anti-Apartheid movement, on getting these up and going in South Africa. Now, I told you, our offices were on the 29th floor of a 30-story building. So, we had these two guys come in – the Moore brothers, we called them; I forget their first names – and they were installing dishes around the world, so they came to Durban and installed a dish on the top of this skyscraper. It was one of the tallest buildings in Durban and is, again, right on the coast.

Within a very brief amount of time – fortunately, it was a Sunday – the dish fell off the roof. As much as they had tied it down. It wasn't the entire dish that fell, but the winds up there were so dramatic that they pulled the metal sheets, and they fell right on the building next to us and on the street. Again, if it had happened on a Monday, somebody could've easily gotten killed. But it didn't.

So, eventually we did manage to get a better grasp on this antenna, and we did run a lot of programs. Again, those programs always began with a little bit of tension; is this going to work or not? It was never easy; we didn't know. We did programs, as well, that were just telephone calls with a speaker phone. I did a monthly program just with the consulate. The consul general would come out and people could meet the consul general. He would talk to people who were invited in for a coffee klatch type of thing. But we were very active. It wasn't hard to get people. There were people in the U.S. who objected to our constructive engagement policy, so a lot of people said, "I don't want anything to do with this," but a lot of people did. We had people come through fairly regularly on the entrepreneurial side, on affirmative action, on anything to do with how

the U.S. dealing with race. But we also brought musical groups. We had a music professor from Michigan come out. He went to all these townships and did workshops. It was just a way to show that the U.S. was really on the side of the majority population in seeking their rights.

So, anyway, I think we did a tremendous amount. There was a dividing line in my assignment, between pre-Mandela release and post-Mandela release. We worked very closely with AID. They had a large program, and one of their programs was education. They didn't have anybody in Durban, so we worked very closely with their education officer on introducing him to some of the technical schools in the African or Indian universities and colleges. We brought people down to do English teaching, as well. This was an English-speaking country, as well as Afrikaans-speaking. But in the African communities, English was taught as a second language. So, we had an English-speaking officer at the Embassy in Pretoria. So, we worked very closely with AID, and again, I think both AID and USIS did a tremendous job on trying to interact with and support these educational institutions.

Q: That's remarkable, because there still had been a fair amount of stove piping among different agencies. So, it's great that you could get that kind of cooperation. Now, you're still in Africa. Are you getting, within USIA, any mentoring, or are you seeking any mentoring, about what you should be doing in terms of your career?

DICKSON: Hardly anything. My second boss, the PAO there, was a man named Kent Obee, who was a wonderful man. He came to visit a couple of times. The last three years of my assignment, he was in Pretoria. I had interactions with the cultural affairs attachés and officers and press officers in Pretoria a lot, but we weren't really talking about careers as much. We had some of the USIA area directors, three of them, come out from Washington. Two of them came to Durban. These were people who I knew and worked a little with, but they got to see me in action. We didn't really talk careers. It was more, "What are you doing? What do you need from us? How can we help?" It was more of, you know, a site visit. You'd introduce them to your counterparts and contacts and so forth.

Q: Now, again, you weren't a political officer, but you were living in very political times. From your perch, did you see changes that would very soon bring South Africa to one person, one vote?

DICKSON: First of all, Durban's English-speaking community was very important in the anti-Apartheid movement. There were many communities in Durban, which they called the last outpost of the British empire. But it also had a very active, dynamic pool of talent among the anti-Apartheid Whites who opposed it. They were mostly English, and they did not like the Afrikaners. Durban also had a very prominent Indian community. It was, at the time, the largest population of south Asians outside of the subcontinent. There were a lot of Indian Muslims and Hindus there in Durban. They were brought there to do the sugarcane cutting in the late 1800's. Again, they also had a very prominent African group, the Zulus, that had their own political movement called Inkatha, and they were

opposed to the ANC (African National Congress). Inkatha was allowed to exist under Apartheid; it was sanctioned by the government when the ANC was not.

So, that was the environment in Durban. I never really thought that things would change. Now, two things happened. One was the prime minister, P.W. Botha, had a stroke. South Africans later referred to this as "the stroke of good luck," because he was a total obstruction to any kind of reform or change. This was the late '80s that this happened. The man who came in to replace him was F.W. De Klerk, and he had been on a USIA-sponsored International Visitor Program. He was more amenable to opening up, a little bit like glasnost in the Soviet Union. People in the embassy and around the world were going, oh, what's going on in South Africa? Could this lead anywhere, or is this just…? But F.W. De Klerk was the real thing, and we later find out that there were secret meetings, even when P.W. Botha was prime minister, with Mandela, trying to get him out without causing a major upheaval.

I would say, Mark, that it was so dramatic overnight, the change that happened when Mandela was released. The ANC was a banned organization. You couldn't show pictures of Mandela, couldn't show pictures of the flag, or you were arrested and thrown in jail. But there was, as I mentioned earlier, violence in the city. Bombs were going off; people were being arrested. Then, it quieted down when De Klerk first got in power, but as soon as Mandela was released, you all of a sudden saw all these people with ANC flags and Mandela shirts. One of the first things that I remember happening right afterwards was going to a beach protest. I never knew this, but there was a Whites only beach in Durban. We went to the beaches, but I didn't know that two beaches down from where we went was a Whites-only beach. Everybody else in Durban knew. So, again, it was a demonstration, and they invited the consulate to be there so that they wouldn't get hosed down or beaten or repressed. Nothing happened. It was a big nothing. The minority or majority groups from Durban went onto the beach, went swimming. There were ANC flags, ANC shirts. Nobody cared. It was amazing how quickly everything happened then.

This all took place before the fall of the Berlin Wall, but right around the same time. The South Africans had pulled out of Namibia, and Namibia had gotten its independence. So, little by little, we were thinking this was one more block, one more chip down. I think the South Africans were just amazed at the fall of the Berlin Wall. I remember talking to one African political science guy who said to me, with a straight face – he later came out as ANC and South African Communist Party – "I think Gorbachev is CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). Why would he be doing any of this? He's giving up."

So, I don't know where you were at the time, Mark, but I'd say now that no matter where you were in the world, whether it was Chile or Portugal or so many places, the late '80s and early '90s was such a dramatic, front row seat in history. For us in South Africa, it certainly was, with Mandela's release. I later heard Pik Botha, who was the foreign minister under P.W. Botha. He had come to Durban to talk to the National Party Convention. He gave a very honest speech, and this was, again—De Klerk was still in power, but negotiations had begun with the ANC and Mandela.

Pik Botha said, "We were looking around at the world at the time, and we saw Ceausescu in Romania being lined up against the wall and shot, and we thought, oh, we don't want to go there. So, what can we do to make a transition that is largely peaceful and save the country?" I would say that we often dwell, in foreign affairs and world affairs, on problem countries and disasters and wars. The transition in South Africa to a democratic majority-rule country was really, by and large a success story. It could've been a blood bath. I'm not going to say it was peaceful, because it wasn't. There was a low-intensity war going on when I was there. People I knew were killed in this civil war that didn't really make the papers. But it could've been a real bloodbath, and it wasn't. I think that largely happened because of Mandela, the kind of leader he was; because of the talent he was able to tap into across all races; and because of the goodwill of most people in South Africa.

I would add one more thing. The U.S. played a role. I'm not going to say that we did it, because the South Africans did so much, and Mandela was incredible. But we did make a contribution that helped. This is where, I think, both USAID and even USIA, in our small way, really pitched in to support a political transition in ways that often aren't seen but that people are beginning to write about and talk about now.

Q: The other thing that's going on at this time, or beginning, is the AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) crisis. Did that have any effect on what you did?

DICKSON: Yeah. I worked for a man probably every Foreign Service officer knows, Tex Harris. He was the consul general in Durban when I arrived and larger than life, moving in 100 different directions at once. He was an idea a minute kind of guy, energetic. South Africans loved him. He was so engaging and so happy, quite frankly. But Tex was also ahead of his time. He had a viewpoint that the relationship can't be one dimensional. It can't be all anti-Apartheid. We had to find other areas to interact with and engage South Africans.

So, Tex was a little bit of a visionary. He previewed two issues in the late '80s that were hardly issues at the time. One of them was AIDS, and one of them was climate change. People were going, "Tex, get off the case with climate change. It's not a priority." But he was kind of a bellringer ahead of time. In every speech he gave, interview he gave, interaction he had, he would always raise both of these. Durban was vulnerable to both of those, and he knew it. He worked very closely with the embassy medical officer up in Pretoria to really ring the bell about AIDS. Durban was a port city, an important port city, and on the truck route going up to other countries in Africa. Later on, Durban kind of became ground zero in sub-Saharan Africa for AIDS. Tex was all over it well ahead of time, trying to raise it as an issue that needed to be attended to then before it got worse. Well, it got worse.

The other issue was climate change. Tex kept talking about it. Durban's on the sea, and he kept talking about rising seas, doing the Al Gore thing before Al Gore. To his great credit, Tex was looking ahead and, unfortunately, many of his colleagues – and probably me – were saying, "Tex, let's focus on what's important." But he was right, and I was

wrong, and others were wrong. He did a great service, just by raising it ahead of time. I think he gave a little cover to people in the community who were trying to also discuss these issues.

Q: Was there any interest in, at that point, or contact with any LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) community?

DICKSON: I would… Because I'm pausing, I would say there wasn't. I'm trying to think. We had no contact at all.

Q: The reason I ask is that often, as AIDS became more prevalent and more visible, so did the LGBTQ community, even though they were not alone in infection rates. Infection rates began to affect heterosexuals, probably even more as it moved through Africa.

DICKSON: Certainly, in Durban and southern Africa, it was transmitted heterosexually. It started with the truck drivers stopping at every place along the way.

Q: Now, you leave before the first free vote in South Africa.

DICKSON: Yes.

Q: I'm sure you felt a little regret, but that's the way the Foreign Service works. Did you try to extend?

DICKSON: No. I did extend to a fourth year. I have to tell you that every day of my fourth year, I was nervous. There was so much violence. At the school where my son went, another parent had been killed taking their son to school. There was a bomb in the butcher's shop where we bought meat. There was a bomb in the movie theater. As I said earlier, people I knew had been murdered. Not all of it was politically related, but a lot of it was, and it was just a very violent, nervous time. So, after four years— It was a three-year assignment, and I extended a fourth year and I thought, I would really regret it if we stayed a fourth year in this violent atmosphere.

But anyway, afterwards, I was selected to be the desk officer for southern Africa at USIA, so for the next two years, in Washington, I was also involved with South Africa. So, I really had almost seven years of time working on this important issue. When I left the country at the end of four years, they had just had a vote to continue the process of negotiations and constitutional change. There had been a strong White resistance to what De Klerk was trying to do. A prominent anti-Apartheid African had been murdered. So, De Klerk said, "Okay, we're going to have a vote. Only Whites vote. We're going to say, do we want to continue this process or not?" It was a way to sideline this very vocal minority and say they were moving forward. People objected in the other racial communities. Why is it a White-only vote? But people around the world watched it very carefully. It was in May of '92, or maybe April. Anyway, De Klerk won handily, and all races were celebrating. It was still another two years of negotiations, with the ANC, fits

and starts, violence and a return to peaceful norms, and Mandela held it together and De Klerk held it together.

So, the end of my two years on the desk was May of ’94 when the election did take place and Mandela was reelected. Then, what we did at USIA was we organized a conference in Atlanta, inviting as many of the new government as we could and people of interest in business and other communities to this very large conference. This was a binational conference with South Africa and the United States. Thabo Mbeki came, Al Gore came, and Bishop Tutu was there. There was just tremendous goodwill, and this was the United States trying to reach out to a new government and say, “We’re here for you,” both in the private sector and the public sector. That was a lot of work, putting that together, because it was all USIA-run. It was a one-off conference, but it was an important, visible thing.

Q: We’ll turn in a second to your time on the desk, but one last question I had was, how was your family coping with the changes and violence and so on?

DICKSON: So, I would say very well. We did what we could. Our children were unaware of it. They were two, four and six, and then four, six, and eight by the time we left. They went to school. There were little British private schools. There was no American school there. My son’s best friend was a young Indian South African. It was a small post. We had very good, wonderful friendships in the consulate, but there were only three or four other people. We got together with our colleagues often. But we also had a lot of friends of all races outside of the consulate. We probably knew more people and were closer to more people who were not embassy related in this very small post. So, we had a wonderful community of friends there. A lot of it was church related.

My wife got a job at the consulate. Her part-time job was to run and administer the ambassador’s self-help fund. So, that was just an incredible window for her. We also had family members visit, my family and her family, brothers and parents. She was able to take them out to these communities that were applying for self-help grants, whether it was sewing cooperatives or any number of activities. There were preschools. This was the equivalent of Peace Corps. She had a very deep inroad into townships and rural life. Because of the small consulate, all the American officers were involved, as well, in trying to identify small projects that could benefit from this program and follow up with them.

There was one community halfway between Durban and Pietermaritzburg that we were able to get a grant for. Mpumalanga. It was a community where there was both ANC and Inkatha. These were the two ruling factions. They came together for a grant proposal to try to end the violence. So, we were able to meet people in this community and through the self-help program. They worked together and really reduced the violence in the community through a cooperative.

We then did a wonderful thing, Mark, and this is getting beyond your question. One Martin Luther King holiday, we thought we would recognize this community for having put aside their weapons and come together and established peace. So, we got Coretta Scott King to write a letter to the two sides, just recognizing what they had done. So, on

the Martin Luther King holiday, Ambassador Swing came to Durban and at a huge ballroom in a local downtown hotel, he presented this Coretta Scott King letter to the two sides. There were 300 or 400 people in the audience, and there was a collective gasp when this letter was read out. It was just such a huge thing, but it was all a result of this small self-help program that established the contact and connection that we were able to build on in a public diplomacy kind of way.

Q: Fantastic. Absolutely. Do you mention that in your book?

DICKSON: What I focus on in the book was not on that incident. But one of the things I focused on in the book was how we tended to view South Africa through the prism of our own civil rights experience. When I say we, I mean me. We were bringing Americans to South Africa to talk about our experience and affirmative action and different programs to repair racial inequities or whatever. Whether it was this Martin Luther King experience of nonviolence or whether it was nonviolent change or through programs for housing or education. We did a lot of things in education, as well. There was diversity, multiculturalism. But it was really looking at South Africa through the U.S. prism.

So, I spent a lot of time in the book saying that I knew, obviously, that the most obvious difference was that it wasn't minority oppression, as in the U.S.; it was majority. It was minority rule. So, it wasn't minority rights. The diversity in South Africa was just demographically, obviously, different. I knew that. But what I didn't really realize was how the different experiences were so markedly different, where the opposition to Apartheid and African opposition grew up in a very different climate. It had very close ties to the South African Communist Party from the early 1900's. There were overt ties, too, because they were the only Whites who would listen to the Africans at the time. So, the African National Congress was a little wary for many years, but then they aligned with them.

Then, after the Second World War, the two countries went in different directions. We did what we could in a very slow and deliberate way, to move away from segregation. They enforced segregation on an institutional level. They repressed the African National Congress. They banned the SACP (South African Communist Party). The African National Congress also had a very different style of political action. You know, we highlighted Martin Luther King and nonviolence. The African National Congress said they were forced to embrace violence because all the routes of nonviolence were closed to them; it was the same with Communism. So, we were very wary of the ANC because of violence and because of Communism. So, they fell into this. This is one of the reasons why we were reluctant to push too hard. We thought that the anti-Apartheid movement was Communist-inspired.

So, there were just very different experiences. In terms of my book, what I was trying to say was that we kept looking at South Africa through the U.S. lens and not seeing South Africa for its own history. I did not realize as much of the history of South Africa, of the ANC, and American involvement in South Africa until, again, I started writing this book. I remembered little incidents where we kept looking at South Africa through our own

eyes, but I didn't know why it didn't resonate as I would've wanted it to with the South Africans until I started doing the research into the ANC and the history. I didn't know the connections of American business in South African mining that extended to the early 1900s. I never knew that when I was there. I should've.

But again, this was where I took the fault of leaving it up to the officers to do their own research. When I was reading about South Africa, I was reading about Zulu history, but not about U.S.-South African history, the role of the United States in South Africa. So, when South Africans and the anti-Apartheid people were looking at the U.S., they had this long history of, oh, you were on the side of Anglo-American, the mining company. You were on the side of bringing in people to break strikes. That wasn't part of the history I had, but they had it, and they remembered it. This was a little bit of their reluctance to get too closely involved. They kept saying things like, "It won't work here," whenever we would talk about the things we had done in civil rights. So, that's what I focused on in the book, these two different approaches to history that were competing.

Q: And of course, that also comes out with the whole disinvestment campaign. As much as we might've been involved directly, we were also involved in the maintenance of companies that practiced Apartheid, and so it went.

DICKSON: I was aware, and even before going there, I remember being in touch with business faculty members in U.S. universities who were trying to look at the disinvestment campaign and how to maintain business links. I had no idea that we were, by then, the largest investor in South Africa. I went to one conference where some South African Black consciousness people were standing up and saying, "These are Ford trucks that the South African Apartheid forces are using against us. Ford can do something about this." So, I knew of that, but I just didn't realize the extent of U.S. investment and how one of our concerns – and probably Reagan's reluctance and some other people's reluctance to push hard on South Africa – was that we had so many economic ties in South Africa, at the time.

Q: Was there any effort by American-owned companies to operate in a non-Apartheid way, in your recollection?

DICKSON: I think they all tried and did, at least in public ways, put a face on it. They would not discriminate in their hiring; they would all have, in their executive suites, Black South Africans. So, they did what they could to show that, and they did a good job, I think, by and large by the time I was there. I didn't have a lot of direct contact with American companies in Durban. I think most of them were up in other places. But we did have a Commercial officer in Durban. But one of the things that he did – he wasn't an American; it was a small Commercial office with a South African – was to primarily work with the port and engage with port officials, in terms of embassy equipment or cars or coming in through the Durban port, going all the way up to Malawi. But it was also in terms of other businesses kind of keeping the port open, flowing, and helping out with whatever customs and so forth for the companies there.

Q: As you move to Washington desk work, what had changed in USIA, and what was your understanding of the changes to come.

DICKSON: I arrived back in '92, and it was an election year, the year Bill Clinton won. So, one thing I noticed fairly early on, and which became much more pronounced in the early Clinton administration, is how vulnerable USIA was as an organization. The Berlin Wall had fallen. We were trying to do different kinds of programs in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. There was clearly a move afoot to take advantage of the end of the Cold War, what people were calling the "peace dividend." And USIA was on the chopping block for budget cuts. In the conversations, particularly with the Congressional Liaison Office in USIA, it was a priority that we had to do something to save the agency. Part of what they did, and what I got involved in – and this was kind of a subtext for why we had this conference in Atlanta – was to try to demonstrate our relevance to Congress, that we were doing things that mattered. They had done a similar conference with Russia at the time. So, they were just trying to show staff and Congressional representatives in both the Senate and the House that this was a viable, relevant agency. It's not just a Cold War agency. It still matters.

Well, slowly but surely, our budgets were cut. So, the beginning of the writing on the wall was then. There was a director appointed by Clinton who most people would say did not really buy into the mission of USIA. I don't know. I don't have any evidence to say that Joe Duffy was a willing participant in its demise, but he didn't really stand up and defend the agency vocally. Maybe he knew it was a losing proposition and he wasn't going to throw himself in front of a train. So, that was one thing. I gradually saw programs cut that I had used when I was overseas.

The one thing I do want to mention about my time on the desk, which serves as a demonstration of the continued relevance of USIA, is that USAID transferred to USIA a million dollars to run exchange programs in this transitional period. We did it to such a positive effect that they gave us a second tranche. So, when I was in South Africa, we were starting to do this. We would organize South Africans to go to the U.S. and bring experts over from the U.S. When I was on the desk, this was really a time of heightened activity for all kinds of exchanges.

Q: Yes, that kind of cross-over funding continued even past the integration of USIA into the State Department. When I was in Romania as Cultural Officer from 2002-05, the USAID rep at our embassy organized a $2 million transfer to Public Diplomacy because we could do grants for smaller amounts than they could. We conferred and supported civil society development with smaller organizations and training.

DICKSON: When I say that I think we made a contribution, I mean that the kinds of people we sent to South Africa, the kinds of people we brought, were constitutional experts, economists who interacted with the ANC, who had views on economics that were taken right out of their experience, for example, with the Sandinistas on how to run a country. There were two economists who I remember bringing in who had actually advised in Nicaragua and came to South Africa and said, "Don't do what the Sandinistas

did, because they did not pay attention to what we were saying about how to run an economy."

So, we made a real contribution in a very quiet way. It wasn't only in constitutional law; it was in public administration, it was in educational organization, it was in integration, it was in all matters of topics. The first two years when I was on the desk, we were just moving through this transition and interacting with Mandela's group, bringing people from all aspects of South African political society together. We were pushing, through exchanges, the idea of political transition. I think that really helped.

But I wasn't only responsible for South Africa. I had eight other countries that I was trying to attend to in the middle of this incredible transition in South Africa to black majority rule. At any normal desk, you're interacting with the posts and trying to get what the posts need and so forth. All of them were very understanding; they knew the amount of hyperactivity related to South Africa. But unlike in Lagos, the phones did work, so I could call people and made the effort to reach out to colleagues in Zimbabwe and Mozambique and elsewhere.

I do remember going to Angola. Angola had had a civil war at the time between Jonas Savimbi and the Cuba-supported leftist regime. It was kind of a proxy war; the Cubans were there fighting with the MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*, People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola). The U.S. was not there. So, finally, some tentative peace had been arranged, and we opened up a small embassy presence there. I remember going there and just being shocked at this bombed out city. There was incredible hyperinflation. We went to lunch at a restaurant there, and the admin officer took a briefcase of paper money and paid for lunch with wads of paper. We later sent a PAO there who was trying to establish a presence there. We had a compound where people were living in trailers.

It was just the beginning of what we hoped would be the long term, but then civil war broke out. The next thing I knew was that the embassy compound was being shelled, and they were frantically trying to get the officers out. Our PAO, a woman by the name of Mary Spear, got out and came into the office. She had horrific stories of hiding behind laundry machines and dryers as bombs were coming in all around her. It was a terrible experience. Again, most Americans don't realize some of the dangers that these civilians are put in. She certainly was in harm's way. We didn't go back, and many people didn't go back until the situation was resolved much later. But that was the most extreme of the other activities that I was involved in in South Africa.

Q: While you were on the desk in Washington, the Clinton Administration pursued a policy of "reinventing government." Vice President Gore was in charge of it. The goal, at least in foreign affairs agencies, was essentially to realize the peace dividend through rationalizing and reducing funding and staff. Did that policy affect you?

DICKSON: Yeah. I was so focused, when I was on the desk, on South Africa and the transition there and what we were doing in this hyperactivity, because of the USAID

funding, that I didn't really pay attention to that. After being on the desk for two years, after the election, I then went on to work for USIA in their Human Resources Office as a deputy director of the Foreign Service Office there. That's where I noticed the reinvention. We really embraced that in a big way, as much as we could understand it and tried to understand it. One of the things we did was, we tried to simplify the rules and make it easier on the administrative staff so that it wouldn't require so much activity and useless rules and regulations. I think that was a big part of Gore's reinvention, to streamline. Another was to improve the use of computers in the assignments process, to make it easier to see available posts and place bids.

So, those were the two big efforts on Gore's reinvention. There was another thing we undertook. It might look small to outsiders, but it was very important to the way we did business. When congress funds agencies with continuing resolutions, they can only spend money at the previous year's level, and then only up to the end of the continuing resolution. Congress might give you a continuing resolution for say six weeks at the previous year's spending ceiling, then they repeat another one for four weeks. Then there was the government closure in 1995. And every time there was a budget problem you had to rewrite orders. So, if you had somebody back here on language training who was coming back in the summer and you put them on orders, then you had to write new orders on October 1, the beginning of the new fiscal year, for a continuing resolution that might be 15 days or two months. Then, as soon as that continuing resolution happened, you had to rewrite orders. We thought that you could only spend the money that you had. You couldn't spend the money you were promised.

Well, we learned that the way the State Department did it was that they would set the money aside in the current fiscal year when the actual order or contract was signed. So, if you obligated funds and spent just enough to get an order underway, you could use the unspent funds into the new fiscal year. There were limits, but basically, that was one way to avoid losing every project begun or every order issued even if the fiscal year ended before it could be completed. USIA, as a separate agency, didn't do that. So, just to make that very small change in USIA, to make our spending rules consistent with State's, took an incredible push to get that accomplished. We were finally able to accomplish things with end of year spending, get everybody on board in the different offices in USIA, and we just saved a tremendous amount of work for a few more years, as long as USIA was still in existence.

Q: This is also the moment when the State Department and other foreign affairs agencies like USIA began to use better information technology that would eventually transform the way they did business. How did these changes affect you?

DICKSON: You know, we were still operating for a long time with Wangs and these outdated computer systems. I remember being in Durban when the first PC (Personal Computer) was brought in. We'd be moving floppy discs from one station to the other and wondering, what was wrong with the Wangs? At least we could talk to each other. But email had started, and we were able to communicate more directly with posts, sending back attachments and so forth. So, on the one hand, it made our lives a lot easier.

Even faxes became outmoded. I remember seeing a fax machine for the first time in like 1985 and being amazed, like, how could this be? But soon, nobody was using faxes. Everybody was using attachments to emails and so forth. So, it was pretty dramatic, how it changed our lives, but certainly not as dramatic as cell phones. I never really worked in the Department using smartphones. We were still using Blackberry's when I retired. But that changed it even more dramatically.

But back to the changes. I remember trying to get something printed. We had a printer in Lagos that was as big as my desk here. You'd send it. You had to have the paper set up right or wrong. Anyway, even in the generation before us, I remember going to a consular officer's office and he was typing a cable without a word processor. He was just typing it. I was like, wow, I guess they used to do it that way. But certainly, by the time I remember writing cables, there was an automatic nature to it that didn't exist even two years prior to it.

This is way out of the chronology, but I remember during my last assignment in Washington, I was coming back from Latin America, and we were standing in line to board a plane in Miami. I was on my Blackberry, just waiting and waiting, trying to get work done at 8PM. The guy behind me says – it turned out I knew his wife; she was a State Department officer – "What are you doing? What's your job?" I said, "I delete emails for a living." I just blurted it out, but it was so true. It felt like all I tried to do was clean out my email inbox of all the extraneous things to find the three or four nuggets that I really need to attend to. It certainly makes our inbox paper exercise that we did in the oral test seem very different. I wonder if they do that now on the oral test, give them an email inbox and say, "Deal with this inbox."

Q: While you were in Washington on the South Africa Desk, and then in the Human Resources office, the beginnings of the integration of USIA into the State Department were under discussion. How did that affect you?

DICKSON: I worked in Human Resources from '94 to '96. It wasn't until '99 that USIA was dissolved and merged into the State Department, but the writing was on the wall at that time. Our budgets were being cut to the extent that the two last classes that we brought in in USIA – and this was when I was in Human Resources… One was a class of all women. That was a response to a lawsuit brought in by women officers. We almost didn't do this class because we didn't have the budget for it, but it was also a requirement, because it was part of the settlement with this class action lawsuit that we had to bring in 15 or 20 women to address the differential treatment.

But for the other last class we had brought in a group, we realized when the group was here, halfway through their training, that we couldn't afford them. So, we spent the rest of their training in negotiations with the State Department to take them off our hands. So, this group of PD (Public Diplomacy) officers, people who had chosen PD as a cone, towards the end of their training then had to decide which cone they wanted to go into. They were all transferred to State. It was a little traumatic for the officers. Some of them

really wanted to PD, others said, "Oh, I always wanted to do political," or something like that. At the same time, it was a bit of an opportunity for some.

Again, you would think that we were negotiating with the Soviets over this. It was a tough and difficult transition. How to do this without harming individuals? Where were they going to be accommodated? But it was also kind of a way of beginning to think of the two bureaucracies as one. I left Foreign Service Personnel in '96 and went on to my next overseas assignment. I think the negotiations on the merger were later. The actual decision was made to merge the two, but I was not involved in those discussions. But the writing was on the wall.

Q: Were there any other important changes from a human resources management point of view?

DICKSON: So, the biggest change was the computerization of the assignments process. This was a way that people could log their bids, track their bids, see what was available when it was available. We had a more floating assignments process through the year, and there wasn't something like, you get your bids in by this day, and then you will be assigned by this day. It was much more like a rolling admission for college. So, the computerization had happened right before. The man who I succeeded had actually written the program. He was a bit of an IT guy himself. He was an officer, but he had done that. So, some of what we were doing when I was in the Personnel Office, part of Gore's reinvention, was taking this computer software program that was built just for USIA and trying to merge it into the State Department system. We thought we had a pretty good system of assignments.

The one thing I would say about it that was really different from USIA's system was that we would send out, every two weeks, an assignments bulletin or newsletter. It would show who was assigned, where they were assigned. It would show openings. So, it was very transparent. If I had bid on PAO Rome and there were 75 bidders, I would at least see who was assigned when they were assigned. So, it was all much more transparent. If I bid on a job at State, I'd never know who got the job until I looked it up a little later and saw that they got the job.

Q: Did you serve on any promotion panels or personnel panels?

DICKSON: No. But there were other major things going on in USIA personnel at the time. One thing that comes to mind immediately was another lawsuit. This was a lawsuit by African Americans talking about promotions and adverse treatment through the assignments process. What we did, mostly, was assignments. So, they brought in an outside group to look at our assignments process. It was run by a man from Georgetown, Alan Goodman, who later went on to become the head of IIE, the Institute for International Education. I think he still is. Anyway, they did this intensive study, and we did a little bit of a study ourselves with them, trying to track and trace assignments to see if there was any bias in the assignments, as was alleged by the group bringing the lawsuit.

We thought we had put together a way to review all of the assignments by officers and geographic cones and promotions.

One of the allegations was that the assignments process was important for promotion – where you were assigned helped whether you were eligible or more promotable. Most of us involved in the assignments process did not agree with that; you could be promoted out of any job. It was the job you did there that did it. But the people who did the review from Georgetown and elsewhere concluded otherwise, that there was a bias in the assignments against African American officers. It harmed them in their promotion prospects. So, that was one project I was involved in towards the end of my two-year assignment.

So, we were talking about early signs of the decline of USIA and the possible effort to merge USIA with the State Department. I had mentioned that we had stopped bringing in junior officer classes, and then there was one class where, because we couldn't pay for them, we ended up going over to State and all of the officers transferred to the State Department. That was a difficult endeavor, especially for the officers involved, who had really wanted to be part of USIA. I think one of the ways that we sold it to them was that this was not permanent, there may be a way to return to Public Diplomacy after a while. But in the interim, we just did not have the budget to support an intake of officers.

The other thing I didn't mention that was beginning was that Foreign Service Personnel – HR, at the time – at USIA was starting to work with State HR on ways that we could merge our assignment system. It was mostly computer technical. So, there were many meetings where we looked at the two assignment systems and said, is there a way that we can take the best of both? Nothing really came of it, although we both learned a lot about each other. When we did eventually merge a few years later, I think we just wholeheartedly got absorbed into the way State assigned officers. But there were a series of meetings on the technical side of it. I remember our IT and HR people going over to meet with State IT and HR people.

I was overseas when the actual merger took place, but I suspect that the teams that were looking at the merger and trying to align the two organizations were many, and each had very different focuses. But I was not a part of that.

Q: At some point during these changes in the bidding process, a novel, grassroots invention appeared. I think it was called Phil's List?

DICKSON: Oh, Phil's List. I believe that appeared after the merger. So, what happened was, as I had mentioned, our list of open assignments came out every two weeks. There was an announcement that was sent out to all the officers about upcoming assignments and decisions taken on assignments. So, it was relayed who got what assignment, and it was every two weeks. Well, State didn't work that way. They had a once a year or twice a year message announcing all the jobs that are open.

So, what happened was that USIA officers really missed the old system where we would find out who was going where. So, one of the Human Resources officers, Phil (and I forget his last name) decided to keep it up informally. It was Phil's List that was sent out every couple of weeks, just to let us know, those former USIA people, who was getting assigned where.

Q: Right. I remember it because even before I entered the Public Diplomacy cone, it was useful just to know where people I knew were. Maybe I had lost track of them, and they were now in Adelaide, Australia or wherever they were assigned. I could look at Phil's List, this informal list that went around, and see, oh, that's where they went.

DICKSON: Yeah. It was prior to the Global Address Book that's now on the Internet and we can all look at it. It had a little bit of a Facebook gossip quality to it; you could see where people were, like you just mentioned.

Q: It was a nice thing for him to do. He didn't have to do it, and it was quite a good deal of work and one of those little things inside an organization that makes it a little more humane.

DICKSON: Yeah. So, that was our assignment system. I remember that at the merger in '99 or right before, we had a meeting. I was overseas at the time, and we had a PAO conference, and a bunch of State people came out and talked about the merger. They said, "Do you have any questions?"

I said, "What's going to happen to the assigning system? We've got this process in place that many of us like."

The answer that came was, "We're going to use the State assignment system. Why do you like your system?"

I said – because I had stood up in front of this group of PAOs – "Well, it's really for transparency. We all know who's getting what assignment. If I bid on five assignments, it's useful to know. I'll never know why, but at least I'll know who got it as opposed to scrounging around and waiting for the Global address list to come out."

Q: Right. Was there anything else salient from the time you spent in Personnel before you moved on?

DICKSON: The only other thing that was a bit of a controversy at the time was, again, related to budget issues. We were asked to come up with a reduction in force policy for Foreign Service officers. Our Office of Policy in HR did that, thinking that at some point, in the event, how were we going to identify who should be let go in a reduction? What role should merit have? How do you judge and evaluate merit? Then, the policy office came up with a plan. I don't think it was ever really publicized or needed, actually. But it was very controversial within the office because the way it played out was that officers who were in a grade for an extended period of time were disadvantaged in the system.

For one reason or another, it was hotly debated and difficult. Then, as things happen, you move on to a new assignment. You don't know what really happened, although I do know that we never used the RIF (Reduction in Force); we did combine as two agencies. But at the time, we were never sure that there would be a merger. One possibility was that the agency would shrink to such a level that the people would have to be let go.

Q: Right. In the event, do you know, roughly, in terms of percentage, how many USIS officers retired instead of continuing on into State Department? I know there was a relatively large number who chose to retire rather than continue.

DICKSON: So, there was a buyout offer. A number of people did retire early. The buyout was for 25,000 dollars. What happened – and this is the issue with buyouts – is that people who were thinking of retirement or so many years away from retirement took the buyout. We were going after the most expensive officers, senior officers. 25,000 dollars for a retirement isn't a lot of money; people who were expecting to retire got an additional 25,000. So, it was a nice bonus for them, but I don't think it achieved its purpose, because those people would have retired anyway. I don't have any numbers, off the top of my head, of how many people actually did leave or retire early. I suspect most people made the merger, somewhat seamlessly.

Q: That was my impression, as well, entering the Public Diplomacy field in the first year of the merger in 2000.

DICKSON: One other thing, just in terms of the merger. I know we're leaping ahead, but at that same PAO conference, we did a little session on the advantages and disadvantages of the merger. The way they did it was, they had two groups of three people each kind of debate what were the benefits or not. We each developed, as an exercise, the arguments for and against it. I had been asked to be one of the three to present on why it was a good thing. We laid out all the arguments, but my last comment was, "At least my mother will know where I work and what I do." Because over the course of my career to that point, no one knew what USIA does? What is USIA? It was confusing. People think it's the CIA. The idea of what public diplomacy is also really hard to explain. But if you say, "Oh, I work for the State Department," it's like, yeah, sure, I got it. So, that was one benefit, clarity.

Q: Interesting. Then, in your career, as your period of time in the Personnel Office comes to an end, what are you thinking about in terms of a next assignment, and how does that work out?

DICKSON: So, I had always thought of myself as an Africanist and wanted to spend my career in AF (Bureau of African Affairs). I also had children of high school age, and I had mentors who said that every USIA officer needs to have two geographic areas in order to make it into the Senior Foreign Service. Now, I was an 01 officer at the time, and we didn't have the opening the window issue that now exists in the State Department promotion system. But anyway, there was only one high school in all of Africa for Americans, and other than that we would've had to send our son away to a boarding

school. So, what we did was, we looked at other geographic areas, Europe and Latin America in particular.

So, in the end, I was assigned to Peru. They had a good American school there. But I had no background at all in Latin America, zero. Once again, I had to rely on a very short, two-week area studies course as my official training for Latin America and for Peru. Again, this two-week area studies course was done very well and very professionally, but the amount of knowledge about Peru was minimal, maybe five percent, if that, specifically. I was off cycle for language, so I had a tutor, and it ended up being a one-on-one tutor. In many cases, I also had a disadvantage because I was learning Spanish at home and in some place in downtown D.C. So, the idea of any kind of area studies opportunities that might have existed out in Arlington at FSI, I just wasn't exposed to.

So, again, my background in Latin America really was very minimal. I had a long period of time, because I was able to get off language probation in three months. So, then I had a bridge assignment, and at that time, I read as much as I could, but it really fell on me. That's part of my conclusion in my book. In the last chapter, I try to make the case that there really should be some more formal training and history for officers going out to the field.

Q: Now, at this point, you're going to Peru. One of your kids is going to a private school, a boarding school?

DICKSON: No, it was a K-12 school.

Q: Oh, but in Peru?

DICKSON: In Peru is a K-12 American school. So, all three children were going to the same school for one year.

Q: Okay. Now, when you get to Peru, what… In your consultations before you left, did you learn anything about what you were expected to do?

DICKSON: So, here's another story that many people in the Foreign Service have their own stories about. When we were assigned to Peru, I told my family in August, September or October '96, we would be leaving in March of '97. So, Peru had a reputation; it had been a danger post. It was still a danger post. It had just come off the "no family" list because of the incidents of terrorism. I remember at one point I remember when I was in South Africa that one of my colleagues there had just come from Peru, and it sounded like the worst place on earth, at the time, because of the terrorism. The embassy had been blown up by Shining Path guerrillas.

But anyway, Peru was moving out of the worst part of that phase. Their president, Alberto Fujimori, had taken a real hard line and had captured the leader of the Shining Path. But I'm not going to tell my children this. I was just trying to get them excited

about going to Peru. Well, in December of that year, after we had known we were going to Peru, I turned on the radio in the morning before going to work and I heard the news that the Japanese ambassador's residence had been taken over by terrorists, not of the Shining Path, but of another group called the MRTA (*Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru,* Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement). There had been a reception to celebrate Japan's national day, and hundreds of people were there. This group of armed people went in and took everybody hostage. So, this was really a shock to everybody. How was I going to tell my fourth grader, "Oh, we're going to this place where there are incidents like this?" We obviously couldn't hide it from them. What we told them is that this happened. At the time, I didn't know what it would mean for the assignment. I was supposed to go three or four months later.

So, this was the climate that I ended up going into in Peru. We had a new embassy. It was one of those Inman buildings. This new building looked like a bunker. In fact, it was called *El Bunker* by the Peruvians. It was out in the middle of nowhere in Lima, off the beaten track, with big walls and so forth.

But I learned shortly after the hostage takeover that in a few days, the group, the MRTA, the *Movimiento Revolucionario de Túpac Amaru,* had decided to release all of the Americans. They did not want to deal, in this hostage crisis, with any Americans. There were seven Americans there. The first day, they released all the women, and then shortly thereafter, they released the Americans. So, this was really just a Peruvian and other nationalities issue. They did not know that, whether we had people in there or not, we were going to do everything we could as a government to support the Peruvians and other nations, our allies.

But anyway, it was a standoff throughout the time that I was in training and in my bridge assignment. I arrived there in March, and there were still hostages in the residence of the Japanese ambassador. It was front and center, the number one issue in the embassy, in Peru, and around the world. The number of television crews that were following and monitoring this every day was quite large, especially from Japan, because it was the Japanese ambassador's residence.

My family stayed because they wanted to finish the school year. My wife stayed with the three children. My son was finishing his grade school in 8th grade, and my daughters were finishing 5th grade and 3rd grade. So, they stayed, and I went down. Three weeks after I arrived, I was making the rounds and meeting people and so forth. Everybody was talking about what's going to happen, how long this is going to go on, how it's going to end. Unbeknownst to me, because we didn't know but our colleagues in the embassy did know, we had contacts and were working with Peruvian intelligence to try and come up with a rescue plan. So, I remember going to a TV station and having lunch and then a meeting, talking about all things Peru and the United States. The general manager was very coy, like, "Oh, I don't know when it's going to happen."

I got back to the embassy, driving the half hour from this studio to the embassy, and the rescue had started. He had known that, but he didn't want to let me know that this was

going to be taking place at the time. But as soon as I got back to the embassy, all hell broke loose. All lines were occupied. The number of press calls that came in was incredible. We were just inundated with what's going on and trying to figure out what was happening at this rescue attempt. The ambassador was very involved, as were other offices in the embassy. But we were dealing with all the press, and it was funny – not funny, but just the way things were – because we were watching CNN, and CNN was calling us up, asking us, "What's going on?"

I'm saying, "I don't know; you tell me."

I remember that at one point somebody handed me the phone and said, "It's CNN. They want to know what's going on." I just put the phone down. I had nothing to add, because I was watching CNN just like everybody else, just like they were, and we had nothing more to say, other than that this is taking place and we don't know it's going to turn out. People wanted to know what our involvement was. We weren't, at that point, willing to share; we were more interested in finding out what was going on and how it was transpiring.

Q: Right. That's an incredible thing to move into as soon as you arrive.

DICKSON: Yeah. It was a remarkable rescue from many different standpoints. We won't know fully the extent of our involvement publicly, but I know we were involved and supportive. But it really fell to the Peruvian Special Forces, who had dreamed up this incredible plan and had built a fake embassy and were working on it to figure out how they were going to enter this building from underneath. They tunneled under it. It was pretty clear that the MRTA hostage takers knew that there was tunneling going on. The Peruvians tried to mask it with music and so forth, but they couldn't mask it completely because everybody knew. Still, from sound detection that people had placed in the Japanese ambassador's residence, we knew that there were down times for the hijackers. They were extremely alert at night, thinking that any rescue attempt would happen at night, but not so alert in the middle of the day at one o'clock. They thought, oh, this will never happen at one in the afternoon. That's when it did take place, when they were all sleeping.

It was a very swift and remarkable event. One man lost his life, the justice minister. He was well-known, well-regarded, and a former exchange grantee on the International Visitor Program. But everybody else made their way out – a lot of foreign diplomats, a lot of other elected officials and Peruvians. What's interesting – and I think the reason the MRTA chose the Japanese ambassador's residence – was that they fully expected the president, Fujimori, to be there, because he's of Japanese ancestry. Fujimori never went to any of these foreign ministry national days. He was somebody who felt he had too much to do to go off and do niceties. Anyway, the MRTA miscalculated, thinking that Fujimori would be there. But they still were able to pretty much paralyze a country for three or four months. It was a long time.

Q: Yeah. In principle, when you arrived, what were you supposed to be doing?

DICKSON: So, that was primarily one, and we had a lot of interaction, particularly the Press Office, with foreign press and American press. They kept calling and wanting interviews with the ambassador to find out his take on what was going on. So, that was a big piece of it. There were two other things that happened right away that I refer to in my book and that I kind of walked into. One of them was, within a week of my arrival, we signed a memorandum of understanding with the government of Peru to protect Peru's cultural patrimony. This had been a longstanding negotiation, took many months of work well before I got there, but I happened to be there when it was signed, and we had a celebratory little event at my house for all the Peruvians and Americans who worked on this.

What it was, was really an agreement that any items that were deemed to be looted from Peru's many archaeological sites would be returned to Peru. It was not retroactive; it only included items recovered from that moment forward. But any exchange of items in the United States or items that crossed into the United States from that moment forward were seized and returned to Peru. That was the agreement. The other part of the agreement was that the Peruvian government agreed to do what it could to stop looting at its source. This was the second agreement to protect cultural patrimony that the United States had entered into in the world. We now have a dozen or more of these agreements, and it works very well for the United States. In the experience of Peru, I think, it really helped convince people in Washington that this was a very worthwhile thing to do. I'll explain a little bit more about that in a minute.

What was interesting from the view of Public Diplomacy and being a PAO was that archaeology then became a legitimate avenue of our work. So, from a very selfish standpoint, I could go into the embassy and make an arrangement to go visit an archaeological site with the museum or the organization that was responsible for the dig. I could walk the site like a tourist, but with the understanding that I was more than a tourist and I had the United States' backing to support what they were doing, see what they were doing, and report on what they were doing. So, that was, to me, fascinating, especially in a land as archaeologically rich as Peru.

I mention in the book one of the archaeologists we worked with who helped on the agreement was a Fulbrighter from the University of San Marcos. He took us to a site he was responsible for, and he said that he thought that Peru had really only been able to identify about 10 percent of its archaeological riches. There were still more. In the years after I left, they uncovered the largest pre-Columbian city in the Western Hemisphere. When I was there, it was just unknown. It's this huge city called Corral on the coast of Peru that was thousands of acres, and it's this big city. Again, the United States, through the Ambassador's Fund for Preservation, was able to support their work in a small way. It was big for us, because we don't have a lot of funding for that. I forget the amount. It might've been 200,000 dollars. It was a multimillion-dollar project, but this was as big as we could do.

The second thing that happened right when I arrived that became one of the threads of my whole assignment had to do with human rights. We were going to give a book donation to the University of Lima, a private university. Sunday night in Peru there was a *60 Minutes* program, and we were going to give the donation on Monday. That Sunday night, they had an investigative piece where they had interviewed a former Peruvian intelligence officer, a woman, who had been tortured and beaten by her own services because they thought she had passed along information to terrorists. So, she was in a hospital bed, paralyzed. It was this big program, and it was huge. It was all over the papers Monday morning, and our ambassador was going to give this book donation at this university.

So, we expected the press there in a big way. There were hostages in the Japanese ambassador's residence. This book donation was nice and important – it was an American studies book donation – but when they got there, the press was all over the place. The press was not there to talk about the book donation. The press wanted the ambassador's views on this human right's case of the torture. The ambassador was very blunt. He was also relatively new, but this was, I believe, his first real statement to promote human rights. He was a little nuanced, but pretty forthright, saying, "This should be investigated." It was huge. You could see the headlines the next day: "Dennis Jett, the ambassador, says the La Rosa case should be fully investigated. If it's true, it's an issue for human rights."

The country was divided. Some people supported him and were pleased he made these efforts. A lot of people who were anti-terrorist did not want him to make these comments and said they were anti-government. He wasn't anti-government, but people perceived that, especially at a time when the government was doing everything they could to get a handle on this terrorism. But they were doing it in a way that really eroded human rights, and that became more and more evident as time went on.

So, what was interesting to me was that this book donation became the platform to get the ambassador out in public. He would make remarks about the book donation, but the press was there to get a juicy kernel. Many people in the embassy thought, no, just stick to the purpose of the event; don't move off into other areas. The ambassador, to his credit, decided, "No, I'm going to use any opportunity to talk about the values that the United States stands for in Peru, even if it's a book donation."

Now, what happened over the course of the two years is that every two or three months, the United States sent back archaeological items that had been seized from Customs. Every time we got these back, the Ministry of Culture would invite the U.S. ambassador to come and say a few words at a ceremony. It was always photographed, always on television news. So, the United States got tremendous credit for caring for what mattered to Peru, which was their archaeology, their history, and their identity. We did that in a big way, and I thought that this was an important way to show Peruvians that we valued what mattered to them. What mattered to them was their history.

But, at the same time, again, the press was not just there to cover the event of the return of the artifacts, which they did cover, because it was important. But they also wanted to

see if they could get another statement out of our ambassador about something going on with human rights. There were always things. Fujimori became increasingly autocratic and disrespectful of human rights, and the ambassador was increasingly vocal about it. But what I think happened was – and I don't have any evidence otherwise – that Peruvians cut him a little slack because of these returns of archaeological items. They could see – or at least this is the way that I interpreted it – that this was a man who respected Peru and was giving Peru what mattered to them. At the same time, he was criticizing the issues of human rights, but deep down, he cared for Peru. So, there was this dichotomy of feelings. As one other ambassador later said, you have a reservoir of goodwill. Once you build that up, you can say other things that really run counter to that. So, this reservoir of goodwill was being built up with the return of the items. Again, it was making good use of history to build up the reservoir of goodwill at the time that we also sent messages that were important on human rights.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it!

Q: But just to go back one second, where did you stand in the Public Diplomacy section, and what were your responsibilities as you understood them for the tour? These are wonderful individual activities, but I'm sure you had an overall plan for what you were doing.

DICKSON: So, I had just been promoted into the Senior Foreign Service at about the time I was bidding back in Washington. So, PAO Lima was a Senior Foreign Service job, and I bid on it. I was PAO and a member of the country team in Peru, one of the more senior people in the embassy. When the ambassador or DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) went away, I ended up being acting DCM for months on end at different times. So, I had two other American officers there, a CAO (Cultural Affairs officer) and an IO (Information officer). I relied on them, particularly the CAO, for programming and exchanges, as you know. The press was very active, because there was an active press in Lima, particularly at the time of the Japanese ambassador's residence. The IO when I arrived, David Kurakane, was very good and had very good relations with both American reporters and Peruvian and other foreign reporters, as well.

Q: As PAO, did you basically expect to accompany the ambassador everywhere, act as spokesperson, or how did you divide responsibilities in your section?

DICKSON: It wasn't a one-size-fits-all thing; it was case by case. Here's a couple of anecdotes on this. I mentioned the University of Lima book donation. We had a country team, where we talked about what the ambassador was going to do and so on. I stayed on after country team and asked Ambassador Jett, "What do you need from us? Do you need any talking points?" Again, I was new.

He looked at me and said something that stuck with me ever since. "I don't need a file card to say good morning to my wife in the morning. I'll know what to say." Okay, that's great. I didn't have to produce endless talking points. So, he was very comfortable. He had been at the NSC (National Security Council), he had been an ambassador in

Mozambique before, he had plenty of experience with the press. He did what every good ambassador does: he thought about and came up with the soundbite he wanted. He felt comfortable enough to say what he wanted to say, and said it. He didn't run it by us. I'm not sure if he ran it by Washington; I don't think he did. Washington would always support the things he said.

The IO, the press officer, had most of the off the record discussions with the media. In my two-year assignment there, I did a lot of interviews. Then, this was also when the war in Serbia and Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia started. So, we were bombing Belgrade and other places, and it became a huge issue in Peru. You wouldn't imagine that it would be, but everybody in the world was concerned about it. The ambassador looked at me in one country team meeting and he basically said, "I want you to get out there and make the case as often as possible to groups." So, I did a lot of public speaking.

I also did a lot of press there. We just wanted to be out and about in the public eye. I remember accepting an invitation to talk about nuclear weapon proliferation for a late-night television show, a news show. I'm barely 3/3, barely in country, and I've got to go get my Spanish out to talk about nuclear proliferation. Now, why would Peru be interested? Everybody's interested.

Q: Yeah. Latin America's a nuclear-free zone now. They're members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

DICKSON: Nevertheless, there were people in international relations who followed this. I remember that the topic came up in a conversation I had in Mexico as well. They were very proud of their non-proliferation status. One of their former diplomats was a Nobel Peace Prize winner for his non-proliferation stance. I said, "Where did this interest in Mexico come from?"

He answered me – again, my ignorance was astoundingly deep – and said, "Have you ever looked at a map and seen how close we are to Los Angeles? Do you not think the winds would be bringing nuclear fallout to us? It matters to us, obviously."

So, I put my tail between my legs and said, "Of course, *por supuesto.*"

Anyway, the other thing that happened in Peru during the bombing in Belgrade was, I remember a newspaper headline that said, "After Belgrade, Lima." You probably saw this too, Mark, in Latin America. There's such a non-interventionist strain in Latin American foreign policy that people jump to the conclusion that if America feels free to intervene in Belgrade and the former Yugoslavia, then they would feel free to intervene in Peru militarily, even though the idea of us coming into Peru with our military at the time was just about the furthest thing on anybody's mind. It didn't even make it to the desk of anybody. In their eyes, Peru is the center of the world, and they think, oh, this could happen to us next, just as easily as it's taking place in a different part of the world.

Q: What was the media like in Peru? Were there developments in on-line media that the embassy could use in its outreach?

DICKSON: That's a great question, Mark. They had a very lively, independent media. They had a very small government-sponsored television. Peru radio was really the avenue of reaching Peruvians. So, we did a lot with *Radio Programas de Peru* (Radio Programs of Peru). They were the preferred way of reaching people and getting our statement out, because 95 percent – I don't know if it's that high, but a lot – of people listen to their programming. It was a one-shot deal. It wasn't a lingering headline. You'd make the statement, and it was out there, almost like Twitter, except Twitter has a lifespan. With radio, you just get it out, and there's nothing written to follow up. But that was a preferred way of doing it, and we did and were very active. We had a good Voice of America program in Peru, and we had somebody in our office who was taping Voice of America. We would then send tapes over to *Radio Programas* so that they could replay them as their own programming or as sponsored programming. So, it was a rich and receptive media environment.

The other thing that we got into while we were there was press freedom. It was a media environment under duress from the president, because there was criticism of him and his party as he, little by little, eroded and changed human rights and constitutional requirements. He wanted to run for a second term; he wanted to run for a third term. The press was very vocally against him, and he threatened it. He took over television stations, closed them down. I remember one manager of a television station coming to my office seeking asylum. What he ended up doing was going across the border to Bolivia and then heading to Miami and requesting political asylum there because he thought he was going to be arrested and thrown in jail. He quite likely could have been; there were others in jail. So, that was another component of our work, trying to promote freedom of the press at the time. The president was trying to restrict newsprint and use the distribution of newsprint through imports to favored newspapers. It ran the gamut. You will remember this, I think, from Latin America and much of the world; there's a paper that's left-oriented, there's a paper that's conservative, and that's the way we would do our reporting to Washington, identifying reports coming from the left-leaning or right-leaning or centrist paper.

The one other thing that we were working on in Peru at the time was counter-narcotics. This was big. When we did our country plan, this was always number one or two. How would we organize a counternarcotics strategy? The Peruvian government had just agreed to a program that was both stick and carrot. They had agreed to a shootdown policy of planes trying to carry coca leaves outside of Peru. They would shoot these planes down and we would offer, through USAID, alternative development programs. It was successful for a long time. So, we in the press office got involved less in the shootdown, obviously, but certainly in promoting alternative development. That was a big issue for us, as well as promoting prevention programs in the cities, trying to say that the more you produce locally, the more you're going to consume locally, and it's going to become a problem.

It was a success story for quite some time, because of the number of acres devoted to coca production. The statistics we had in terms of the export of drugs also went way down. Peru was really getting a handle on its own contributions to the war on drugs, though we didn't call it that. It was counter narcotics. So, that was another big aspect of our activities in Peru at that time, and we were very successful, again, in promoting alternative development with USAID.

Q: Now, I just want to go back for a moment. Once the MRTA guerrillas were apprehended or killed, did the security situation improve for you?

DICKSON: Yes, markedly. It was still a danger post, with all that that meant officially, and did not lose that status in the two years I was there. It lost it shortly thereafter. But again, there were still both elements of the Shining Path and the MRTA that were active but very much in decline. The leaders of organizations had been arrested or killed, and there just wasn't much activity. We were safe in our bunker. We had different requirements for moving around. Certainly, there were places that we were advised not to go in the interior, particularly where there were drug-growing regions.

Q: Another question about how you engaged with the public: How did you use your locally employed staff, your Foreign Service nationals? Were they involved with outreach in any way?

DICKSON: Absolutely. We had a terrific staff of locally employed Peruvians, on both the press and the cultural side. I can't speak highly enough of them. I don't want to rate this group of people compared to other countries where I served, but these people were tremendous. They were very energetic. We were very active program-wise. We did big conferences on counter-drug, for example. We had a mayor's conference where we invited all the mayors in Peru. It was a major event. We brought in speakers from the U.S. and had different facilitators. That took months of planning, but we pulled it off, largely because of the local staff. We did a lot. We had excellent press staff as well, divided between print and broadcast media. They had great relations with their counterparts in the media. We were a go-to place for a lot of local media, both in terms of sources and stories but also for protection. We were very vocal in trying to protect freedom of the press, and they knew it.

Q: Did you have to deal with eliminating urban myths that sometimes grow up in Latin America about what the U.S. is doing?

DICKSON: I don't remember. This is one case where I think where history plays a role, and why the local staff is so important. Many times, an officer would parachute in, and I quote one ambassador in my book who said, "We have this issue where every officer thinks that history begins with their arrival." At the time, we called locally employed staff FSNs, and they knew a different history and prolonged history, and they kept reminding us. But there were certain myths. One of the things we did, Mark, was I hired a Foreign Service spouse to prepare a history of U.S.-Peruvian relations. It was a little booklet that we handed out on the Fourth of July. It was almost like a very small yearbook. It was

divided up into business and history, and it was pretty remarkable, the American involvement that had been there for a long time.

We had a very lively, successful cohort of binational centers in Peru. I think there were seven. They were independent of us. Years before, they had been more closely affiliated with the U.S. embassy, but we had cut the cord. They found out, these independent boards who started running these institutes that they could make a lot of money just by teaching English and charging just enough that many middle class and lower-middle class people could afford it. The demand for learning English in Latin America that I saw across the continent is huge. There were thousands and thousands of students. These binational centers were great venues for cultural programming and educational programming. It's really a little-known fact in the United States, the importance of these binational centers, first to our relations to these countries and second as good friends.

It's really incredible. We don't realize what good friends we have in these places where there are histories that have not been so positive. We didn't have that kind of history in Peru, quite frankly, with one exception. I didn't really fully appreciate this until I started writing the book. This had to do with Hiram Bingham in Machu Picchu. I had mentioned we had this nice cultural property agreement that was not retroactive; it started in 1997 and went forwards. Our friends who worked with us on this were very polite and civil and correct with us. We knew that there were issues with Hiram Bingham, Yale, and these artifacts from Machu Picchu, but they didn't, as they could have very easily, hit us over the head with a two by four, with an impossible ask, "When is Yale going to return these?"

Yale's holdings of Machu Picchu items came up in the press in a small way. It was never directed at the U.S. embassy, and it was only when I started writing this book after retirement that I found that the perception of Hiram Bingham in Peru is very mixed at best. We all look at him as an Indiana Jones who discovered Machu Picchu in the early 1900s, a kind of hero. The Peruvians, even then, when he was there, had a different view of him, as someone who was taking things out of Peru without permission. He knew it too, at the time, because he had a lot of difficulty getting approvals to take things out. He signed an agreement that all of these artifacts could be returned to Peru when they asked, and he took things out of Peru, maybe not with all of their permission. They ended up at Yale, and when Peru was asking, Yale would not give them back for many years.

It was a subtext when I was there, but when you talk about urban myths, I was unaware of it, but I knew that there was this misperception or difference in perceptions of Hiram Bingham between what the U.S. thought of him as and what the Peruvians thought of him as.

Q: Peru is also, as you mentioned, a place with lots of culture. It also has a bit of a history of the public intellectual or the public poet or artist who is always asked what their opinion is and so on. Were you able to work with those people as champions or amplifiers of U.S. messages?

DICKSON: So, we certainly had a lot of contact with the public intellectuals in the university scene. The University of San Marcos was the oldest university in the hemisphere and in Peru, and it was kind of an off-limits place because it had been a center of revolt. Many people were saying that the *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) had entered it. It was only when I was there that we began to really push a little at the corners and start doing programming there, but very minimally. We still had contact with them. As I mentioned, the archaeologist who helped us with the memorandum of understanding was an archaeologist from San Marcos.

We did not have a lot of contact with Mario Vargas Llosa, who was perhaps the best known. He was not present all the time in Peru. He was by then an intellectual on the world stage. He had not won the Nobel prize yet. He had run for president and lost to Fujimori, a shocking thing to most people, but only shocking because people thought that this intellectual, elite member of Peruvian elite society didn't really connect with the majority voting as much as an unknown man of Japanese ancestry was able to connect.

But I would certainly say we had a lot of contacts. The ambassador was very good friends with a university public administration or business administration teacher named Francisco Toledo, a former Fulbrighter who ended up becoming president of Peru after Fujimori's last election was overturned and he was thrown out of office. They had another election, and Toledo won. But we had a lot of contact. As you know, it's just remarkable how easy it is for someone from the U.S. embassy to pick up a phone and say, "I'm John Dickson from the U.S. embassy, and I'd like to speak to…" Just because you can put the phrase "U.S. embassy" out there, people return your calls. They want that kind of contact.

Q: This is something that I found even as budgets for Public Diplomacy went down. The ability to invoke and have access, at least in Latin America, did not necessarily go down. It might not have been as frequent, because you don't have money now, to invite people to large parties or throw the big galas that we used to, but still, the glow of the U.S. embassy still had some cred in the local society.

DICKSON: And it was a two-edged sword on that, Mark, because at the same time there's a reputation that the U.S. is, first, behind everything, and second, can fix everything. So, the amount of power people in influence thought that we had was way above what we actually enjoyed. We never fully appreciated, and I don't think Americans fully appreciate, how highly regarded the U.S. still is around the world in that respect. A little bit of it is that, like I said, people think we can do more than we actually can. I don't know how true that is after Katrina and Afghanistan. I think there's probably been some erosion on that. But there's also a tremendous amount of goodwill, I found, in Peru, even in the harshest, most critical climates when we were talking about human rights in Peru. I was criticized in the press by name, and our ambassador would drive to work and see "Jett, go home," written on the walls, probably put up there by Peruvian intelligence. They did not like what he was saying. I guess they could have kicked him out, but it never got to that point.

Q: You had mentioned Mario Vargas Llosa. What about Alan Garcia?

DICKSON: So, Alan Garcia was also in exile at the time. He was almost railroaded and sent out. He had driven that country down into catastrophe. People hated him on the street. He had inherited a country that was viable, and terrorism got worse, and the economy got worse. He disregarded debt payments; he flouted it. The country just went through a very rough period. When Fujimori came into power, he was able to recover and stabilize and arrest terrorist leaders and have a viable economy. So, people really liked what Fujimori had done, on one level. I suspect that if Fujimori had decided to walk away after one or two terms, he would be Peru's greatest president, but he's now a disgraced person who tried to linger on as a power-hungry autocrat, and he's in jail.

Q: Yeah. The reason I mentioned Alan Garcia is because it's amazing how often in Latin America, leaders who failed somehow remake themselves and come back.

DICKSON: Yeah, I agree. I think that people were stunned that he actually had that capacity and was able to come back. Then, they were even more stunned recently when he committed suicide. He was just a remarkable character, almost out of a Mario Vargas Llosa novel.

Q: Exactly. Yeah. Everything was a bit larger than life, and in some ways, smaller. Now, along with all of this stuff going on, were there some unexpected things that came up, like major VIP visits or natural disasters and so on, that you had to deal with while you were there?

DICKSON: I don't remember big visits. We did not have any. I was not pulled away to go to visit other places. My first presidential visit was when I was in Mexico, when we had four presidential visits. There was no secretary of State visit in Peru. In terms of natural disasters, there was an El Niño flooding one of the years that I was there. This is a country that is a desert all along the coast, except for these rivers. Small towns would be along the rivers. It was remarkable how quickly these El Niño rains flooded towns and cities. We did not have a lot to do with it, but Fujimori was out there. There are actually pictures of him leaning out of a helicopter, rescuing somebody who was stranded in a boat in the middle of a new lake. That's just the kind of leader he was, being out there.

But another kind of disaster was brewing – the man-made kind. This was that the on-again, off-again border war between Ecuador and Peru. It erupted again. So, there was fighting along the border. There was a rush on both sides to nationalism, especially in the media. "We've got to defend our *patria* (country) against the Ecuadorians or against the Peruvians." It was not simply fed by the politicians. People were getting riled up really quickly. So, the two embassies in Quito and Lima had a couple of teleconferences to discuss what could be done. We agreed that there was probably something we could do here to ease tensions. Both the PAO in Quito and I decided that we would engage in some exchanges to bring Peruvian university and media leaders together to talk about what was going on and this rush to judgment, rush to Randolph Hearst, rush to war mentality.

The idea of exchanges at a more grassroots level puts me in mind of Tex Harris who introduced me to a term used in South Africa to support the move to majority rule. It's called "track-two diplomacy." It's not his term, but Tex came to South Africa trying to figure out a way to employ the methods of track-two diplomacy. In FSI at the time, a former FSO named Joe Montville was very prominent in trying to get together members of civil society who could serve as diplomats and provide a little cover – I'm mixing metaphors – or till the soil enough so that it becomes easier for those government officials involved in formal negotiations. So, with Joe Montville and with an organization called Search for Common Ground that works a lot in Israel, we drew on these experts. We did that in South Africa, but also when I got to Peru and this war broke out between Peru and Ecuador, I thought that this would be a good opportunity to do the same thing. It works well as a support for formal negotiations. In our case, we sent the university and media representatives to a place in Boston where they sat in a university conference room for a week and got to know each other. A facilitator guided them through just what it means to reach agreement. I don't know the exact questions or stages that they guided them through, but it was really getting to know each other and getting to know what would happen in the event of war, what it would mean to them, and what they could do.

It worked. We didn't have many people on the exchange, but they were the right people. I think there were 12 people on each side who met. They met in the U.S. in Washington. It was second-Track Diplomacy in FSI. They ran encounters and did some travel. This was a group of 24 people. They came back and started writing articles and reporting in a way that reduced the tone and made it a little possible – I'm sure we were not alone – for the diplomats to have room to come up with some kind of agreement that was short of continued war in the jungles across a border that, to many outsiders, had nothing there. But there were long-standing grievances between Peru and Ecuador and Peru and Chile over borders, so it was very quick to light the flame of hostility. So, again, this was a public diplomacy program where we were able to use our public diplomacy tools in diplomatic ways to advance U.S. interests there.

Regarding the formal diplomacy, I know that Luigi Einaudi, as a representative of the OAS, did a lot of the heavy lifting to resolve the border conflict, as well as a lot of people in the State Department. I remember him coming to the embassy. He had talks with Ambassador Jett and counterparts. He certainly did not have much to do with any of us. But he was a very famous and well-known name for getting this done. While this was indispensable, it can lead to a false assumption that only the great men, or great women can solve things at a negotiating table or summit. Certainly, in the past, you've read things like, "Oh, do we need these embassies? Do we need this? I, the great negotiator, can do better. I alone can fix everything." What people don't realize is the number of issues that don't rise to the level of a Luigi Einaudi or a Tony Blinken that need to be resolved on a daily basis so that they don't rise to that level. So, what we did helped prepare the ground for Luigi and his work.

Specifically, what we saw was an amazing turnaround among the op-ed columnists and university professors who went to Boston. Before going to Boston, they were beating the war drums. When they came back, they were writing columns about their experience

getting to know their counterparts in Ecuador and the consequences of rushing into a greater war. The head of the Chamber of Commerce and others also came back, and in their own circles began to spread the word a little. It helped. I don't know how much it helped, but it certainly did help the process that was taking place at a closed-door level and at a higher level. I did want to bring that in, this thing called track two diplomacy, that really, I learned about through Tex. We employed it in South Africa because there was a civil war going on between the rival Black African anti-Apartheid factions, between Inkatha and the ANC. We did a little of that there, too.

I'm not an expert in this by any means, but when you look at some of the major peace agreements – and the one in my lifetime was Northern Ireland – that was really started by civilians who were just fed up and pushed this. It's succeeded so far, although I know the peace is tenuous and violence is always ready to come back at any time. But the fact that it was these people, mostly women, who just said, "Enough is enough. We have to stop this and have a better life for ourselves and our children," was just… That's what often happens at the lower level. Then it allows someone like George Mitchell to come in and work at a different level to hammer things out.

Q: This is why we record the oral histories of people below the level of ambassador. A lot of these behind-the-scenes support activities never see the light of day unless the actors come forward and preserve their legacy of service. In a similar vein, you mentioned archeological sites. This reminds me that Peru has a sizable indigenous population that has lived on the margins of the economy and often expresses distrust of the government. What kind of outreach did you do with this group?

DICKSON: Well, what's interesting in Peru was that the indigenous were, I would say, part of our daily interaction. Maybe they were called *criollos* (pure-blooded Spaniard born in South/Central America) in terms of race. The Peruvians were very conscious of, is this person European, is this person mixed race, is this person indigenous? We did not make those distinctions. It was just less obvious to us. What we did do, Mark, was we had a lot of contact with what I will call the slums of Peru or the *pueblos jovenes* (young towns). These were people who, escaping the terrorism of the Andes, flooded into the cities. There was no housing for them, so they started building shacks, and then the shacks became more permanent brick. It was the same pattern. First, they would put up cardboard, and then a couple of years later, they'd have enough money to put up plywood, and then years later they'd have cement blocks.

But they were called young towns or new villages, *pueblos jóvenes.* A lot of these were also hotbeds of terrorism, at the time. So, there were no inroads in these places for American embassy people. What happened was, there was a young city council guy from one of them who came into the embassy and invited us there. So, we, as Public Diplomacy, went out for the very first time into these, and we started doing programming there. There was a Peruvian American who was an astronaut. This was huge. It was so big that Fujimori, the president, made a call to Carlos Noriega, the astronaut, when he was in space. It was publicized. As you would try to take advantage of it, any PAO or embassy would try to highlight this. Then Carlos Noriega came to Peru, and it was like

Michael Jordan coming. We took him to this *pueblo joven,* and he was mobbed. Everywhere he went, he was mobbed.

Then, we got the local binational center, which was dealing with middle class and lower-middle class people in the city, to do outreach in these, for want of a better word, slums outside of Lima. But you know, it was interesting; some of our locally employed staff lived in these places and were eking by, working very hard to get in every day on a commute. I have a picture right here on my wall that I want to show you of me going to one of the schools, if you don't mind.

Q: Again, in these pueblo jovenes… *These were squatter communities, essentially, right?*

DICKSON: Right. There was a school that changed its name to the *Colegio Estadounidense de Perú* (American School of Peru). This was the picture. I don't know if you can see. But here I am at the school, just getting mobbed by students. They were so happy to see an American. This man here is the head of the binational center in Lima, and this man here was the city counselor who invited me in. We played soccer there. We brought an American embassy team out there. We just did what one would normally do to, again, fill up the basket of goodwill in these towns. We went out to the Altiplano, the communities in the Andes, and promoted alternative development but also left literature about Fulbright. We did radio programs out there. So, we had a lot of outreach to all sectors of the society.

Q: Now, did that include women and women's empowerment training and so on?

DICKSON: Yeah. Here, again, we used the self-help programs. There was a sewing collective that wanted funding, and there was this man who was a city counselor applied for it and got a couple of self-help grants, as well. So, we made those interactions. Again, the timing was just right. Two years before I arrived, no American embassy person would've set foot in this *pueblo joven* via El Salvador, on the outskirts of Lima. But certainly, by the time I arrived, shortly after the Japanese embassy rescue, it was safe enough for me to go with FSN colleagues and do programming in these places.

Q: As you're doing all this work in Peru, you know that the decision's been made to integrate USIA into State. Did that have any effect on what you were doing there during those years?

DICKSON: From a morale standpoint, yes. We began to talk about how we were going to merge. What was it going to look like within the embassy, within the Public Diplomacy section? Who would go where? We had a wonderfully cohesive section, and people were very sad that the admin components of USIS Lima were going to be moved over to the State Department. Those people were sad to be leaving. They liked the coziness and the familial nature of USIS. They were worried about getting swallowed up by the embassy, what they deemed as a cold and large and heartless place. That wasn't true, but there was a fair amount of just walking people through what was going to happen. "You're not going to lose your job. You're going to stay. You're going to be in a different office, but

your friends will be here. You'll have lunch with everybody in the cafeteria still." The merger had not happened in Peru while I was there, but I went back later, and I think people's worst fears were allayed. But in the middle of a change like that, people's natural tendency is to assume the worst and not to trust. So, we tried to be honest and transparent with them as much as we could, but still, change is hard, and in the unexpected, people expect the worst.

Q: I have run out of questions on Peru, but I may have not asked one or two that you want to answer.

DICKSON: No, I think that's good, certainly for Peru. It was short. I was only there for two years. We had extended a third year, and then it became apparent that all three American officers were going to be leaving at the same time at the end of three years. I just alerted colleagues in Washington that either I could extend to a fourth year, or if there was a place they thought I should leave after two years, they could let me know. For continuity's sake, particularly at a time of merger, it would've been not as helpful. So, what they ended up doing was breaking my extension. Although I was thinking about going back to Africa, they sent me to be PAO in Mexico. This tour will be unforgettable, In fact, I devote two chapters of my book, *History Shock,* to Mexico. One is on the legacy of the 1848 war, what the Mexicans call the War of North American Intervention, or what we refer to as the Mexican American War or the U.S.-Mexican War of 1848. The second chapter's on immigration.

Q: Now, as you leave Peru, what year is that?

DICKSON: That's 1999. It's a month before USIA was dissolved and merged into the State Department. That happened on October 1st, 1999. I arrived in Peru at the end of August.

Q: Okay. Did you do any significant training in between posts?

DICKSON: No, not at all.

Q: The reason I ask that is because in your book, History Shock, *you address a fair amount of the history between the U.S. and Mexico, in particular the immigration issue. Of course, that could have been a topic of instruction or training for you as PAO before you went out, but the State Department did not address that.*

DICKSON: There had already been a gap in Mexico City because the former PAO had, I think, reached time in class or time in service or whatever, and he had to leave. So, there was a vacancy there. For one reason or another, I took my home leave and then went right to post. Like I said in my book, I did as much as I could to inform myself and read as much as I could about the history of Mexico. This was less so – and this is where I focus in the book – on the history of U.S.-Mexican relations or U.S.-Peruvian relations. It was mostly getting to know the history of the country where we were assigned.

But anyway, it was a lot of on the job, self-taught, self-informed instruction when I got there. Immigration was a huge issue, at the time. There were other issues, as well. One of them was counter-narcotics. That may have been the most prominent one in the beginning when I got there, because Mexico was a transit country, and most of the drugs that came into the United States came through Mexico. We didn't credit Mexico with doing enough.

We had this process, Mark, that you may remember called certification, where every year we would write a report and certify if the countries were doing enough to cooperate with the United States. Mexico often did not meet those standards. It was a huge issue in Mexico. They treated it as a slap in the face. There was a long history of problems in this counter-narcotic cooperation, going back to the murder of a DEA (United States Drug Enforcement Administration) agent, Kiki Camarena, and the abduction of a doctor who was involved in his torture. It was an illegal abduction, and the doctor had to be sent back once found in the U.S. So, then the Mexicans decided to cap the number of DEA agents that were there.

So, we then changed course a little and had more FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigations) agents come down who were involved in counternarcotics activities. They were definitely FBI, but counternarcotics was one of their biggest portfolios in Mexico, because there weren't enough DEA agents. Now, what is enough? They capped it at 44. So, we thought 44 DEA agents in Mexico was too few. That just shows you how important that was. We had a huge law enforcement presence in Mexico, working with counterparts in the Mexican government, on the understanding that we would not be conducting operations, and everything we did would have Mexican government approval and permission. We would be doing this in league, in concert, with our Mexican counterparts. They would be doing the operations, and we would be coordinating with them and so forth. So, anyway, I would say that even more than immigration, at the beginning, counternarcotics cooperation was the biggest issue.

Q: Okay. As '99 is going into 2000, how big an issue was the U.S. election there, looking at it from the Mexican side of the border?

DICKSON: So, it was followed, as they all are in Mexico, very closely. The fact that it was a governor of Texas who was running, and a governor of Texas who ran on the fact that his foreign policy credentials were almost exclusively in dealing with Mexico as the government of Texas, meant that he had a very favorable opinion of Mexico. So, they were watching it and interested. I don't think they had an opinion. I don't remember who they would've rather had, Gore or Bush.

Here's what I do remember: you know that embassies have these election night parties. So, we organized this big election night party. We had all the trappings and had hundreds of people, Mexicans, come. Certainly, we were watching on television, we had the feed in. It was complicated because we had to wire the satellite antenna from the embassy off to the nearby hotel where we held it. There were all those kinds of complications. Then, we were watching it, and you know what happened. We're a couple of hours behind the

East Coast. The election was called, and then it was reversed, and then it wasn't called, and we just went home and said, "Okay, we don't know!"

So, that was a little bit of a confusion, and actually, it lasted more than a month, if I'm not mistaken, until it was called. Mexicans got more than a little bit of a schadenfreude kick out of it. They started talking about needing to send observers to the U.S. elections. You know, people do that more often now because of the troubled state of our elections, but that was really the first time that there was this poke in the eye about Americans who have observers going everywhere. They were like, "Well, maybe you ought to have observers in your elections as well." But I don't think there was anything, other than comments on the process, saying who would be better, Gore or Bush, at the time. Bush certainly sent out all the right signals to Mexico.

Of more interest, quite frankly, in the 2000 election in the U.S. was the 2000 election in Mexico in July. So, that was extremely dramatic, and one of the high points of my career was being myself an observer. The Mexicans invited diplomats to come to their Institute of Federal Elections and to watch. So, we in the embassy, all of us, spread out to different places to watch this election and then just watched. The prior election, in 1994 in Mexico, and the one before that in 1988, brought accusations of fraud. The initial election results were going against the ruling PRI party, and there were urban myths that somebody pulled the plug in the election commission and then switched the votes around. Then, Carlos Salinas came into power.

Well, the president, Ernesto Zedillo, in 2000 really made it well-known that none of this was going to happen. This was going to be a free and fair election. They had a very credible Institute of Federal Elections that ran the election. Early on in the evening, when it looked like the opposition candidate Vicente Fox was moving in the right direction, Zedillo came out and said, "We're not touching anything. We're going to let the process play out and let the election take place."

What happened, almost as euphoric as Mandela getting released in South Africa, was the calling of the election in favor of Vicente Fox. It was the first time a non-PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional,* Industrial Revolutionary Party) candidate had won in 70 years. The street outside of the embassy, the main route, *Avenida Reforma.* (Reform Avenue), was packed with people. We were at the center roundabout of the *Angel de La Independencia* (statue of the Angel of Independence). It was just celebratory. Until 2AM, people were singing and dancing. It was very dramatic.

So, in terms of elections in 2000, that was something that we looked forward to, a change. Although, we worked very well with Zedillo and his people. Vicente Fox had been an executive for Coca-Cola and was the governor of a state. He was a conservative, and he really reached out to Mexicans in the U.S., encouraging Mexicans in the U.S. to vote, and that really helped him. Before, they did not do that as much. I talked a little bit about that in my book, that they looked down on the Mexicans in the U.S. as people who had left and abandoned Mexico, by and large. But Fox embraced them and said, "We're

going to have your back. We're going to work with the United States to make sure that your rights are protected."

So, we were looking forward to a relationship with Fox in Mexico that would be substantially different than in the past. It certainly started out that way. Bush, the governor of Texas who became president, broke with tradition. The tradition was that the first foreign visit was to Canada, always, by any U.S. president. He broke with that tradition, and in February of 2001, his first foreign visit was to Mexico. It was a very high-profile visit for him and Fox. There was something about the love affair between the two border brothers. It was a wonderful visit by all counts. They rode horses together; there were lots of visuals that signaled a new tone.

Now, I'm just going on, but this is when, I think, the immigration kind of overtook counter-drug cooperation as the principal issue. Fox made it so. He wanted us to fix our immigration system. He talked about doing a whole package. He called it "the whole enchilada" that would be not just protecting the rights of Mexicans in the United States, but also some kind of regularization program that would allow Mexicans to go to work, come back into the United States. It would strengthen security and safety along the border. He saw a package that would deal with that, and some kind of route for citizenship for Mexicans in the U.S. Bush embraced it. There's no question about it. He thought that this was something that could be doable.

At that first meeting, they set up a high-level working group with the secretary of State and the minister of foreign affairs and the attorney general. So, it was Powell and Ashcroft. At the time, the Justice Department had a major role – this was pre-Homeland Security – in immigration. So, he just put Powell, Ashcroft, and their bureaucracies in charge, and they had the two counterparts for high level discussions on what could be done in immigration.

Q: Interestingly enough, as well, because there are so many American citizens who live in Mexico, they were also looking to complete what's called a totalization agreement, where the social security earnings would be taxed in one place. In other words, if you, as an American dual citizen moved to Acapulco permanently and you wanted to get your social security earnings, it would only be taxed in Mexico, as opposed to being taxed in both. But it didn't work, and it was one of the first signals that a big enchilada was not going to happen.

DICKSON: Where were you, Mark, when this totalization agreement was going on?

Q: I was in Armenia, but the reason I know about it is because I've interviewed several other people who were involved in trying to make the immigration agreement between the U.S. and Mexico happen at various levels with various pieces, up to John Maisto who was the senior director for Latin America at the beginning of the Bush administration. George W. Bush made very strong efforts, and at one point he gave up. Maisto quotes him as saying, "I'm failing because of my own party. I can't get it through the Republican Party."

DICKSON: Yeah. So, totalization was a proposal. We had done it with other countries, and throughout my five years there, it was an effort that we kept trying to push through. It was not just for Americans in Mexico, but also for Mexicans in the U.S. What happened, as my understanding goes, is we had multiple Social Security officials come down and interact. The way it works is that Mexicans and undocumented Mexicans pay into our social security, even if they have a fake social security card. So, what the Social Security Administration said is that they have hundreds of millions of dollars set aside that Mexicans have paid in for and by law they can't put it in the regular pool. It's just sitting there, waiting to be claimed.

So, we tried to work a deal. It was so much money that it dwarfed whatever totalization agreements we had with Britain, France, or any other country. I think the sheer size of the amount of money we had in the Social Security Administration in the U.S. that belonged to Mexicans who had paid into it really made it much more difficult. This is going back to what you said about it being "people in my own party," in the Republican Party. It would've been political dynamite for the U.S. to start paying out social security to Mexicans who had worked in the U.S. without documents, underground, and we were now giving them these earnings they had gotten in unlawful ways in the eyes of this. I think that at some point, it was just a bridge too far, and it couldn't have happened.

Q: Right. But all of the other ideas, as you mention in the chapter in your book, regardless of the goodwill between both parties just could not create even a portion of immigration reform.

DICKSON: The reason why Fox was interested in the whole enchilada, and why even George Bush tried twice in his presidency, the second one at the beginning of 2004, was that the idea was that you give something to everybody when you address security at the border and a path to citizenship and work opportunities. It became apparent to me, as an observer, that immigration reform in Mexico has built-in political opponents in both parties. So, there are people in the Democratic Party who are on both sides of the fence. Labor does not want an immigration package with Mexico; they're afraid of wages going down. Human rights people want to get these people out of working in the shadows. That's the Democratic side. On the Republican side, business loves the idea of immigrants because of lower labor costs, while there's another side of the Republican Party that is worried about cultural issues like the identity of the United States and having too many Mexicans, too many non-English speaking people in the U.S.

So, it was difficult, even within each political party, and that's when I realized that this is very unlikely to take place. Our mantra, which I mentioned in the book, was "We don't negotiate immigration," because it's a domestic issue. Therefore, we have to negotiate with ourselves in the Senate and the White House to come up with some package and present it and then work with the Mexicans.

Well, the history that I found out was we in fact had negotiated immigration with Mexico in the past. I had heard of the *Braceros* (farm workers agreement) when I was in Mexico,

but in a different context. The context of the *Braceros* that I heard was this program that started in World War II that brought Mexicans to the U.S. to work in American farmland and American industry to replace male workers who were off fighting the war. Part of the package was that a portion of their salary the Mexican government would keep it for their pension. So, when the *Braceros* returned to Mexico, when they reached a certain age, they would be able to tap into this pension. That was the issue on the *Braceros* when I was in Mexico because nobody knew what happened to that fund that the Mexican government took. There were all kinds of accusations.

So, that's how I heard of the *Braceros.* When I was doing my research for the book, I found out that yes, in fact, we did negotiate with the Mexican government on this program. So, the idea of us saying we don't negotiate, well, we didn't know the history. We absolutely did negotiate with the Mexicans. It was the State Department that negotiated this agreement. We then presented it to Congress to pass. When it expired after the war, Congress had to approve its renewal, and the U.S. State Department just negotiated a continuation without the approval of Congress. A year or so later, Congress finally caught up and approved what had been negotiated. Meanwhile, people were still continuing to work.

Now, I'm not saying that the *Bracero* agreement was ideal. There were all kinds of problems with it, and certainly labor and human rights people don't like that history; they still think people were taken advantage of during that time. But my point is not that I was pushing a renewal of the *Bracero.* My point is that we negotiated something with Mexico on immigration. So, the Mexicans knew this. They knew the history. I didn't. That was what I was talking about.

The other thing that happened, Mark, was 9/11.

Q: Right. One quick thing before 9/11. Bush goes to Mexico for an early summit with Fox. Fox comes back right before 9/11. I think it was even a state visit. He speaks to Congress. Do you recall, from your point of view, what was going on at that moment?

DICKSON: So, it was still the warmth of the honeymoon between the two new leaders and the two countries. This high-level working group with Powell and Ashcroft had met one or two times. It was going to be a rough go. As you mentioned, Bush was saying that he had to convince people in his own party. But they kept at it. They knew this was a goal they wanted to do. The idea of Fox coming to the U.S. for Bush's first state visit in September, and giving this speech in front of Congress, was, from the Mexican point of view, a way to push this forward. It worked. We had multiple Congressional delegations come down to Mexico. Jesse Helms from North Carolina came down. He had no time for Mexico at all pre-Fox, but he went in and gave Mexico the biggest hug, both rhetorically and practically. He loved meeting Fox. Senator Biden also came down. All kinds of co-dels (Congressional delegations) came down, and everybody was really looking forward to this new era. So, that's, I think, the climate that Fox encountered when he came to Washington. As our former ambassador, Jeffrey Davidow, said, we gave Mexico and Fox the biggest hug in the days prior to 9/11. He came back to Mexico in glory, and

everybody was waxing eloquently in the newspapers and the media about this wonderful visit.

Then, 9/11 happened. The Mexicans will say that 9/11 derailed the immigration talks and forced the United States to turn its attention elsewhere. We were distracted, they felt, and didn't focus on immigration. If we did focus on immigration, we were more focused on border security and worried about all these people in the shadows working who we did not know, including some of the 9/11 hijackers, who we didn't really know who they were or how long they had been in the U.S. That was what the Mexicans said. There is certainly a large grain of truth in that. But as I said, we were already having trouble and difficulty in pushing this agenda forward pre-9/11 because of the internal contradictions in each political party. When Bush tried again a few years later, those internal contradictions were still there. When Obama tried in his presidency, those contradictions were still there, as well. So, now, I think what's happening is that people are trying to slice off what we can get done. Bush's theory was to give something to everybody; Obama wanted to beef up security but find a path to regularization. What happened was that we beefed up security and added more border patrol, but we couldn't even do the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) people.

So, anyway, what happened at 9/11 was obviously a jolt through the global system and a jolt to the relationship. You were in Armenia at the time, you said, Mark? I'd be curious what happened in Armenia.

Q: Oh, let me explain, I'm sorry. I was literally coming back from my tour in Armenia when 9/11 happened. I was on home leave. But that was the immediate previous tour. So, I was not in Latin America at the time.

DICKSON: Oh. What happened in Mexico was that people were conflicted. For historic purposes, that was a large segment of the population that said, "Oh, the U.S. had it coming to them." They felt the U.S. was a country that was intervening in everybody else's business, and now we finally got payback. I write in the book about a leftist newspaper that printed a full-page ad in very small print that listed each of the "interventions" the United States had ever had. Some of them were stretches of the imagination; some of them were obviously true. But there was a little bit of schadenfreude, "this is what you had coming to you" sentiment.

At the same time, on the other hand, there was genuine worry and feelings of shock. There was the solidarity that we saw in other parts of the world in Mexico, too. So, it was divided. Now, Vicente Fox, in this climate, didn't know what to do. He paused and hesitated, and all these other presidents and leaders around the world were calling Bush, saying, "How can I help?" The Mexicans joined right away in invoking the provision in the OAS charter to protect and defend other members of the charter in the event of an outside attack. So, the foreign minister was very forceful and quick to sign onto the declaration that they would invoke the Rio Treaty, as it was called. In fact, Colin Powell was in Lima, Peru, at a meeting of the OAS on 9/11 with his counterpart in Mexico and all the foreign ministers. So, they invoked it almost immediately. Mexico did that

formally, but it took Fox days and days to reach out to the United States. It became more and more evident and glaring that this man who had just been feted with a state visit and an address to Congress couldn't return the hug at a time that the United States needed it.

Q: Oh, there was one thing. In his address to Congress, in that week before 9/11, Fox managed to say something that was really disastrous for his media appeal in the U.S. He announced he was taking Mexico out of the Rio Treaty. He had declared that the Cold War was over, and the Rio Treaty of mutual self-defense was no longer important because the big threat is gone. One week later, it ends up being Brazil, who is always trying to outdo Mexico in Latin American foreign policy, that invokes Rio. But because it takes a year or so from the announcement of leaving, Mexico still took on some responsibilities until it formally left.

DICKSON: That's a very good memory, and you're right. I do remember that. Like, why is he pulling out of Rio? It sends the wrong message. I think he was saying we were in a new era. I think he was also, when I remember the commentary, trying to show a little independence. Mexicans didn't want to think he was Bush's poodle. So, here's Mexico, standing up to something Mexico wants for its sovereignty. This doesn't make sense for Mexico to align itself with.

It was a major disappointment, I understand, for President Bush, that Mexico and Vicente Fox, who he thought was a friend, couldn't reach out in this hour of need. Fox, for political purposes, didn't feel he could do that or didn't have the spine to do it. This is the way that I think President Bush labeled it. I'm not going to speak for him, but basically, Fox didn't have the backbone to lead at this point, in the face of obvious opposition. This was certainly how it felt in the U.S., when so many other leaders and nations jumped in immediately.

Mexico's history of protecting internal sovereignty of nations really guided it over the next few years as the U.S. moved to a footing of war in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. Mexico kept falling back on this notion of national sovereignty and wouldn't align itself with us, certainly not on the Iraq War. That became another big issue for the U.S. Mexico had fought to get on the Security Council as one of the two seats for this hemisphere. So, Mexico was on the Security Council when Colin Powell convinced President Bush to go back to the Security Council and get a clean resolution to intervene in Iraq. It was pretty clear that Mexico didn't want to do it. Vicente Fox, as President Bush said, never showed his cards of what he would do. They hesitated and hesitated, in spite of entreaties, over and over, by the embassy, by the State Department, by the White House. Finally, the White House pulled the resolution, and there was never a vote. It saved Fox from having to show whether he was going to support the U.S. in its decision to intervene in Iraq or was he going to rather look to the voting population in Mexico, which probably did not want the U.S. to intervene.

Q: As Public Affairs Officer, what were you doing in terms of programs and activities as this historic year moved along?

DICKSON: So, a number of things on different elements of the relationship. We had a very large office with multiple Americans in the cultural section and in the press section. We had two AIOs (Assistant Information officers) and an IO. We had two ACAOs and a CAO. We had an admin officer. So, we were very active on all fronts, like on the immigration. We also did one track two program. There was a death on the border. Border Patrol had shot and killed someone trying to get across or someone who was throwing stones. They claimed self-defense. There was a Mexican rancher along the border who said, "The next time a Mexican dies at the hands of a Border Patrol officer, I'm going to kill Border Patrol agents."

So, it was an elevation of the threats across the border that shook me a little personally. So, I thought, let's get together the same kind of track two group that could go and meet with counterparts on both sides, see each other for who they are, and help diffuse tensions. We did this twice at New Mexico State University, right along the border, in Las Cruces. We invited people from universities and newspapers who went up to Las Cruces and met with their counterparts. I think Sheriff Joe Arpaio was in the group, as well as a few others. They listened to each other and came back, really, with different views. It was markedly able to help tap down the emotions that had been running high. They understood each other, and it was different. I remember one woman who was very much opposed to U.S. immigration policy. She was a university academic who wrote a lot. She came back and said it was very helpful to listen to the sheriff and hear his side of the story. Anyway, it helped.

Another thing we did, because we were worried about the number of Mexicans who lost their lives in this inhospitable climate, trying to sneak across the border, whether it was through water or desert, we organized with the Mexican Institute of National Migration a series of public service ads that would run on Mexican television, warning of the dangers. So, this was a good program from a number of viewpoints. One was that again, this was in cooperation with the Fox government. I don't know if the previous government would've wanted this kind of, "You can't go to the U.S.," subliminal message. But they were working with us. We paid for the filming, and they were able to get the ads on television, and we did focus groups. We did six different messages. They ran for a long time.

Did deaths go down because of it? One of our focus groups that I mentioned in the book was interesting. We brought in people who were of the demographic of those who would want to leave. Some of their comments were instructive. We had visuals of young people crossing, talking about the heat. Other people were saying the rivers were dangerous. Some of the comments from our focus group were, "That's nothing. What's wrong with that? My life in the village is just like that. The heat is terrible, the search for water is just as bad. That's my life. Why shouldn't I take my chances coming across the border?"

The one public service ad that resonated the most was with a mother and her baby, trying to cross. I mention, in the book, how important mothers are in Mexico. On Mother's Day, the country shuts down, and there's gridlock as everybody's trying to take their mother out to a meal. But this idea of a mother, teary with the possibility of losing her child as

they cross the river, was the one that resonated the most. So, those are some of the immigration things.

On the drug side, we worked with providing, as much as we could, access for the media to the embassy people who were working on drug cooperation, just to show that this is what we were doing. Everything we did had the approval of the Mexicans. It was 100% cooperation. Over and over, that was the drumbeat of working together. We coupled that with a series of programs on drug prevention. Mexico had its own growing problem of drug use and abuse, and we made the case, as is true of every country, that transit eventually seeps into the population and becomes an issue there. So, we did a lot with drug prevention and treatment programs, bringing a lot of U.S. specialists to Mexico under our speakers' program, inviting Mexicans to the U.S. to look at drug prevention programs in the U.S. We used the tools of public diplomacy in these hard national interest areas.

Q: Then, you had a large press section, but another problem in Mexico is Mexican journalists themselves getting killed or harassed for reporting honestly on things. Were we in any way active in supporting free media in Mexico?

DICKSON: Yes. Mexico has a very lively, active press. There are 10 or 11 dailies in Mexico City alone. Were journalists getting paid by elements to plant stories? There were things like that. But we were very active in promoting freedom of the press and committing to protect journalists' organizations. I remember getting a call from an American correspondent in Mexico City who had been threatened and called me up one night and said, "There's somebody outside my house. Can you come over and get out of here? I'm worried." Those kinds of actions, beyond programs, were things that we took and talked about quite regularly, I think, regarding freedom of the press. That was both in cultural programs and in freedom of the press programs.

Q: Then, also, as PAO did you travel? I know we have several consulates, and the consulates are responsible for their own consular areas, but I imagine that Mexico City also has a larger area of responsibility. How did you deal with that?

DICKSON: Yeah, so there were a lot of universities that we interacted with and that we would travel to in the Mexico City area. I remember in nearby Pueblo we had very good affiliations and extended exchange programs with the Universidad de las Americas, a private university that was there. We did have PAOs in Monterey, Guadalajara, and Tijuana. They had their own programs. I visited them in each of those places and went out with them. In fact, I went up to Sinaloa, the drug capital of Mexico at the time, to do a program with people up there. So, we certainly were out and about. It wasn't just me, but it was others as well who did have a lot of contact.

Of interest is that we did some programs on public administration and efficient government in the years prior to 2000 when Vicente Fox was governor. He was governor of the state of Guanajuato. They were very interested in the whole Gore reinvention, so we were doing programs even before I arrived with his state and people in the state. They

were inviting people from other states to come as we talked about efficiency and government, so much so that one of the FSNs who was organizing these programs with the state of Guanajuato, Fox's state, got to know Fox and got to know his people. So, when he won his presidency, the person who had the most contact with Fox and his people afterwards was this FSN in our office. So, when someone in the embassy needed to get a message through to Fox, it was often through his people. When they were doing their transition team, Miriam Hamdam had the most contact with his group of anybody in the embassy, and that, again, shows the value of our locally employed people. Those programs happened well before I arrived; I didn't know anybody on the Fox team. But she had the history and the contacts. We nominated her for FSN of the year and she won it because of that interaction.

Q: Fantastic. Did changing media platforms have an effect on how you did your work? I realize that social media had not yet really taken off, but did increased television, increased radio, alternative forms of media have an effect on any of it?

DICKSON: So, we had one side of the press section that did broadcast media; the other side did print media. Most embassies do, but this was a huge media environment with extremely successful continent-wide television. But we still had a lot of very good contacts at Televisa and TV Azteca, which were the two rival television programs. We did a lot with them. We still were able to do whatever the successor of WorldNet programs was with them, and other kinds of programs with the radio. Radio wasn't as important, I didn't feel, in Mexico as it had been in Peru. It was important, but there wasn't a single broadcast radio as large as the radio station in Peru. There was a multiplicity. But we still used radio quite a bit when we wanted to get a message out widely and quickly. We would go on the radio for three or four minutes.

So, we did a lot in that environment. Did we do a lot with the new social media? Well, we did more, obviously, use of email and sending things out like press releases like that. Our ambassador, Tony Garza, the second ambassador when I was there, was probably a pre-Twitter user of Twitter. What he did was really very creative. It was interesting, and it worked, from a public affairs standpoint. Instead of our normal instinct, which was to have an interview, bring somebody in to talk to the ambassador, or have them give a speech, he came up with something. Because he came right from Texas and the inner office of George Bush and worked on the presidential and gubernatorial campaigns, he had a different mindset. He wanted us to just put out a very brief press statement of one to two sentences. "Ambassador Garza said today…" That way, there wasn't any confusion about some journalist trying to ask him a question that wasn't involved. The Mexicans would carry his statement intact.

I think that that was kind of in advance of Twitter; people are using Twitter like that. It was just a very brief thing, like, "Ambassador Garza said such and such." It was just a one sentence statement and thus made it into every paper the way he wanted it to and the way we worked with him to get it in those papers. So, I thought it was helpful. Again, people complain about having political ambassadors, and I have tremendous respect for every career ambassador I've worked with, but also the political ambassadors bring a

different mindset to the job. They have a different set of connections than the career people. Certainly, Tony Garza had that. He came in with a campaign view of how to run Public Diplomacy, and really taught all of us in Public Diplomacy a lot.

Q: Interesting. Also at this time, in the U.S., you had Spanish language media beginning to really take off. Did that have any effect in Mexico?

DICKSON: Not that I remember, Mark, but that's a good question. We did some interviews with Miami Univision or some outlets like that. We did a little of that. They had people in Mexico who were reporting for them. But I don't really remember… Again, because our job is public affairs, in Mexico, we were really focused on the Mexican population. We had contact with the Jorge Ramoses and Andres Oppenheimers of this world, but not as much as the locals.

Q: Here's a somewhat humorous question: Telenovelas *(soap operas) are famous in Mexico, and in fact in all of Latin America. Sometimes they get used for public service announcements or to alert the public in a fictional and emotive kind of way to things. Did you have interactions of that nature with telenovelas?*

DICKSON: Yes. We approached different television stations about counter-drug messaging in their telenovelas. I don't remember having a lot of success. I remember us making the case that this would be a platform that would reach millions and millions of people. What was interesting from anybody's standpoint was getting into the studios and watching them tape some of the programs and stuff and calling it work. So, anyway, we did a plant-the-seed approach. Whether anything transpired, I don't know that it did. It may have.

Q: Looking inside the embassy, now USIS is fully integrated into the State Department. Did the way you interacted with the other sections begin to change? Were you also trying to do public affairs work that focused on other sections of the embassy?

DICKSON: I don't think so. Again, I arrived a month before, and I didn't really know how it might have been before I arrived in terms of working. We had an office right in the embassy on the second floor, so we were certainly embedded. We did have – and we can talk about this – a cultural center and a library across town, a Benjamin Franklin Center and library. So, we worked very closely with other sections, certainly USAID, to get word out about their democracy programs and their other activities they were involved with, whether it was environment or something else. They were doing some wind surveys for wind energy. But we also had a regular stream of counter-narcotics, and the DEA chief of office came through and people were interviewing him. These were not only for Mexican journalists but also American journalists who were resident there and would call up. So, we did a lot of that kind of interacting.

The way it changed the most was that we had enjoyed our own separate, stand-up administrative section. So, everything we wanted to do, we had our own motor pool, our own budget, everything. Those people, with the exception of one or two, transferred over

to State. We became one of many sections trying to tap in and draw those support activities of the admin section. That was a little more problematic than it had been when we could do it all ourselves. But that's the nature of the beast. It was very helpful to keep one admin person in the office who could track the budgets, because that was the one thing about the merger – we walled off the Public Diplomacy budget, certainly for programs. We were fearful that the State Department would be looking at our budgets and trying to tap into that money to buy desks or computers. In its wisdom, when the merger happened, they did put a firewall around our budget. I think that that still exists today.

Q: Yes, but did you actually get the funds in a timely way to be able to use them? Public Diplomacy is such an immediate kind of tool for the embassy. Sometimes, if you don't have the money to do something immediately, you lose the golden hour.

DICKSON: So, last time, we had a little bit of a conversation where you talked about your annual budget. I had a different approach, both as a PAO and then in Washington. These continuing resolutions allowed us to spend up to 90 percent of what we had spent the year before. We couldn't do new things. So, my interpretation – and I never got in trouble or had anybody change my mind about it – was that if I had a speaker coming down from the U.S. the year before on counter drugs, I had 90% of my budget, and I could bring in a speaker the next year any time that I wanted. If I did a conference the year before when I had the money and I wanted to do a conference the next year, I did it. So, the money was there when we wanted it.

It was only on things like end of year spending that it became more noticeable. It's just a terrible thing, but it happens across every embassy, maybe even every government department. The end of the fiscal year comes, and all of a sudden you have two or three months left and you realize you've got this budget and you've got to get rid of it. If you don't, next year you're going to get a smaller budget. So, people are just buying superfluous things. But for exchanges and public affairs activities, we continued throughout the year without any regard to slowing down at all.

Q: Okay. What I haven't asked is, what new major projects or new major activities that you initiated were there that were valuable and sustainable as time went by?

DICKSON: So, you know, I'm trying to remember if there were things that we initiated and did with Mexico that were long-term innovations. There are two things that stick out in my mind from the time I was PAO in Mexico. One was that there was a huge country team. There were 30-plus organizations and sections at the country team table. It was the longest table in any embassy that I've ever seen. But I took the approach that I had a bag full of tools, and I would sit in this room, and I would listen. What is everybody talking about, and what is in my toolkit that I can use to support whatever the issue is? We responded rapidly to almost everything.

That was certainly true after 9/11, for example. I probably did 50 speeches in the weeks afterwards, just going out and about. We did organize a day of talk. Anybody in the embassy who wanted to go out and talk about the United States went out. We did it on the

first-year anniversary. We shut down the embassy and organized 200 opportunities for embassy employees to talk. The embassy employees were worried. “I don’t have talking points. What do I say?”

I just said, “Be yourself. Be an American. That’s all anybody wants. There are no talking points.” I never even said a *no,* I just said, “Be yourself and show who you are.” So, it worked out really well. We went all over the city to secondary schools, colleges, and radio. We were all over. So, that was one thing we did, again, as part of that toolkit and listening to what was important this week to the embassy.

The other thing that happened with the merger was that we had an institution about 10 blocks away called the Benjamin Franklin Library. This was a marvelous library. I mentioned at the beginning how the reason I was interested in Public Diplomacy was because of the library and cultural center in Gaon, where I served in the Peace Corps. Nowhere was I ever in a place as important as the Benjamin Franklin Library was to Mexico. That occurred to me when I found a map of Mexico City; they would label certain institutions around the city, and the U.S. embassy wasn’t labeled. The Benjamin Franklin Library was. It was a very big library. It had five floors. It didn’t house just USIS or those things. It housed the Institute for International Education and another book exchange program that we ran for all of Spanish-speaking America. There were four or five organizations in it, and four of them were not connected directly or part of the U.S. government. So, it was kind of one stop shopping for anybody who wanted these kinds of exchanges with the United States. Any Mexicans who wanted to go to the U.S. went there for educational advising. All of those programs were available, as well as a regular loan library. It was well-used.

Well, under the merger, there was a little bit of pressure of the view that we don’t need this anymore. Cultural centers and libraries had been closing down around the world after the end of the Cold War. This one stayed open because it was so heavily utilized. What happened was that it was in a building that had been damaged during the 1986 earthquake in Mexico City that was disastrous. So, there were cracks; it was not level. When there was this pressure, saying that we needed to do something different with the Benjamin Franklin Library, it was hard for me to argue that we should stay in a building that we had concerns about the structural soundness. I knew people who worked in the building. They were friends. Every day that went by, I was worried about their safety.

It was a little disingenuous on the part of some State Department GSO (General Services officer) colleagues who said, “Oh, we can find you a new place for a quarter of a million dollars.” There was a big porch, open space in the embassy proper. “We can put you there and just fill it in. It used to be a consular waiting room, but for a quarter of a million dollars, we’ll make that work.” They sold the idea to Washington, that we could make this transfer for that cheap. Well, because of a conversation I had with a Commercial officer who had too much space in his building, which was very near – about 10 blocks away – we ended up taking his big expo space. They weren’t doing the trade shows that they had been after 9/11, so we used that space and built that out for way more. We didn’t

have to build an exterior wall or anything, but just to fit out all of the new library, it was easily approaching three times the quarter of a million dollars they had initially sold us.

But it worked out. The Benjamin Franklin Library was transformed into a new purpose. It still had a loan library. It was still used as a reference library. It wasn't the one-stop-shopping beauty of the last place, but the other organizations found their own offices and continued to interact with us and work with us. The Fulbright Program was another one – the Binational Fulbright Office had been in the Benjamin Franklin Library. They found a new space and we obviously continued to work with them. In terms of a lasting project coming out of the merger, that was probably the biggest, the moving and downsizing of the Benjamin Franklin Library.

Q: So, I recalled that I had not asked you how your family did during your tour in Mexico City. Did your wife work? Were your kids okay in school?

DICKSON: Good question. My wife was teaching at the American School in Mexico City. She taught special ed there. She worked there for maybe four of our five years. We had one daughter who went to the American School for five years. Another daughter was there for three years, and then she went to a school in the U.S. because it was apparent that she would not graduate there. So, she wanted to go to the boarding school in the U.S. where my son had gone. It happened to be in the hometown where my parents were living. My son made the transition from high school to college while we were living in Mexico. He was never there permanently. He came during the summers and got jobs at the embassy in the summers. They were wonderful jobs; people were very helpful and nice to him.

But there are two stories. My wife and I had very different experiences on 9/11. She was at the American School with our two daughters, and my son and I were flying to London on 9/11. He was going to school. I was going to drop him off at St. Andrew's University in Scotland. On 9/11, we were probably an hour outside of U.S. airspace when they grounded all the planes. We made it to London and went up to the rental car place after we landed, and the man looked at us. I said, "I'd like my car."

He looked at me and said, "Are you American?" And right then, I knew that something was wrong. He said, "Go look at the TV."

It was unbelievable. My son, just a week before, had signed up for the Selective Service and filled out his draft card. My first sentence to my son, at the time, was, "This is war. You will have never seen it in your lifetime, but this really means war."

We were in England and Scotland for a week afterwards, and the British were just amazing in their solidarity with the U.S. and willingness. It was very emotional. Just last week, my son sent me a video taken outside Buckingham Palace on September 13th, 2001. They played "The Star-Spangled Banner." It was the first time in 100 years that they had played any song besides "God Save the Queen" or "God Save the King." So, that kind of very emotional thing. We participated in a three-minute moment of silence at

Edinburgh Castle that was ordered throughout the kingdom. Again, that was very emotional. We watched television every night. So, the contrast when we got back to Mexico was pretty dramatic, in terms of how people were feeling among the general population.

Q: Does this bring us to the end of this tour, or is there something I forgot to ask you that was significant?

DICKSON: Career-wise, yes. What happened was, after three years as a PAO, George Bush had been president and kept the career ambassador on, Jeffrey Davidow. He was just a wonderful man and an unbelievable fount of knowledge in all things. The Mexicans loved him. So, he stayed on in Mexico for another year, and then his DCM got a job back in Washington, and they wanted to pull him back. Jim Derham was brought back as the DAS (Deputy Assistant Secretary) and they needed him back right away, as soon as possible. So, they opened up the job. Jim Derham and Jeffrey Davidow both approached me as PAO and said, "Would you be willing to throw your hat in the ring for DCM?"

I was like, "Wow, sure." So, I did, and I was their candidate. So, I moved from being PAO to DCM. I was DCM for two years and stayed on there. I would've had a three-year tour. I had extended a fourth year in Mexico, and then I extended a fifth year, and then I didn't think a sixth year would've been healthy for anybody. But that was a major change for me, moving from the second floor as PAO up to the fifth floor to be DCM. That was at a time of transition between two ambassadors, with a new political ambassador coming in.

Q: Did they immediately replace the PAO position that you had left?

DICKSON: No. I think it was March, April, or May when I started, sometime in the spring, as DCM. So, the CAO, Omie Kerr, a wonderful cultural officer, became acting PAO for the remainder of her tour. Then, they brought in Jeff Brown, who Jim Derham had known and had asked to apply for the PAO job. He did, so he became PAO. But he didn't arrive until the summer, so he was on a regular summer cycle.

Q: Okay. Now, typically, you do get some training prior to becoming a DCM, but it sounds like you didn't have an opportunity for that.

DICKSON: I didn't have that, and I'm not even sure if they offered it to me at the time. So, it was very much on the job learning. I did not know the Department at all. I didn't know how it operated. I didn't know the importance of the relationship between the desk and the embassy. The relationship between the desk and Public Affairs offices was tenuous at best; it was not close. Between the desk and the front office in the State Department, it's very close, and I did not appreciate that.

I didn't take the DCM course when I became DCM. Some of it was a little bit of my own reluctance and stupidity; I should've. I know I should've. It would've helped me to have that background before, and certainly to understand a little bit more how the Department

worked before I started this. I didn't get the DCM class until I had finished two years as DCM in Mexico and was going on to my next post as DCM in Canada. They made me take the DCM class, and I said I didn't really want to; I'd already been DCM in one of the biggest places in the world. Why should I take it? But I knew it was helpful, and I certainly realized that I probably should've done something even more than that before becoming a DCM.

Q: The first thing you have to do as DCM is let go of managing the Public Diplomacy Office. That can sometimes be difficult when that's what you did for an entire career. Was that difficult?

DICKSON: No. Fortunately, or unfortunately, the new political ambassador, Tony Garza, who came, saw the importance of Public Diplomacy. He thought that this was one of their biggest jobs, not just to interact at the highest levels of government. Ambassador Garza used to say, correctly, "I've got the biggest mic around. So, use me. Help me get the message out that only I can get out." That's true in any embassy around the world. So, the next three ambassadors I worked for were all political and all saw PD as one of the most important sections in the embassy.

But one small thing was that I also have a small bias towards the Fulbright Program. I think it's the best thing we do as the government, really. So, I loved being on the Fulbright board as a PAO, and I asked if I could stay on the board as a DCM. They were happy to have me. After a short while, I realized that it was too much. To be a DCM in Mexico, you can't be PAO and DCM. You can't do that stuff. So, when the new team, a new CAO, new IO, and new PAO came into Mexico, they were all very well-qualified, very highly thought of. When I introduced them to the FSNs , I said, "You've got a dream team here." It was Jeff Brown, Jim Dickmeyer, and Marge Coffin. They had all been PAOs elsewhere, and they all knew what they were doing. So, I was very confident, as was the ambassador, that we had the A team in the Public Diplomacy section. They did a great job; there's no question about it.

Q: Since it's a new ambassador, you and the ambassador sit down and divide up what you're going to be doing for him and where you're going to let him carry the message, carry the advocacy. How did your responsibilities divide?

DICKSON: So, he called me the COO, the chief operating officer, and said, "You get the embassy working, and I'll be the CEO (chief executive officer)." That's the way that he envisioned it. A lot of it came down to me being the one doing the daily stuff in the embassy, as is true of any DCM. He was the voice of the embassy. He was brought in, and brought himself in, at those moments when he needed to be there. We had a very good relationship. He was learning, and quite frankly, Mark, he was a little suspicious of the bureaucracy.

I'll let him, at some point, speak for himself; he may or may not see this. But I think that he heard the stories from other political people about State people not liking political ambassadors, and I think he was a little worried about that. He didn't have the best

introduction, because a story came out from Washington on his arrival, and he thought that somebody was trying to undercut him already. But I think we got off to a very good start and had a very good relationship. At the time, I think he would say that he could trust whatever he said to me. He could confide in me, and it wouldn't be passed along. I wouldn't gossip. That's what was important in any DCM-ambassador relationship, that you could speak to each other in confidence.

Q: Absolutely. Well, there are so many things that a DCM has to do, including resolving very difficult personnel issues, ensuring that emergency planning is very well-integrated, and all of these things that you may have had in a small version, but now, for a gigantic embassy like Mexico… How did you handle all of those things?

DICKSON: So, one of the biggest transitions from the beginning was establishing my own credibility with peers as the head of this – I was chargé for a while – country team. Of the State offices, there were four or five heads of sections who had already been DCMs. They knew the drill, and I didn't. So, a lot of it was, I would say, a little bit of humor and a little bit of humility. My first day as chargé after Ambassador Davidow left, I walked into my office and sat down on my glasses. They were on my chair. So, I broke my glasses and had to go to the country team meeting, and I couldn't see anybody. That broke the ice a little. It was a little bit of proving yourself with these colleagues who were very good, knew what they were doing, and knew what a DCM was supposed to do. I got a few lectures here and there about how, "No, you shouldn't be doing this; this is my job." So, that was fine and helpful.

So, there was a little bit of that. I was head of a law enforcement working group and the head of a security working group with other sections of the embassy that met once a week. I had to sign off on all law enforcement activities that took place, so I was briefed before they could do anything, whether it was running an informant or working with the Mexicans on this. That was part of the post-Kiki Camarena agreement we have with Mexico, that someone in the front office would sign off.

I was immediately sworn in with higher-level security clearance, so I got to read all of the traffic, back and forth. So, that was big. But it was the personnel issues that are the hardest for any DCM, whether it was inter-office conflict, allegations of abuse that transpired, or whatever. It was enormously time-consuming and very difficult to manage.

Q: Yeah. Those are the really miserable aspects. They can drag on so long and there are so many regulations about what has to be done in what order and so on. As DCM, how do you see relations change with Mexico over these final two years that you're in the embassy? Now we're in both Afghanistan and Iraq. We're doing a lot of advocacy about it, and of course, all of the issues that had started the George W. Bush administration were now on the backburner. How do you see, from that perch as DCM, the changes going on?

DICKSON: So, it was 2002 when I became DCM. It was the summer of 2002 that the drumbeat for intervention in Iraq started. There was a presidential visit in November of

2002 where I sat in on the meeting. I was chargé at the time. The new ambassador hadn't come. President Bush was really pushing as hard as he could to get Mexico, as a member of the Security Council, to approve the resolution authorizing intervention, and they wouldn't show us which way they were leaning. So, the first probably 10 months of being DCM was taken over discussing Iraq with the Mexicans, and it was, on the one hand, very interesting from a national security point of view. This is how embassies advocate. On the other hand, after the intervention, when there were no weapons of mass destruction found, it was extremely discouraging, as somebody who had said over and over again in all contexts that this was the gravest danger facing the world right now, putting weapons of mass destruction in the hands of terrorism and that Saddam Hussein could not be trusted. Then, he didn't have any. So, we kind of reshaped the argument, put our tail between our legs, and moved on to the different subjects.

I served in countries that border us. We had issues in those two countries that you wouldn't find in any other. So, water and the way we shared the water in the Colorado River and the Rio Grande was a huge – and still remains a huge – problem. We had an agreement where Mexico would give us so many cubic liters, and they would take so many cubic liters. Every year, they reneged on it, and the Texas farmers were screaming. Having a president from Texas, it was a huge political issue. So, that was something that was unresolved and kept on as a constant thorn in the relationship. We had one office in the embassy, the EST (Environment, Science, and Technology) Office that was responsible for this issue. It was very technical, but it was an irritant, and it was an irritant that wouldn't go away. The last year I was there, Mexico had had enough rain that year that they were finally able to comply with the terms of the agreement they had signed many years before, after incredible haggling with them.

Immigration continued to be an issue. Then something came out of nowhere, and I talk about this in the book. It was the 10th anniversary of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement). At the time, there had been, when NAFTA was originally negotiated, an agreement to wait and phase in some of the low-tariff items. The one the Mexicans wanted to wait the longest on was corn, because corn was so intertwined with their national identity and so many people grew corn and grew a different kind of corn, maize, in the indigenous areas. They were afraid of Monsanto Corn coming in. So, they kept the tariffs on U.S. corn for a long time, for 10 years, as agreed. Then, in 2004, on the 10th anniversary, the tariffs were scheduled to go down.

Our Agricultural counselor, Bill Brandt, was very aware of this and warned us six months in advance that this was going to be a huge issue. He kept reminding us, at every country team meeting. People were saying, "Bill, get off the corn thing." Certainly, by November, two months before the tariffs were supposed to go down, politicians in Mexico started talking about renegotiating NAFTA, even pulling out of NAFTA in Mexico because of this corn issue. It was at that point, in 2004, that we really had to step up our Public Affairs stance. It became an effort in every section in the embassy, almost, to push and advocate, whether it was econ or political, on behalf of not touching NAFTA. Do not open it up. If you open it up, then you don't know what's going to transpire.

I had a little bit of pushback from other sections, saying that this was not a political issue. "This is an Ag issue. Why are you telling me to go see congressmen about this?" I had to argue, "Look out on the street. There are protestors in the streets. When is that not a political issue?" The content is hard and not easy, but when you get protests in the street, then it becomes a political issue, and you're involved. There were congresspeople in Mexico who were talking about renegotiating, and we had to work with them to try to hold the line. We were successful, as an embassy. We won the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) award for advocacy that year. They didn't reopen NAFTA, and corn did come in in major waves, but it didn't change everything in Mexico. But it was harder for the Mexicans, and certainly for the subsistence farmers, there's no doubt about it.

The other thing was security. Because Mexico was on the border, there were major inter-section efforts in the embassy to look at Mexican airports, to make them so secure so that terrorists couldn't use the loose security provisions in airports. So, we worked with the Mexicans in different ways to tighten up their security, control who was coming in, pass along information about people who were coming in to our new DHS (Department of Homeland Security) section and others. We did have, Christmas of 2003, rumors and intelligence saying that there were people who were going to come into Mexico to hijack planes and take them to Los Angeles or Houston. So, we again as an embassy ramped up in a big way. We had the U.S. Marshals down. We had all these people coming in to try to figure out what was going on. It was a major three or four weeks of intense effort to see what was happening. We had people out at the airports, people working with the Mexicans very closely. Nothing happened, to our great relief, but it was that kind of scare that kept us all on the edge. That was the biggest one I remember.

We got in a little trouble, public-wise, because one of our consular officers went out to the airport and was looking at passports as people went on to the plane at the gate. A picture was taken of him, saying, "What's this American doing in the Mexican airport? Americans are taking over. Why are we letting the Americans do this?" It was something we couldn't really defend, because we had done it, but it passed. Again, I look at that as an example of history shock, with their sense of national sovereignty, and, "We should not have Americans doing this on our soil." Technically, it was in the international section of the airport, and people had already passed immigration controls. So, we didn't even make that case. We just took it down and hoped it would go away quickly, and it did.

So, those were a couple of the big issues I remember.

Q: The other thing is that once you go into the front office, you also get exposed to the regional Mexican foreign policy that we watch, as well. There are other things going in Latin America, to the extent that we want Mexico involved in them. There are some interesting things going on – there's Hugo Chavez, the beginnings of ideas on how to end the civil war in Colombia, and all of the spillover of all these things. Did that end up in your office at all? Did any of the regional Latin American things end up there?

DICKSON: A little. You will guess which country was the most important, and that was Cuba. That was the most problematic. But it was almost… Here's where this is the Deep State. We would get all of these demarches from Washington: "Go into the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and make this demarche about a vote at the UN against the embargo or human rights on Cuba." We would do it mechanically. We already knew the answer, but we would do it and send the cable back saying we did it, and the Mexican response was so on.

Everybody knew it was a dance. I think we even called it "The Cuba Dance." We knew their response. They knew we were coming in. We danced around and went home. There was so much, Mark, on the bilateral agenda that didn't come up. Had it been a different era, with Central America and the wars in Guatemala and El Salvador, when the Mexicans were very prominent in helping negotiate the ends of those, we might have been more closely tied with them. We did a little OAS programming, mostly on counter-narcotics as well but through the OAS. So, that was regional. But that was it.

One thing you realize as DCM is that every day was an incredibly different day, very packed, very full, very varied. What my wife reminded me was that some days, I would get home at the end of a long day, usually involving something in the evening, as well, and I would forget what had happened at the beginning of the day because there were so many things. I had a friend who worked in both Mexico and Canada. I was on my way to Canada, and she was the head of the Office of Canadian Affairs. She said, "The difference is that in Mexico, there's a crisis two or three times a day that the embassy has to deal with." A lot of times, it was involving American citizens, but not always. I think that's the nature of the beast.

She said, "In Canada, there are issues and challenges we have that are the same because we share the border. We have issues with water and demarcation and trade and so forth. But the difference is that those are largely managed, and they're not spontaneous. They don't head up into crisis mode right away." So, that's what I just wanted to say, is how every day was so full. It wasn't completely stressful, but there was a certain amount of stress in the day in Mexico, because you just never knew where the next thing was coming from, whether there was a protest in front of the embassy or something else.

Q: This is something that the Department began to realize over time, which is, promoting a good work-life balance. It was one of the things, I think, that over time the Department understood it was important for recruitment and retention of talent. Since we're now reasonably far along in your career, and you've had management positions, how would you comment on that, as time has gone by?

DICKSON: Well, I would say that one of the things that the Department is probably grappling with, as many businesses are, is that because of these smartphones, you don't leave your work at work. You take your work home with you. When I first got my first Blackberry, I was really happy because I could do the odd scroll through my email on my own. Very few people in the embassy did have it. So, I was able to catch up while sitting

with my family or whatever in the evening. But then everybody got them, and the idea of catching up never quite took hold. So, I think there is a work-life balance issue.

Well, and the other thing that happened with technology, Mark, is that because of the computers on our desks, we found ourselves more and more tied to our desks. We spent less and less time outside of the office, and more and more time just sitting at our desk. Now, sometimes, that's very efficient, and I'll give you a couple of examples when we get to Canada, but I think you lose, in the face-to-face interactions, quite a bit, certainly for diplomats and people in Public Diplomacy. But you know, I had a boss who once said, "You should spend 60 percent of your day outside of your office and 40 percent inside." I would suspect it's now 90 to 10 in your office. There are very few opportunities. Certainly, it was moving in that direction in my career.

Q: I would place the same event in 2007 to 2008 when I was in Hungary and we all got Blackberry's, and we could all suddenly not only answer the phone but send emails and read emails. It was iffy. Coverage wasn't great. But you were now 24/7. The biggest problem I found, as bad as that is, is that no one was trained on how to send emails, in the sense that you don't need to send an email on every topic. You don't need to have a long email thread.

DICKSON: You don't need to reply all.

Q: Right. You need to be thoughtful about whose email queue you fill with nonsense. That has not… Even when I retired in 2013, I think, the Department was only beginning to grapple with that idea.

DICKSON: I think that the pandemic has maybe exacerbated it. I do remember, towards the end of my career and maybe even in the last few months of it in 2010, I was coming back from Latin America on a plane. I think I was boarding in Miami to head back to Washington. We were standing in line, and I was on my Blackberry, just waiting to go through the sleeve and down into the plane, and the guy behind me – it turned out he was married to a State Department officer; he was a lawyer – looked at me and said, "What do you do for a living?"

I said, "I delete emails. That's my job. I delete emails." I used to get, in both Mexico and Canada, 300 emails a day easily. How do you get out from under that? Certainly, when you add cable traffic to it, you're really just skimming topics, subject lines, and … What do you call it? There's a term for it that escapes me at the moment, but you're just putting your finger on it and dying trying.

I found that I was trying to carve out some kind of work-life balance. Some time to unwind, but inevitably, two of the most stressful things that happened in Mexico when I was there happened on times when I was away from the office, trying to unwind. All of a sudden, all hell broke loose. One was with the incident that was during the week, the one I already mentioned about rumors of terrorists flying into Mexico and then taking planes hostage and out to LA.

Another was an instance that I described in my book where there was a military funeral of a Mexican soldier who had volunteered to join the U.S. forces in Iraq and had died and wanted a military funeral. The Mexican military did not want us to carry even ceremonial rifles that couldn't shoot. They did not want the image of American Marines carrying anything that looked like a gun. So, at the funeral, they surrounded the whole funeral party of both our Marines and our embassy officers who were there. I was away with my family, having lunch in a nearby town, and I got interrupted. Anyway, it was 45 minutes to an hour of rapid negotiations by phone. Finally, we unwound the incident, but that's the kind of stressful thing that you don't plan for at the beginning of the day; you can't.

Q: Yes. Incredible. It's good that we raised this notion, because as you rise in rank and responsibility, it becomes more and more difficult to manage that work-life balance. But hopefully, you will be able to do more of that in Canada. We'll see. When do you arrive?

DICKSON: I arrived in early August in Canada. It was a quiet time in Canada. The ambassador was away, so I was right away… Oh, no, I arrived Labor Day weekend. I'm sorry.

Q: And this is Labor Day weekend in which year?

DICKSON: 2007. The ambassador is away so I'm chargé right away. The arrival itself, Mark, just to give you a bit of contrast… We drove up from Massachusetts, where we were, and crossed the border. We were driving into Ottawa. There's a sign that says, "Ottawa, 10 kilometers." I look around, and there's nothing but trees. Now, when we flew into Mexico City, we were an hour outside Mexico City, at the airport, and you could already see the lights. You were flying over the suburbs of Mexico City. This was a city that had 22 million people. Ottawa had maybe 600,000 or 700,000, including all of its many suburbs. So, that was one dramatic thing.

The second dramatic thing was our living conditions. I lived seven minutes from the embassy. It was a quick drive, no traffic. In Mexico, it was a 45-minute battle to get into the embassy every day. So, that kind of – as you say – ability to resist stress was markedly different. The other thing was that when the ambassador returned, he had an event at his house, a reception, as you know we all do. In Canada, it started at five and ended at 7. In Mexico, those receptions didn't start until seven and ended who knows when. I remember being at one reception at Ambassador Jeffrey Davidow's house when I was DCM. It was 11PM, and he came up to me and said, "I have to go to another event. You close this down."

I was like, "It's 11PM!"

"Yeah, I'm going to a wedding." So, it's just very different in terms of time. I would just say, as a comparative, everybody who's served in Mexico knows how fun it is. The Mexicans have fun. They know how to enjoy life. We did have fun. I'm not saying it was all stress. Certainly, there were elements of fun.

But anyway, just that introduction to Canada was a marked contrast with that. I still did things that were, as every Foreign Service officer does, dramatic and full and varied. You come home at the end of the day and pinch yourself, saying, "Really? I did that today?" So, we can talk about a number of those, as well.

Q: Okay. So, you arrive. You're relatively close to the embassy. It's assumed that you have representational space in your housing to hold events at your home.

DICKSON: Yes. We lived, like many DCMs and ambassadors, in a nice neighborhood. It was a beautiful, fancy neighborhood close to town. We had an old house. Here's another difference, Mark, between Ottawa, Canada, and every other place. We actually did have a wall around our house. It was about a foot high, and there were no gates. So, it was just this ornamental brick thing in this posh neighborhood. The ambassador was behind an iron picket fence. We moved house midway in the tour to a property that was right next door to the ambassador's residence, but there was no fence at our property. I was up there last year, and they have since put up the same kind of iron picket fence around the DCM house, for whatever reason you can imagine.

Q: Okay. Now, roughly, what's the size of the mission there? What are you going to be responsible for?

DICKSON: Well, the number of people there working were 1,100, roughly, across seven or eight consulates. It was Halifax, Quebec, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Vancouver. So, there were seven. The consulate that we had in Winnipeg was just a one-person experiment, really, to see if we could manage with a very small presence there. I believe it's still open and operating.

Q: Okay. Now, within the embassy, often the ambassador to Canada is a political appointee?

DICKSON: Yes. The ambassador when I arrived was a former governor of Massachusetts, Paul Cellucci. He was picked… He was one of the first people to jump on the George W. Bush bandwagon, along with two other Massachusetts Republicans, a guy by the name of Andrew Natsios and Andrew Card. All three of them ended up with positions in the Bush administration. Card was chief of staff. Natsios was head of USAID. Cellucci was ambassador to Canada. He was there through the end of the first Bush administration, and then he left to return to private life. After a pause of three months, our second ambassador was a man by the name of David Wilkins. He was from South Carolina, and he was the speaker of the House in South Carolina. He was very instrumental in George W. Bush winning that first primary that he won in South Carolina that kind of set him off on his path to victory as a candidate.

Q: Was the relationship with the ambassador in any way unique? In other words, you're the COO of the embassy, but sometimes political ambassadors also ask you to take over a particular portfolio that they're not interested in. How did that work?

DICKSON: Paul Cellucci was a remarkable political ambassador. He had come with two assistants that he brought with him, political assistants, Schedule C or B appointees who left. So, he was up there on his own, and he had a very funny saying that he would say all the time, which was, "I don't understand this department. You guys just do everything backwards. But if that's the way it is, that's the way it is. Let's go forward." So, he just had a good sense of humor. He was beloved in the embassy.

We didn't really divide up anything. He was a very good judge of people, a quick and executive type of actor and decision-maker. He did a lot of things that were endearing to Canadians. He learned to ride with the Mounties. He had good friends in the Mounties, and he went to the Calgary stampede and rode his horse down there. He also – and I mention this in the book – was there on 9/11, and I was not. As I said, I was in Mexico, on my way to England, at the time. But he was there. The Canadians gave us a moment of silence on Parliament Hill, which is this very big, grassy area right in front of Parliament. Tens of thousands of people showed up, and Ambassador Cellucci, although he's passed away, did say that it was probably the most dramatic moment in his public service career, speaking to the throng two days after 9/11.

He then had the very unfortunate task – and he was relentless in it – of trying to convince the Canadians to join us in Iraq. He was very blunt about it and courageous because the Canadians were dead set against it. But it was a losing proposition, but he kept at it. Ultimately, it made him, in Canada, less likable. I'm not sure he cared, because he saw it as his patriotic duty. Despite all the other things he was doing, people saw him as a bit of a hard-nosed guy.

Q: Now, the Canadians were with us in Afghanistan, but not in Iraq?

DICKSON: They actually weren't with us in Afghanistan. They ended up… They did a lot in Afghanistan, but they had no boots on the ground, is my recollection. So, one of our goals was to try to convince them. What happened was – and we're jumping ahead, into the second ambassador, which is fine – the liberal party at the time had an election. The liberal party was very rigid about military support, from Jean Chretien to Paul Martin, who was the prime minister when I got there. This was just a political loser for this left of center party, to join the U.S. in intervening. They had a view of the Canadian military that was different from their history. The history of the Canadian military was very much one of involvement and sacrifice in World War I and World War II. They had big memorials around the town. They have a war museum in Ottawa commemorating the soldiers who were lost. But by the '70s and '80s, they saw the Canadian military as being more of a peacekeeping force. They had a statue within eyeshot of the embassy of peacekeepers. So, the liberal party was more than willing to send troops overseas for peacekeeping, but not for active war. In 2005, a year plus after I got there, the liberal party was voted out and the conservative party came in. They were much more open to a different kind of Canadian contribution to global peace and security. So, they ended up joining us in Afghanistan with troops on the ground.

Q: That's what I remembered. Principally, as I recall, their mission was also training.

DICKSON: That could've been true at the time. I think they were deployed with NATO, so I don't think that they just did training, and it was difficult when the first Candians died there. I know that we, and particularly Ambassador David Wilkins, made a tremendous effort to thank the Canadians repeatedly after encouraging them to join. He would go to military bases and do special military salutes to these Canadians. That endeared him to the Canadians. Here this American was, constantly stepping up to express appreciation for all the contributions Canada was making.

Q: Alright. So, you're right; we've gotten a little bit ahead of ourselves. From the beginning of the tour there, what were the major focuses? We certainly have plenty of issues with Canada, but fortunately, very few crises.

DICKSON: Right. So, I think that the major focus, almost from the beginning, and certainly our number one priority was security cooperation along our 3,000-mile shared border. A lot of attention was paid to that. It grew to one of intensity, because the U.S. Congress passed a law that would require all visitors, back and forth across Canada, to carry a passport. Before, people could carry any one of a number of documents just proving that they were a citizen of the country, like birth certificates or whatever. As part of the upgrade to security along the border – and this was the biggest thorn – we now required citizens to get a passport. It came in first on airports, and then gradually, it was introduced across all travel. Canadians were very upset because they liked and enjoyed this free flow of travel across the border, as did many U.S. citizens close to the Canadian border. 90 percent of Canadians live within 100 miles of the U.S. border.

Gradually, we opened it up to this Smart ID (Identification) driver's license. It's now called Real ID, and everybody in the country now has to have it, but initially, it was for those people who didn't want to carry a passport or forgot their passport. If you had this Smart ID chip in your driver's license, then you could cross back into the United States. The Canadians did not require a passport. That was the one thing they did. They also knew that if somebody came into Canada without a passport, an American citizen, they would have a hard time returning. Anyway, that was a huge point of contention, probably the biggest issue while I was there. What's interesting, Mark – and this is true in Mexico, but maybe even more so in Canada, because we actually share so much in many different ways – is that we called these issues intermestic. They were international, because they crossed borders, but they were really domestic.

So, this was one of them. There was a big water issue that was extremely complicated in North Dakota. There was a lake that was flooding, and it was just flooding out the town's border. It's called Devil's Lake. What they wanted to do in North Dakota was to build a sluice to get the water into a river – one of the only rivers along the border that flowed north into Winnipeg. So, the Canadians were adamant. "You can't do this. We have treaties. We don't want waters from other watersheds coming in. There's this kind of parasite living in the lake." That was a very thorny, very technical issue that was hard to manage. This is where you need scientists and geologists and hydrology people to really

explain it and get together in a room. What happened on Devil's Lake was that the people in North Dakota just went ahead and built the sluice and opened it up regardless. So, we had to deal with the aftermath of that and the craziness.

There were a lot of environmental issues, as well, whether it was opening up Alaska Arctic ranges for oil drilling – the Canadians were adamant about not doing that. The biggest economic issue was softwood lumber. There were other ones, but it was softwood lumber where we unilaterally, against NAFTA, banned or raised tariffs on Canadian softwood lumber coming into the United States. That was a perennial issue, going back to the 1980's, and unresolvable. It had a lot to do with Vancouver's great forests. The Canadians obviously had better lumber than the United States had, but the Canadians were also subsidizing their industry, and they worked with their foresters in a way that gave them a price advantage over our softwood lumber foresters. So, they objected, and I think, quite frankly, Mark, it was a political issue, because these American softwood lumber people were very much supporting President Bush and providing contributions in many different ways. So, the president just wasn't going to budge on it. This was a political issue.

Now, what happened – and this is interesting – is that when Harper came in to be prime minister, the conservatives brought it in, and they really wanted to open up to the U.S., but they did not feel they could open up and embrace us as long as this lingering softwood lumber dispute continued. I remember one cable in particular that went back to Washington saying, "We have an opportunity to have a partner on our border who could very likely help us in Afghanistan and other places if we can resolve this dispute." Within a very short time, that dispute was finally resolved.

Now, I say finally, because it was not permanently resolved; it erupted again a few years later. But I remember in our mission performance plan, we had an argument in the embassy about whether we put in as a goal to resolve the softwood lumber dispute. The econ officers were saying, "You can't say that."

I said, "It's a goal. This is not a movie. You've got to have a goal. What are you going to say? Ignore the softwood lumber plan? You've got to have it." Sure enough, that year, it was resolved. I think we had a small part to play in it. There were a lot of these very technical, difficult issues that were a little relentless, and I think the term we now use is that you've got to manage these issues of difference. You can't always solve them.

Q: What about pipelines? They become a difficulty, at least in some cases.

DICKSON: Right. So, there were several issues of cross-border pipelines. Interestingly, pipelines are handled through the Office of Mexican Affairs in the State Department. There is an EST (Environment, Science, and Technology) office of three people – or there had been, when I was the director of the Office of Mexican Affairs – that did water and did pipelines. Whenever there's a proposed pipeline or rail crossing, we had one person who would collect all these documents from all the stakeholders. It would include the scientific stuff, architectural drawings, all of it. Then they'd put a package together

for approval or not. So, the Canadian Keystone Pipeline was one of them that actually didn't reach the Office of Mexican Affairs until I was director of the Office of Mexican Affairs, after my posting in Canada.

So, it wasn't really that oil pipeline, but there were other pipelines. The Canadians were very worried about water and us trying to grab their water, which really wasn't happening, but there were these conspiracy theorists who felt that this was something where we were going to build pipelines all the way to California and Colorado to steal and drink up and drain Canadian lakes. There was zero chance of that. It was a wildly imaginative idea, maybe a Hollywood idea. But it was still a presence. So, that was another pipeline issue.

The interesting thing – and I refer to this in the chapter on Canada – was that the president, President Bush, started with his counterparts in Mexico and Canada a trilateral negotiation that he called the Security and Prosperity Partnership. To George W. Bush's credit, he wanted to ramp up security with our two closest neighbors and allies, but he didn't want to harm the incredible amount of trade that went back and forth. So, what he envisioned was a smart border using technology so that we could identify what's coming across the border before it gets there. People could file their customs manifests ahead of time.

Anyway, the Security and Prosperity Partnership that he worked out was just an agreement. He knew he could not take any agreement to Congress, because Congress just was not in the mood for treaties or two-thirds votes required to approve treaties. So, what he did was he made it so all of this was going to be by executive action. So, these were very small reforms and changes that were negotiated, but they were extremely difficult. I think there's a list of over 200 different things in all these sectors. There were 14 different categories of trade and health and security. There were so many that the Canadians eventually started calling it "Differences that Don't Make a Difference." It was things like, the Canadians and Mexicans had the metric system, and we didn't, so how large an issue would that be to resolve? Impossible.

The one I refer to in the book that took months of negotiation was, "What's the size of the pipeline that crosses the border?" This was a major achievement, and it was a matter of just small centimeters. We finally had an agreed-upon size of the actual pipe that would cross the border. It was very technical and difficult. Matters that required FDA (United States Food and Drug Administration) approval were tough; the Canadians didn't want to accept our FDA approval. They had double approvals. So, there were all these instances where Canada had its own bureaucracy and the U.S. had its own bureaucracy, and they didn't want to give up the small things or share. That's what the Security and Prosperity Partnership was intended to do. It was to streamline and accept the other country's science. But again, for issues of sovereignty, this was enormously difficult.

We did have – now I'm just going on; you got me going – right after 9/11, a proposal to develop a security perimeter with Canada. The idea, after 9/11, was to keep the terrorists far away, and don't even let them near North America. We proposed to the Canadians that

we would work with them on their air flights and share information about incoming ones. We would keep our borders open, but only if we had this outside perimeter. Well, it was very difficult for the Canadians to accept that at the time, and they didn't, so at that point, that was when the Canadians said we were starting to harden the border with these new regulations like visas and new technology.

So, our argument was, specifically, that this new technology would actually make it easier. We would know ahead of time who was entering the country. For somebody who's holding a passport, it's one passport for the whole country and these 90 different border crossings. A Customs or Immigration officer could just see the passport and you could go right ahead. That was opposed to thousands of different birth certificates they'd have to peruse and determine if they were legitimate or not. So, we made the argument that this would actually make it easier, but their problem was that people would want to come to Canada, forget their passports at home, and not be able to get into Canada to spend their money and vice versa.

Q: Once again, it was ultimately resolved by this Real ID?

DICKSON: Yes, and that was well after I had been there. We continued to try to develop this smart border over many years, and we made a lot of headway. Certainly, as soon as President Bush was no longer president, the whole idea of a Security and Prosperity Partnership fizzled out. All of this bureaucratic computer documentation just evaporated. But the idea of developing a smart border and smart border security cooperation was still there, and we continued to work on little things to iron out these differences that didn't make a difference.

Q: I see. Was there a major concern about terrorists coming into Canada?

DICKSON: Yes, and there were examples. Now that you mention that, this was yet another issue we had with the Canadians. There were many Canadians of Middle Eastern origin. Canada had a very open immigration policy. They want people. They invite people. They have what I would say is a rational, logical point system to accept people – if you speak French, if you speak English, whatever. So, they were welcoming people from all over the world in their immigration system, and large communities of – for want of another term – Middle Easterners were growing, because so many Middle Easterners spoke French, as well, whether they were from Tunisia or Syria. This was a concern for us, that potential terrorists would try to exploit this open system of immigration. So, they became persons of interest. There were, in fact, entire families that were open to defending Islam militarily. In Toronto, for example, there was a famous family that was openly Al-Qaeda. The father had taken over several of his sons to get training in Afghanistan before 9/11. That was the Khadr family. They were very well-known.

There were a number of others, too; in fact, while I was there, we worked with the Canadians very closely to identify a group of people who were training outside of Toronto. We were able to make a big arrest. There was a lot of quiet interaction back and forth, the gathering of intelligence and sharing of intelligence, as we do with Canada, and

then arrests were made of this group that was doing training. At the time, we insisted that they were training to enter the United States and do damage. There were other instances well before. There was a famous instance in the year 2000 of the Millennial Bomber, who came across a border out in Washington state from Vancouver with bombs, and he was on his way to Los Angeles Airport. A very alert Customs officer saw a very nervous driver and asked him to pull into secondary, and they found bombs in the car after he tried to flee.

So, there was this concern. I don't want to paint with a broad brush that all Middle Easterners living in Canada were like this. But there were people of interest. We had people in the embassy, FBI and others, who were working with their Royal Canadian Mounted Police counterparts to ensure that there were no people who tried to enter the U.S. with means or intent to do harm.

We made mistakes along the way, though. There was a very famous case, when I was there, of a man named Maher Arar. He had been arrested. He had been stopped at JFK (John F. Kennedy International Airport) shortly after 9/11 as a person of interest. We sent him off to Syria, and he ended up spending a year plus in a dark prison over there. Many people thought that he was connected, and we had phone records of him having conversations with known terrorists. I would say that my colleagues who were convinced, convinced everybody else in the embassy. But there was never any direct evidence linking him to anybody, and he was released. He was made Canadian of the Year in their *Time Magazine*, and he's kind of a hero up there, someone who withstood American overreach in the War on Terror. That was their view. So, this was also an important element of law enforcement and intelligence sharing.

Q: Now, speaking of sharing and sharing the border, the border is also across from Alaska. Were there arctic issues that also played out in the time you were there?

DICKSON: Yes. Some of these were border issues. We still have a border dispute with Canada on both coasts. Again, these were managed; they never rose to public disputes. We kind of just agreed to disagree and muddled through. But there were other issues, and I've already mentioned the Alaska national wildlife range where the United States wanted to open it up to drilling, and these herds that would cross the border into this wildlife range, the Canadians were insisting would be damaged by drilling. It was back and forth and got very heated, at times.

Q: I also meant, though, the issue of arctic ice melt.

DICKSON: Canada views itself as intently, intensely not American. They see themselves, and their identity is wrapped up as a northern, cold climate country. So, we had several issues related to this with the Canadians. Again, one of them was just managed and kind of a don't ask, don't tell thing. We do not view their management or the way they conceive of the Northwest Passage as Canadian waters. We say that the Law of the Sea Treaty, even though we have not signed it and almost every other nation has – we abide by it, we just haven't signed it – makes clear, according to our interpretation, that that is

international water. It's a through water; it's not bordered by anything. But the Canadians are adamant, and we're equally adamant. The Canadians say, "You can't come in here without our permission," and we wink wink, nod nod. They know when we're there. We don't make a public case out of it. But we feel that we have to continue to stake our claim that this is international waters. So, the northwest passage is one issue.

A second issue is NORAD, the North American Regional Air Defense, that was started, I believe, in the Cold War as a common defense against the Soviet Union. The Canadians are very proud of it. The headquarters is in Colorado. One of the things that happened on 9/11 was that the man who was actually seated in the commandant chair on 9/11 was a Canadian Air Force general. He was the one who had to scramble jets for NORAD, the jets that were under their command, for American defense. So, this was an organization that has a long history of really important security cooperation. We monitor Soviet flights that come near and attempt to enter our common airspace. The other wonderful thing NORAD does is they arrange mail call to Santa Claus at the North Pole every year.

One of the things President Bush did, shortly after 9/11, was stand up a command for North America, like Central Command or Southern Command. He wanted to call it and did call it Northern Command. For the Canadians, this was very worrisome, because what was going to happen to NORAD? We had this wonderful security relationship with the United States that was just Canada and the United States, and now you're setting up NORTHCOM, whose area of responsibility includes the Caribbean, Mexico, and Canada. Are they redundant? The Canadians were very adamant, saying, "Please, don't drop NORAD." That was the political calculation that we heard from the Canadians. "We can't afford to be seen as the one that lost NORAD." So, we kept them side by side for many years, and I think they're still there, NORAD and NORTHCOM.

Q: Interesting. Okay. Cultural issues… As an old USIS hand, what were the cultural issues that either divided us or united us? How did you handle those?

DICKSON: So, well before I got there – and this was in the lead-up to the signing of NAFTA and in the immediate years following NAFTA – Canadians were very worried about getting swamped by American cultural products. So, they used to really require that books or magazines that were coming into Canada were limited. So, that was largely resolved by the time I got there, in terms of Canadian content in these magazines. I think that that was mostly done, Mark, but I'm not totally sure, through the good private sector people who just saw an opportunity. "This is the way we have to do it if we want to sell," for example, "corn flakes in Canada. We have to have two languages on the box. It's more expensive, but…" It was the same thing with *Time Magazine* or the separate edition. Well, *Time Magazine* went to separate editions all over the world anyway, so it made sense.

I used to say that if you wanted to sell anything in Canada, you should just start off by saying, "The Great Canadian," and fill in the blank. Anything – whether it was Tim Horton's Coffee, named after a Canadian hockey star… Dunkin' Donuts does not stand a chance there. Even when it's wide open, everybody loves Tim Horton's. That's one of my

examples. It's the same with bookstores; they have their own bookstores, their own equivalent of The Gap and Nike. So, it is a national pride, national identity thing. Canadians will automatically, if they see something with a maple leaf that says, "Made in Canada," go for it. One of the things that happened when I was there was that the Hudson Bay Company, an iconic Canadian company, was up for sale, and I think Macy's ended up buying it. That was a shock.

So, culturally, that was one issue. We had a very active Fulbright commission. They were doing things that many other countries couldn't, because they were able to draw in and tap many private sponsors to supplement and augment the exchanges that happened. We did bring in American cultural groups, performances, to great interest with people. You would think that that didn't continue, in a place like Canada, but there was still interest in having the embassy host arts and musicians and certainly Fulbright.

I remember – this was a really telling statement for me – that there was an economics professor from the University of Ottawa who had gotten a Fulbright. He had spent half the year, I think, at UNC (University of North Carolina), and half of the year at Berkeley. I met him in the months after he came back. He said, "I was astounded at what I saw in the United States. I thought that Americans were people where everybody had a pickup truck with a gun rack and a Bible right on their front seat." He said, "I met so many people. The diversity of viewpoints, I just never imagined."

So, the need for that kind of exchange still existed, even as close as we are. I used to call Canada the Johnny Carson country, because when Johnny Carson died, it was on the front page of Canadian newspapers. I'm sure he didn't make it anywhere else in the world on the front page. So, here's our Johnny Carson ally. They love American culture. In fact, the man who was head of the Fulbright Commission said, at one point, that… He made some comment – and this was certainly after Obama won the election – that, "We look across the border and see dynamism and vibrancy and excitement and adventure. People are doing things. As much as we want to be not American, we see all this and embrace it."

Well, I don't know what happened under the last four years. I can't imagine. The reaction up there, certainly via insults that went both ways. The Mexican government was more open to Trump than the Canadian government. But I think the people were confused when Obama won. They thought, "This is not the America we knew," and then they were just as confused when Trump won.

Q: Yeah. Now, related to culture is education exchange. I mention it because it appears that Canada is one of the places where we have the least amount of difficulty accepting credentials, going back and forth, with Americans getting educated in Canada and vice versa. Was that also something that the embassy was involved in?

DICKSON: Oh, we were involved in a number of ways. There is a large American student population in Canada. The Canadian universities, particularly McGill, actively recruit. Other universities do, as well. Their advantage is that, even for out of country, out

of province students, it's far cheaper to get a good, quality education. You just have to put up with the winters. Many people were willing to, in order to take advantage of the lower cost of university education. So, we have large American student populations.

You're right. The credentials of Canadian high schools were easier for us to figure out, and we had a large number of students from there. Where the credentials came in difficulty was in a number of ways, but particularly in the area of medicine. So, our consular officers had a lot to do with that. Many people would emigrate from Canada with professional degrees of medicine, and we would not accept them. We had programs, I think, that were not government programs, but they were private programs to invite fully qualified doctors in from Canada who ended up having to go back to school and were invited to take some rural post in the United States that no American doctor was willing to go to. So, those were the credential issues that I remember, but that was more of a consular issue.

Q: Now, as DCM, did your work require you to travel through Canada?

DICKSON: Quite a bit. I was the supervisor or rating officer for all of the consul generals. So, I went to every post and saw the terrific and excellent work that everybody was doing in their own way, both in terms of the regular consular duties and their public engagement. When I say regular consular duties, we did not have large visa sections, obviously, like we had in Mexico. We had visa sections that were very active because of a couple of things. One was – and this was because of the proximity – that a number of American green card holders or immigrants in the United States, instead of going all the way home to renew their visas, could go to the nearest consulate in Canada. So, one famous case was V.J. Singh, the professional golfer who came to the embassy in Ottawa to renew his visa at the embassy in Ottawa. Paul Cellucci was an avid golfer, and V.J. Singh presented him with a driver. We told Ambassador Cellucci, "You can't accept this. We have rules about gifts." So, he asked V.J. Singh how much it cost. It was very expensive, but Paul Cellucci wanted that driver, so he paid for it.

Anyway, those were the kinds of visa issues across Canada. Every consulate had other things they were doing. In the consulates, there were very few political and econ officers. In Toronto, there was, and there might've been one out in Vancouver. So, there wasn't a lot of political and economic reporting, apart from the consul generals, who would occasionally write something up. But again, most of it had to do with trade, commerce, security. In each of the major airports in Canada were Department of Homeland Security officers. So, there is this pre-clearance process at I think eight or nine airports where Canadians go through U.S. Customs and Immigration in Canada and fly into the U.S. and end up in a domestic terminal in the U.S. They do all the pre-clearance. That was in place before 9/11, but it took on added importance, because you could actually clear people before they even got on a plane. You didn't do the security checks before.

I should say, Mark, that we had one other issue. You had asked about Alaska. We have this very complicated arrangement for cruises in Alaska that are leaving from Seattle or Vancouver because they're going back and forth between Canadian and American waters.

So, there, again, was a very technical and complicated question of who's in charge? Who does the visa checking? Both sides? But those were all worked out to everybody's satisfaction. But that was an issue after 9/11, as well.

Q: Were there particular issues related to Quebec because of language, but also just because Quebec so strongly holds onto its French character?

DICKSON: One issue was that we actually had two consulates in the province of Quebec, in Montreal and Quebec City. So, the question, as Washington kept asking for budget cuts, was do we really need two consulates in one province? The answer was a resounding "of course we do." Quebec City is the capital of the province; Montreal is the biggest city where we have the most interaction with people. We had a very large consulate in Montreal. To close one or the other – and it wouldn't have been Montreal, because we had one officer in Quebec City – would've sent a terrible message to Canada and to Quebec. So, just the presence there was important. Have you been to Quebec City?

Q: No, I have not.

DICKSON: If you ever get a chance, it's just one of the most dramatic geographies in the world. Canada has three or four of them that I'd put on my top 10 list, Vancouver being another. Calgary, too, and Banff is another. But the consulate in Quebec City is this very old building right across from the famed Chateau Frontenac, and it's just remarkable. It's close to the Plains of Abraham, with this walled city, and it really is a treasure of American government property around the world. That was why we would not consider closing. We would lose this beautiful property. But it was also more the vantage point.

Now, in Quebec, we had a lot of areas of cooperation. One of them was electricity, the hydropower that came from James Bay. I remember flying up to James Bay with the consul general. We were invited up to look at this hydro-powered dam. This was very dramatic, Mark. We flew out of Montreal. We went straight north for two hours in a plane. We did not see one inhabitant, going straight north. We were not even halfway through the province of Quebec by the time we reached James Bay. So, there were yet another two plus hours of flight time were we to go all the way. The magnitude of this province and the country as a whole was just hard to imagine.

So, the electricity that came from James Bay goes all the way down to New England. They provide supplemental power on an as required basis. James Bay was very instrumental during one of the earlier blackouts for keeping Boston alight when the rest of the northeast, from Buffalo to New York City, was in the dark.

Q: Yeah. You had mentioned all the water issues. Was there anything particular about sharing the St. Lawrence Seaway?

DICKSON: Not that I remember. I'm trying to think. So, we shared the St. Lawrence Seaway in terms of the fact that at some point, we share the border, and little things came up. So, one issue we did have, also on the Great Lakes, was something called geographic

inhibitors. This was a case where American law enforcement on the U.S. side in boats was trying to enforce the law in the Seaway and in the Great Lakes. In some cases, going point to point along these seaways, you cross into Canadian territories. Our American boats carried guns. They would be in trunks or whatever. We had a tremendous amount of negotiations to try to allow the Americans to take the shortest route and not have to go the long way, hugging the coast in order to get from Point A to Point B. Eventually, we were able to resolve this after I had left – I think years after I had left. It was a big thing. Geographic inhibitors are finally resolved.

So, those were some of the issues in terms of just carrying weapons. There were other issues. There are Native American settlements on both sides of the border in a few areas, so they have separate jurisdictions. There's a lot of smuggling going across these areas. The big issue was cigarettes. Could DHS enter these territories? No. I remember driving up to the embassy in Ottawa through Messina, which was the name of the closest town. You'd go through a Native American reservation, as we call it. There would be signs up, saying "Department of Homeland Security - Terrorist Governor George Pataki, Stay Out!" We would stop there and get gas, and people were very nice, but there was this sense of, "We are separate here. We have our own laws and rules and law enforcement." So, that was another issue.

Q: We've talked a lot about the management of everything along the border. We haven't talked about the foreign policy issues. Canada, in many ways, has common issues with the U.S. internationally, but there's a lot of distinctiveness, as well.

DICKSON: Absolutely, and we did a lot together. I remember Condoleezza Rice came up several times, once on the fifth anniversary of 9/11 when she went up to the Atlantic provinces, to Nova Scotia. I remember being in an elevator with her and saying, "This is our best partner of cooperation. We can do so much here, and accomplish so much, particularly as we look outside, to the rest of the world."

So, a lot of our visitors who came up, whether they were Undersecretary Nick Burns or Secretary Rice or others, spent a fair amount of time talking about other places. Tom Shannon, the assistant secretary for Latin America, came up; he spent a fair amount of time talking about Cuba, Venezuela, Argentina. He was trying not to coordinate but just to explain, and sometimes to advance our interests, saying, "This is what we're trying to do. We'd appreciate your help." We probably shared – and this was new to me – more international organizations with Canada than any other country I was in. Certainly, there was the UN, but also the Organization of American States, NATO, and others. So, we had this multilateral dialogue going on, as well, managing the bilateral relationship, which is what most embassies do.

We did have one remarkable example of working together. This is what I was referring to earlier. I think I mentioned this in the book. I referred to, earlier, how you can do things with technology that you couldn't do. You'll remember that when I talked about Lagos, I mentioned that the phones didn't work; I'd have to get in the car and drive across town to set up a program. But I think it was the summer of 2006 – might've been 2007 – that the

Lebanese started shelling Israel. Israel, in turn, retaliated, and there was an incredible exodus. It was a very violent, very nervous time. We sent ships to the coast to pull out American citizens. We have a consular agreement with Canada that each of us will work with each other to protect each other's citizens outside of Canada and the United States. So, Canada invoked this. It didn't need to be invoked. We were happy to help, and we even said, "We have room on board our ships for Canadian citizens." What we may not have known was how many Canadian Lebanese there were who were trying to escape. That certainly dwarfed the number of American citizens there.

What was really dramatic, Mark, was that I was sitting in my office in Ottawa, talking to my counterpart at the Canadian Foreign Ministry, the undersecretary there, by phone. We had tapped into the U.S. embassy in Lebanon and to a ship right off the coast. We were making arrangements by phone to bring out Canadian citizens. The Canadian consular people were in Lebanon. They were getting people to the port. We had several of these phone calls over the course of that time period where we worked so seamlessly with Canada to get their citizens to safety. Again, this was something that went totally under the radar. Nobody knew about it, but it took up a little bit of effort. The fact that we had these communications made it so easy to bring about.

Q: Did we… How did we handle the issue of Cuba?

DICKSON: Like in many places – and I think I talked last time about Cuba, with Mexico – we went through the Cuba dance every year. The Canadians had their own views about Cuba. They did have relations with Cuba that we did not have. They didn't agree with us. Well before I got there, under the Helms-Burton Law, passed in the late 1990's, we were going to penalize foreign companies that were operating in Cuba in places that Americans had once owned. So, this was a real thorn in our discussions on Cuba with Canada. I think every year, the president had the opportunity or the jurisdiction to waive that requirement. Again, my memory may not serve me well. But I think that because we had so many other issues, with Afghanistan and Iraq and other places, we did not want to throw another thorn in the side of the relationship. We wanted to get other things done with Canada. So, I think the president waived that requirement each and every year.

Q: While you were there, now that we're talking about difficult individual countries, did Iran have diplomatic relations with Canada, at the time?

DICKSON: I believe they still did. Barbara Bodine, a former U.S. ambassador to Yemen, came to Ottawa. She was the first female ambassador in the Middle East. She had been in a plane that had been hijacked, and released. She was retired and came at the invitation of the Yemeni ambassador to Canada. So, he brought her up, and he had a big dinner for her, and she gave a few remarks. But at the dinner was the Canadian ambassador who had worked with us during the Iranian hostage situation to get the seven Americans out. That was later made into a movie, *Argo.* There was a great example of close cooperation with a close neighbor and a close partner, where we could get things done. I think that those kinds of things still continue and would still continue.

Q: Were there any other irritants that you had to deal with?

DICKSON: Probably. I've tried to hit the main ones.

Q: Yeah, just on a day-to-day basis.

DICKSON: There were other ones, like clubbing seals. The Canadians would take a very high moral and principled view about environmental issues. But I remember talking to their national security adviser at one point, and he said something to the effect of, "You can't quote me on this, but don't look too closely at the way we harvest timber in British Columbia, because it is not environmentally sound." The whole issue of clubbing seals off of Newfoundland every year was a huge issue internationally, as well. They allowed an annual harvest of seals, and the traditional way of doing that was clubbing them. Linda and Paul McCartney traveled there to publicize the harvest and maybe to get the Canadians to stop it.

Still, we had many common interests, whether it was fisheries in the northern Atlantic, which was, again, another multilateral body we belonged to. We belonged to the Arctic Council with the Canadians. So, there's such an overlap with Canada that we have more, I think, than with any other country, in terms of multilaterals.

Q: Okay. Well, I don't mean to dwell on too many fine details, because obviously, on a day-to-day basis, you deal with all kinds of small things. Was there anything else consequential while you were there as DCM that also occupied your time?

DICKSON: Yes. There were budget cuts. In the middle of my first year there, it became apparent that we weren't going to make it with the budget we had. We were going to be facing furloughs. This was very difficult, and perhaps the most stressful thing in my three years there, apart from anything foreign policy, was dealing with this budget issue. Now, I had said in one of my earlier interviews that I did take the DCM class before I went to Canada. But I was probably unaware of how much lobbying goes on back to Washington. Give me more money, give me more money. I think I probably could've made the case more. Washington had money that they could have divided out more equitably.

What happened was that in talking to the administrative officer, it became apparent that one of the ways we could save money was to reduce our ORE, official residence expenses. We had eight official residences, including mine. To me, I had a hard time making the case that we would be paying 50,000 dollars a year to staff, in these eight places while our representation allowance was 3,000 for everyone but the Ambassador. So, why are we paying 50,000 dollars a year to spend 3,000? So, we made a very difficult and very contentious decision that we were going to eliminate the resident staff at all of the consulates and all of these residences, except for the ambassador's.

Now, that fell like a lead balloon, but we stuck with it. We opened it up a little, because these residences are big houses that require cleaning. I was trying to make the case that the way our money comes to us is in different pots, different budgets. We have more

money to pay cleaning staff than we do in other areas, so just go out and hire a cleaning staff. Well, it's not as easy as that because of security problems and issues. But still, we could have done it, and we did do it for other services like lawn services and so forth. There was the same thing with cooking. The Mexican ambassador in Ottawa had invited me to some event, but she held it at a restaurant. She didn't do it at her house. She did her representation at restaurants, instead of hiring people to work in her office.

So, anyway, we did save money. It got us on good financial standing. I tried to argue that I never wanted to go through another year where we were cutting newspapers to try to save 100,000 dollars. So, we never had the issue of budget cuts again. But at the same time, I think the Department saw the kinds of budget pressures we were on, so they gave us more funding. Was it enough to save the representational staff? It probably was and could've been, eventually. I had one senior level Department member, the director general of the Foreign Service, who came to Canada and said, "Oh, this is just cutting the Statue of Liberty because it's the most prominent thing and it's a big threat."

I said, "No, it's not a threat. We already did it. It's a done deal. We're not going to survive." But I ran into incredible resistance from all the consuls general who did not want to lose this staff. It was understandable. My wife did not want to lose the staff. It was, again, a very difficult decision. It got us on a firm financial footing. Yet, as soon as I walked out the door, they reversed it. They brought back the ORE staff. But it was a tough couple of years for those people, ourselves included, because we lost our staff, as well.

Q: Yeah. Wow. Okay, so you're there from 2007 to 2010?

DICKSON: No, I was there from 2004 to 2007.

Q: Okay. So, the entire Bush 43 administration. Over that time, was there any significant change overall that you noticed between the U.S. and Canada?

DICKSON: It had more to do with the change of government in Canada, going from a liberal party to a conservative one. Stephen Harper had a minority government initially, before he had his majority rule, but there was more acceptance to working with us. It was easier to work with the conservatives. They were pro-Bush. That was their right-of-center spine, so they were much more inclined to agree with a Republican conservative in power in the U.S.

There was one other major issue. That was missile defense. This came up, again, before I arrived, but it was very prominent while I was there. President Bush had reopened missile defense after the Clinton years had ignored it. He was really very interested in working with Canadians in missile defense, putting up radar stations. We had radar stations in Canada that were related to NORAD, but we didn't spell out, I don't think, exactly what this cooperation would be. But President Bush certainly opened up missile defense, and again, this was a losing political stance for the Liberal Party, if they had agreed with us.

Again, the prime minister before I arrived was Jean Chretien. He did not join, and then Paul Martin also did not join.

President Bush arrived in Canada in 2004, just three weeks after he won reelection. He decided to make his first visit as a newly reelected president to Canada, and he came up. The Canadians were saying, "Please don't mention missile defense. Please don't, when you're here." President Bush wanted to give a speech, and he gave it in Halifax. He came to Ottawa and then flew to Halifax. One of the reasons he wanted to give a speech was to thank the Canadians for their help on 9/11, something the Canadians were… I think I mentioned earlier that the Canadians were disappointed that the U.S. didn't acknowledge all that they had done. Well, Bush made up for that, and so did Condoleezza Rice, later on the fifth anniversary of 9/11.

But Bush was there in 2004 and he made this speech in Halifax. But he threw a line in that was such an innocuous line. It wasn't him saying, "You must join us." He said, "We would look forward to Canadian cooperation in the area of missile defense." That's about as light a touch as you could imagine. Well, the Liberal Party was really upset, after, with him for bringing that up.

Anyway, that was a problem. Shortly after that, Mark, the Canadians hosted the Conference of Parties for Climate Change in Montreal. The COP… I think it might've been COP 11. The ex-President Bill Clinton came up for it. Were you ever involved in any of these COP events?

Q: Only tangentially.

DICKSON: Okay. We sent up our lead person for COP, who was an assistant secretary for EST. He was a nice guy, but totally way down the chain, a sign how little the Republicans emphasized climate change issues. I don't know that he sat in the chair in the hall for more than 13 minutes. I went over one day, the last day, just to see what was going on. I was interested. They said, "Oh, do you want to sit in the main hall? There's nobody in the U.S. seats." I thought, there's nobody in the U.S. seats? Really? In fact, there were many empty seats through the hall. So, I sat in the seats in the U.S. section. I think everybody was given four seats, and there were all these non-governmental people. There were thousands of people. Well the UN norm is you don't really call out or name countries who you oppose. But every speaker who I was listening to tried to outdo the person before them in making reference to and criticizing the United States without name-calling the United States. So, I was kind of shrinking in my seat. With every speaker, I was getting lower and lower in my chair. It was pre-arranged. Obviously, there was no rebuttal; nobody was asking me my opinion. I'm not sure I'd even want to give it.

But before they break for lunch, there's a rumor going around, and I heard that Clinton was in town and going to speak after lunch. So, they get up and make the announcement that everybody has to leave the hall. "There's going to be a security sweep. The former president of the United States is going to be here after lunch." I was expecting people to start throwing eggs. This was a major inconvenience, and they were already so mad at the

U.S. People had to go out in the rest of the hall and have their lunch. But nobody said anything. Everybody filed out. Then, after lunch, a half an hour after they had completed their security sweep, everybody goes back in. We turn all the chairs around, because Clinton's at the other end. He comes in, and I swear it was like it was Mick Jagger walking in. Everybody was cheering, standing on chairs. These distinguished, elderly gentlemen from South Asia or Africa were standing and cheering wildly. Clinton gave his stump speech, and it was just a winner. It was totally shocking, after listening to all of the criticism.

The funny thing, Mark, what Clinton said, and what he offered as his policy – as you know, he is a policy wonk, right off the top of his head – was so close to what the United States was offering under Bush that people didn't make that distinction. I had read the talking points of what we were trying to accomplish. Clinton said it with his friendly way, a little bit of a drawl, and they were predisposed to liking anybody but George Bush.

Now, one of the reasons I bring that up is that, again, this is just a week after George Bush's visit in November, we have this COP meeting. The prime minister, Paul Martin, decides to have a press conference with Bill Clinton. So, he's smarting from this missile defense issue that arose, and he takes the opportunity to hug Clinton and distance himself from Bush. It was very noticeable. It was in all the papers, all the newscasts. Our ambassador from South Carolina, David Wilkins, did not take well to this. He had a speech scheduled shortly afterwards. The election had begun in Canada. Martin had called for reelection, and his opponent was Harper. Martin wanted a majority government. All polls looked like he was going to win. Then Martin decided, one of the ways I'm going to win is by embracing Clinton. So, that was his political calculation.

About a week after that, Ambassador Wilkins has an opportunity to give a speech in Ottawa. He decides to address this issue. He uses the phrase, "Slippery slope." He says, "We're not on the ballot. This is for Canadians to decide about Canada. Don't go down this road about putting us on the ballot. That's a slippery slope if you want to distance yourself from the United States." He did it, and the picture of him in the paper was with a finger. It wasn't the middle finger, but just a pointed finger, saying, "Slippery slope." It was really quite courageous. He stuck to it. It was huge, all across Canada. He stood up for the U.S. Canadians were a little shocked that this folksy guy from South Carolina would be so adamant about this.

Now, that wasn't why Martin lost the election, but … The initial reaction was, how dare Wilkins do this? But this fell on top of a number of other things that happened shortly thereafter, all totally, 100 percent domestic. I think Canadians, as Canadians and many people in other parts of the world do, have an initial gut reaction that's anti-American. Then they pause and reflect and think about it and go, oh, if not them, who? We want to keep them close. The U.S. is still our biggest trading partner. So, it ended up that, I think the election was in January, Martin lost. It was a surprise that Harper won. But I think Wilkins' stern warning did not help him and may have started people looking and seeing that this was not working. You don't need to hug the United States, but you need to have a good, managed relationship with our biggest partner.

Q: It's interesting you mention this, because there were just elections in Canada, and the top American Democrats were endorsing various candidates, in the sense of giving kind words, certainly, to different candidates on the political spectrum. Once again, the current prime minister won, but by a smaller majority. It was surprising to see that, first of all, Americans would have the gumption to make essentially political endorsements in Canada, but secondly that nobody in Canada seemed to object.

DICKSON: Yeah. I followed the election in terms of the outcome and some of the issues, but I did not see any of this. I can't imagine it helping. Ambassador Wilkins was very clear: "I'm not taking a stand." He did not say, I'm a Harper or a Martin guy. He just said, "We're not on the ballot. Keep us out of this. You guys have enough to talk about here."

You will remember in Latin America; we ran into a number of problematic cases where U.S. ambassadors made pretty clear who they wanted to win. In one case, I think the candidate that was preferred by the U.S. won, but it backfired in the next 17 elections. So, obviously, we always say our line is, "You choose your team; we'll choose ours. We'll work with you, even if we don't have anything in common, as long as the process is good."

DICKSON: What happened next was that I was asked to bid on the director of the Office of Mexican Affairs to continue this North American experience, having served in both countries. My last week in Canada was in August 2007. There was another presidential visit by George Bush and the Mexican president, Felipe Calderon, and Prime Minister Harper. It was a trilateral summit. It was their annual Security and Prosperity meeting. It was at this point that I learned that we had proposed, with the Mexicans, an initiative to ramp up our security and law enforcement cooperation there. That eventually became known as the Merida Initiative. This was a package of one billion-plus dollars that we were seeking to get to support Mexican counter-drug efforts. It was there that I learned that this would be the focus of what I would be doing in Washington, helping support this through the office of Mexican affairs with many other offices in the Department and across town. So, that was kind of the last event I had in Canada before heading back to Washington. I went back to Washington and went right to work. I took a delayed home leave. The next week, I just started trying to inform myself about this new and supplemental budget proposal to get money to Mexico.

I left Ottawa in 2007, August, and went directly to start a position the following weekend in Washington as the director of the Office of Mexican Affairs.

Q: How large was that office, when you arrived?

DICKSON: It might've been 11 or 12 people. There were two parts to the office. One part was a small EST section of two Foreign Service officers and a civil servant. Actually, it ended up being two civil servants. One person had been on leave when I got there. The reason for that was that there were a number of very technical elements of the U.S.-Mexico relationship that required an office that was slightly separate from the

political and economic issues in the regular office. Those technical issues, I'll just tell you, had a lot to do with the agreements to share the water along the border. We had a civil servant who had been there 14 years, and she was certainly the expert on that. That office also had responsibility for preparing the documents whenever there was a proposed rail crossing or pipeline crossing along either border. So, one Foreign Service officer spent a fair amount of time on those documents, pulling together these gigantic portfolios for people who would make a decision on whether to approve these proposals for border crossings.

Q: It's 2007, the last year of the Bush administration. They're working on the Merida Initiative. Can you describe what that was briefly? It's now a part of history, and many people may not remember it.

DICKSON: So, it's the last year of the Bush administration, but it's the first year of the Calderon administration in Mexico. Felipe Calderon, who was of the same political party as Vicente Fox, the PAN party, came into office and sent out feelers to the United States that perhaps there was a way to cooperate more closely on issues of law enforcement and drug trafficking that took place between the two countries. The term that we began to use as we worked to promote this extended cooperation was "unprecedented." Mexico had had a very tortured relationship with Mexico over drug trafficking that went back to the death of the DEA agent in the '80s, Kiki Camarena, and a couple of other instances. I think we grabbed a doctor who had been involved in the Kiki Camarena murder and ferried him across the border. He had to be sent back.

So, there was a lot of distrust among both sides in the relationship. But here was a new president in Mexico who wanted to do something and wanted to tap into American resources to take on these cartels in Mexico in a way that was unprecedented. Nobody had ever said, "Okay, we are really going to seek your cooperation." We had talked for years, using the term "shared responsibility" with Mexico. Both countries shared the responsibility for doing what we could on either side of the border for reducing the impunity and the illegal activities that were taking place on both sides.

It had, for many years, been a finger-pointing diplomacy, where the Mexicans would point at us and say, "You need to do more to get the trafficking of guns and arms under control," and we would say, "You need to do more to stop the flow of drugs coming up to the border, stop money laundering." But finally, with the new administration of Felipe Calderon and his tentative feelers, there was the possibility that we could work closely together. It ended up being called the Merida Initiative because of a meeting that President Bush and Felipe Calderon had in the city of Merida in the Yucatan peninsula in that last year of the Bush administration that kind of set things in motion. Calderon raised the possibility of working together and that, if there was funding that came from the United States in a big way, there would be close cooperation.

So, this was an opening that we were very intrigued by and that we wanted to pursue, especially because it had never been done before. Not only did we have to negotiate with Mexico on the terms of what they needed and what they wanted, but we then also had to

negotiate across U.S. government agencies and then with Congress to see if we couldn't get funding for this kind of prospect.

I would add Mark, just as an aside, that in 2004, when I was DCM in Mexico, there had been a hurricane that crossed the Yucatan peninsula and had left a path of devastation. It was not tremendous, but it had really, as hurricanes do, done damage. It wasn't Katrina, but it was a hurricane that caused power blackouts and flooding. For the very first time, we approached the Mexicans, as we usually did in the aftermath of a disaster, saying, "Do you want American help? We would be happy to help." To get that help required a request. The State Department and USAID have immediate disaster assistance, but you have to have a letter asking for help. The Mexicans would never send us a letter. Finally, on this one occasion, they wrote a letter and sent it to us, and it was the first time they had asked for assistance. Again, this was a new political party. It was the third year of Vicente Fox. They wanted to put in motion this immediate disaster relief.

So, the fact that three years later, Mexico's coming to us for a major initiative, requesting funding for huge projects on law enforcement, was, as I said earlier, totally unprecedented. We use the word unprecedented as well, because the violence was also unprecedented. It became not a Mexico-only violence. The fear was that this was violence that could easily and did cross the border. That's how we tried to talk to our colleagues on the Hill and the staff aides and people who were responsible for voting, whether it was congressmen or senators. This was an unprecedented opportunity, but in the face of unprecedented violence that was happening.

This was 2007 and 2008, the year that I was serving in Mexican Affairs, and we were lobbying to get this funding. We were at a heightened sense of alert because of terrorism worldwide. There were actually many more deaths in Mexico along the border and in the interior because of this illegal drug trade. It wasn't just drugs. It was kidnappings. It was money laundering. It was all kinds of illegal activities. But they were all wrapped up with the same cartels. So, again, one of the things we talked about was that the cartels were wreaking more violence within an arm's length of the border than any terrorists were thousands of miles away.

So, part of the Merida Initiative was, how would we organize such a package of support? What we decided to do first of all was to appeal for a supplemental budget increase through Congress. These couldn't go in the regular budget appropriations, but it would be an additional budget appropriation. That occurs infrequently during the year, but it did mean more funding. We worked interagency. We worked through the NSC to come up with a package that made sense. What we did was we combined equipment that would be used, whether they were helicopters or vehicles. This was the biggest ticket item that would be sent down to the Mexican military and one of their organizations that we were working with. Then, we also organized a series of projects that would be training for police and joint training. Other things of technology would be materials that could be used in prisons to track people who were trying to use cell phone technology from prison to run cartel business. All of this was public information.

Then, the third slice of funding had to do with judicial programs – what we called the soft side of the package. These would work with supporting judicial administration reforms and tackling the issue of impunity through the court system in Mexico.

Q: Let me ask just one quick question, since you've detailed very well what the budget request was for. Often, supplemental budget requests were used for funding Iraq and Afghanistan. Was there a legislative benefit for the executive? Was there some kind of extra ability to move money around or to be more creative by having a supplemental, rather than by putting it in the regular budget?

DICKSON: Good question. It really, I think, had more to do with timing and urgency because of the three-year budget cycle. Normally, you would put in a February request to Congress that they would vote on, perhaps, in September, October, November, and it wouldn't be available until the following year. So, the funding couldn't be spent for two or three or more years. So, by doing this supplemental, the idea was to start this project and program as quickly as possible.

The Bush administration was going back for Defense Department supplementals to pay for the war. So, that was part of the political calculus in all of this, as we went through the to and fro's of putting this package together. One day we thought, this is dead. The next day, it was on life support, and then the next day it was coming out of intensive care. There was the fact that this was competing with other military supplementals, and the Bush administration and many people on the Hill did not want to add yet another supplemental to the ones that were already happening. They wanted to limit the number of supplementals. That's where we made the case that there were these levels of violence right at our border. It's hard to say it was as much a threat as anything coming from Iraq or Afghanistan, at the time, but I guess when you're working in those rarefied areas and legislative or executive discussions, you tend to exaggerate, perhaps, and make the equivalency. Certainly, we were making that equivalency.

Q: The one other thing is, if I'm sitting in Congress and trying to decide whether to give you the money based on your arguments -- which all sound good – I still have a suspicion. By 2007, it was well-known that the different drug cartels had penetrated civil society organizations and local governments, if not national governments. That makes it extremely difficult to be able to identify people who you can vouch for. People who are vetted and you know won't be recruited by the cartels.

DICKSON: Absolutely. Again, Mark, you really seem to know a lot about the relationship. We worked, even before in law enforcement, with independent vetted units. We figured out a way for our law enforcement people in Mexico to vet their counterparts, working closely with the Mexican government, who would do the vetting on our behalf. By the time of Merida, there was actual programming funding available for the vetted units and for the process of vetting. But you're right. Since Merida and since this time, Mexican counterparts who we thought were trustworthy turned out to not be trustworthy. We were sure they were on our side, but they were playing both sides of the fence.

I do have to say this in the defense of some of these people in Mexico: Barry McCaffrey, who was the drug czar, the head of the White House Office of Drug Control, ONDCP, came down to Mexico. He met with his counterparts up and down the government, and then he gave a press interview at the very end. What he said was, "People were telling me about two things. One was, if they didn't cooperate, their families would be at risk. Two, they were being offered up to 50 million dollars' worth of support to work with them." Then the drug czar himself said, "That's the kind of money that would lure even me." He said it facetiously, but he did say that this was an incredible enticement. There's the worry, too, especially if the members of the family are at risk, as well. Your children and your wife don't sign up for that kind of activity when you do. So, I don't know the details of the people. I know some of the names of the people who were later found to be in league with the cartels, but I don't know why or how that happened.

Q: Okay. That was really all I was looking for, just a general understanding of how the program proceeded and overcame Congressional hesitation.

DICKSON: So, it was a long period of back and forth. We had many meetings internally, because there were multiple offices in INL (Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs) and Pol-Mil (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs) in the State Department, AID, Office of Human Rights. So, internally, there were many meetings, and then the NSC pulled together many meetings with the Defense Department, the Justice Department, Homeland Security as well. So, all of that was happening internally as we cobbled together a package, and then we had multiple meetings with both houses, Congress and the Senate, the elected officials, and staff aides to try to inform them of what was coming through and coming up.

At the same time, the White House was going back and forth, saying, is this something we really want to do, putting in a supplemental when we have all of these other priorities? The Mexican government and the embassy here in Washington were working their contacts in both the executive branch and on the Hill, as was our embassy in Mexico. So, it was really a three-dimensional chess game going on as we tried to put this together.

I was serious about this one day collapsing. Multiple times in the course of that year, we would go into the office in the morning and learn that, okay, all of the work we've done for the last six months is over with. We're moving on to other issues. There's no more Merida. And then by the end of the day, we'd get word that, oh no, it's coming back. This happened all the way up to the very end. So, when I hear about, today, on a much bigger level the negotiations happening in Congress about the debt ceiling and all that, I feel sorry for foreign governments who are trying to figure out where the levers of power are in Washington. It is a floating thing. Who knows, on any given day, where power resides and lies? That certainly happened with this. I think it's public that our ambassador to Mexico, Tony Garza, who had worked with George W. Bush and was in his inner circle when he was governor and was very good friends with Laura Bush, was working that back channel right to the Bushes, saying, "This is your legacy of really making a

difference in the U.S.-Mexico relationship and in this issue of impunity and drug trafficking along the border."

One other element I'll just add, since I'm yammering away, is that our focus, obviously, in my office was Mexico. But it became pretty apparent that Mexico was not alone in having this issue that was affecting the United States. Central America had its own drug trafficking issues as well. So, we heard pretty early on from people in Congress – and in part from our offices in Washington that did Central American issues – that for Merida to be successful, you really have to include some part of the package for the Central American countries. I remember within my first couple of weeks on the job that we had an NSC meeting where we were talking about the package, and there were people from across the government there. The deputy head of the NSC was running the meeting, and he wanted to focus on Mexico, saying that this had been only Mexico. At one point in the meeting, it was decided it would be only Mexico. At the very end, he goes, "Anything else?"

I said, "I really would like to revisit Central America, because we're hearing from the Hill that this proposal is dead on arrival unless Central America is included." Again, the conversation opened up, and finally, by the end of the meeting, we had resurrected Central America as having a big component of this. That was along with the same kinds of pieces, whether it's equipment, training, and judicial reform activities in Central America.

Q: I worked in Costa Rica from 2009 to 2012, and yes, I recall a little of the Merida money still existed for vetted units there. As I recall, that was about it.

DICKSON: So, one of the things that occurred pretty early on in the discussions was, should we have two separate packages, one for Central America and one for Merida? Colleagues in the Central American offices were saying, "Well, Merida is in Mexico, and we really should have a separate package. Central Americans get the perception that this is a Mexico thing. If we just renamed it or did our own thing, we could join." So, we just argued that Merida had a brand name, at this point. But several years after I left – I don't know at what point – they did hive off and separate the two programs with a different program for Central America than Merida. I think that Merida stayed alive for quite some time. It really was unprecedented cooperation, once it got started.

Q: How long did you stay on the Mexico desk?

DICKSON: So, I was there for one year only. It was only at the very end of my one year that the Merida supplemental was approved. It was a neat timing. I had intended to retire about halfway through my one year, and then I learned that the head of the Office of Public Diplomacy was retiring, and that job was opening. So, I thought, this might be a way to continue to make a contribution in an area that I'm much more comfortable in and where I started my career. So, I thought that that would be a nice bookend to the career, to go back to Public Diplomacy.

Q: But in theory, you were supposed to have stayed on the Mexico desk as Mexico Office director for two years?

DICKSON: That's true. I had announced my intention to retire around January 2008. They had moved quickly to fill the Mexico job. Because of Merida, there was a need to get somebody quickly. They moved the head of the Office of Canadian Affairs, who was a longtime WHA (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs) person who had more focus on Spanish-speaking regions than on Canada. So, he moved over to the Mexico office, and he did the follow-up, the implementation work on Merida once the money was approved. I went over to Public Diplomacy when that opened up. So, I had not submitted my retirement papers, but I was going to. I still had a few months, and I worked with the front office to throw in my hat for the Public Diplomacy job.

Q: Alright. So, you were there for the birth of the Merida Initiative. Did you continue to follow it from the Office of Public Diplomacy?

DICKSON: Only peripherally. The embassy in Mexico and our embassies in Central America had a lot to do with providing Public Affairs support. We had less to do within our Office of Public Diplomacy. I continued to follow it, just because it was of interest, and again, noticed that the implementation was a whole other series of negotiations and memo writing and all that we do in Washington to push such a program forward. It was a huge program.

Q: Alright. Let's go ahead and turn to your move to the Office of Public Diplomacy. By this point, USIA had been integrated for several years. What was the shape of the office you took over, the Public Diplomacy Office in the Office of Western Hemisphere Affairs?

DICKSON: So, we were still trying to work out what was the best way for us to work with our colleagues in WHA. We had different desk officers, as we had had with USIA, who were geographically focused. We had a cultural officer, and we had somebody called a policy officer who was kind of focused on the press side of it. Nominally, our office included the very small Press Spokesman Office for WHA, which was a two-person office that helped prepare the guidance on a daily basis and worked directly with the front office.

What we decided to do shortly after I took over was move our geographically based officers and embed them in the WHA geographic offices. So, for example, we had a Central America desk officer who then just moved over to the Office of Central American Affairs and occupied a desk there. She was able, for example, just because of proximity, to be much more aware of what was going on, what was needed. She was much more involved with the development of press guidance every day. The woman's name was Michelle Lee, and I use her as an example of how this integration really worked well, with her embedded in there. One of the things that we in Public Diplomacy have all talked about is the need for Public Diplomacy to be there at the takeoff of the development of policy and not just grab on midway through when the plane is in the air

or after it's landed. Michelle really had an exemplary role to play in one crisis in particular, and that was the coup in Honduras.

Q: Right, that was a mess.

DICKSON: Because we had agreed about not supporting any coups in the hemisphere, this was a very ticklish situation. The man who was president of Honduras was a Chavez, Daniel Ortega acolyte. He had been removed, and from my perspective, there was no love lost. He wanted to also change the constitution illegally so that he could run for another term. People in Honduras didn't want that, so they removed him, but it was an illegal removal. So, they were looking to the United States. Which way was the United States going to go? Tom Shannon, our assistant secretary, and Craig Kelly, our deputy, really had to straddle our principle of not intervening in undemocratic changes of government but also the fact that removing this man meant he wasn't going to be involved in an undemocratic change of government internally.

So, for several months, we were trying to figure out and unravel how best to proceed in Honduras with Hondurans. They came up, finally, with an agreement, but it really required constant press guidance, and Michelle was there at the takeoff. I know that she was in on late-night phone calls with our ambassador in Tegucigalpa and Tom Shannon and Craig Kelly, formulating the guidance that would be needed for the next day, offering her suggestions and really having an input. It was a true good example of how this is supposed to work. It didn't happen in every office, but that was one office where it worked very well. It was also a bit of a crisis situation. It has a lot to do, as you know, with personality and competence, where you get somebody who's very good and is brought in to do that, whereas in another office, you couldn't really rely on that person.

So, at the time, I was troubled by how the integration was going. The Public Diplomacy offices were still a little bit aloof and separated from everything else. They were also kind of stepchildren in the Department. They weren't really making the contribution that they could have. So, I guess that over the next two years, what I tried to do was, as I did when I worked in embassies, ask, how do we make a contribution to the broader bureau to make our programs and tools relevant? I think that the embedded officers really helped quite a bit. We did a number of other things that I think helped. I used to say that we were a laboratory, and we would try things out and experiment with different programs and projects. Again, this was to make us relevant to what the Department and the bureau was trying to do.

I can tell you a couple of those things. You probably saw some of them from your vantage point in Costa Rica as PAO. One of them was social media. We had a person who was extremely talented and gifted who came up to be the Mexico-Canada desk officer. It was pretty apparent that her contributions to the bureau extended beyond Mexico and Canada, particularly in social media. How was the United States as a government and the State Department going to set itself up to take advantage of these platforms? So, what we did with this wonderful officer – Suzanne Hall was her name; I think she's since changed her last name – is we took her off the geographic assignment and just made her the social

media and Internet person for WHA. So, she worked with all the offices. She worked with the front offices, just ramping up our ability to get the word out. We did small videos and got them out to the field. People started standing up and taking notice. "Oh, this is what WHA is doing and this is what PD is doing to support this." That was a big thing.

Another thing we did was we brought in two outsiders. One was a Jefferson Fellow. One was a Franklin Fellow. These were fellowships that enabled people from outside government to come in and spend a year in the Department. The Jefferson Fellow was a science fellowship where we could recruit scientists to come in from around the country. The Franklin fellowship was to bring in people who had a business background into the Department to work. In both cases, people who won the fellowships would go around to offices and interview to find a home for the year. "Where do I want to work for the coming year?" We talked, in both cases, to these two individuals about how they might contribute to WHA. So, they actually did make a wonderful contribution in different ways.

The science person. We were interested in him, because what we wanted to do was improve scientific exchanges between the United States and Latin America. We noticed that on a non-governmental level, science collaborations and international cooperation are important to the advancement of science. That happens on a regular basis between the United States and Europe. It happens on its own between the United States and Asia. But it doesn't happen at all between the United States and Latin America. So, this man's portfolio was to get down to Latin America and try to drum up interest in working with the United States, using Public Diplomacy exchange programs to promote this kind of collaboration. That worked out very well. Science isn't really the area that USIA or Public Diplomacy is most known for. It's known for the arts and policy and academics, but not science. But this gave us, again, a little bit of a unique vantage point.

The businessperson started a program that still exists today, which is working with women in business and mentoring them. So, she organized a couple of conferences and training programs and exchange programs to bring young women entrepreneurs to Washington. That program has since expanded to the Department, I think, globally for women entrepreneurs, and has been a focus of Public Diplomacy since. I'm going to say that Marsha McLean, who was the businesswoman who came, the consultant, really helped push that forward. The Jefferson Science Fellow was Tim de Vogt from Cornell. Again, I lump all of those – social media, the science, and business – together in the category of WHA Public Diplomacy experimenting and being a laboratory for what could be done with Public Diplomacy.

Q: This puts me in mind of your book, History Shock. *The reason it does is because I worked in Costa Rica as PAO from 2009 to 2012. We eventually got money for the Public Diplomacy section to have one person devoted to social media, all the social media. He was a very talented guy. He very quickly learned the dates in history that were of importance to the U.S. and Costa Rica, the ones that are set on the calendar and that we would always celebrate for messaging. But he went beyond that. He started looking for dates that would only happen once a year, or a particular event, or maybe something that*

was in a speech by a president, either a Costa Rican president or ours. It went on and on. He was able to begin suggesting Tweets and Facebook postings for the U.S. ambassador that made her look better and better, more informed about the history of the bilateral relations. In a very short time, he became absolutely indispensable.

DICKSON: Brilliant, and that's a great use of that. I think there are many places I've heard of that. My son is working in Brazil, and his wife is in the Public Affairs section, and they're doing something like that, but 10 years later from what you did in Costa Rica. We tried to do a little of that, out of Washington, but it was mostly focused on the bicentennial celebrations of four countries in the year 2010. So, those were big, historic events. But the idea of just going back and finding days of relevance, it not only is an opportunity to remind Costa Ricans, in your case, of the relationship, but it also teaches the Americans in the embassy that this is what the relationship did at one point in time.

Q: Yeah. We had sunsetted both the Peace Corps and USAID, but our social media officer went back and found important dates, like the first day they arrived, the last day they arrived, and little statements about how this university that you are attending now was originally started by USAID in this year. Of course, 20 years later, no one remembers, but we found the old… And so on. So, there is a lot of creativity and potential for these things, if you just give them the chance and the general framework of what you're looking for.

DICKSON: Absolutely. That was right at the beginning. I remember a couple of years before that, even when people were very nervous about this. How do you get clearance for things like this? You can't do the Department clearance with 35 clearers on a Tweet. You really have to be quick and automatic and have a separate platform. So, these were all the things we were experimenting with, building up a little trust that we weren't going to mess things up. This was a way to frame the discussion and frame perceptions and so forth. Mark, what you just said was really creative, which is why I say that Public Diplomacy jobs are the most fun in the Department. You get to have creativity and an ability to experiment, and you have resources. You don't have a lot, but you certainly have enough for creativity and to support, in a big way, whatever the ambassador is doing or what the assistant secretary wants to do.

Q: And we did get positive feedback from the Costa Rican public, measured by how many people came to our Facebook page or read a Tweet. It began to get better. But I'm sorry, I'm pointing this out only because you're discussing, from the Department side, the beginnings of this kind of use and the people in the Department who are beginning to do this.

DICKSON: Yeah. So, that's what we were trying to do. In the middle of this, there was a broader framework that the undersecretary wanted to implement to professionalize what we were doing, and that was to come up with strategic communications plans along the lines of what the military did. So, I went down to SOUTHCOM (United States Southern Command) and got one training, and then one other interaction on how the military writes these strategic communications plans. The undersecretary wanted it in every

office. So, there was this bureaucratic layer to what I would say is the creative, experimental activity that was going on. This was another thing to fit into the State Department.

Again, the undersecretary noticed this, and she, as well, wanted to figure out how to make the cone more relevant to the work of the Department. She put a lot of effort into thinking about it and making some changes. One of the changes that she did make was, she thought that in order for Public Diplomacy to be taken a little more seriously in each bureau, we would have one deputy assistant secretary exclusively dedicated to Public Diplomacy. Now, that started right after I retired, and I'm not sure how that has worked out, but I think that that was her intent, at the time.

Q: What I found was that it was relatively easy to create social media presence and outreach. It was much harder to learn the technical aspects of how to use Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms as they changed and expanded services. That makes your social media person even more important.

DICKSON: Yeah, and we did a little of that, Suzanne and I. I remember going out to FSI and talking to Public Diplomacy classes that were heading out to post. She would kind of lay out some of what she did to people who were also more technically savvy than I was but weren't as savvy as she was. So, you're right, there's usually going to be one person who knows more and is more inclined and interested in mastering this. When that person goes, what happens? But your idea is that you've got to find a replacement right away. What I was also focused on, from my level, was how do you manage this? If you don't have that day-to-day interest, talent, or inclination, there still is a management role, and how do you free up the people to have the space to do it? How do you get them embedded into the rest of the embassy or into the bureau and work this so that there's trust and confidence? So, there is a management side of it, and that was the other component on the social media side of it.

The other thing that was happening was that Public Affairs was beginning to start to experiment with social media, in this Department-wide, secretary and senior leadership rather than just geographic leadership. So, Suzanne also coordinated with them to get different kinds of social media done on behalf of WHA but through the bigger apparatus.

Q: Yeah. Speaking of the bigger apparatus, you've discussed what happened in your office with the assets you had there. How were you interacting with the Undersecretary for Public Affairs Office, which had the exchange programs, the speaker of the Department, and IIP (Bureau of International Information Programs), which was kind of the catchall of everything else?

DICKSON: Yeah. So, obviously, the chain of command for these PD offices is bifurcated. The people who wrote my evaluations and my director supervisors were in my bureau. But Craig Kelly, who was the PDAS (Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State), was also PDAS for the Office of Economic Affairs and the Office of Resources. So, he also had a lot of different responsibilities. I think that what Craig thought was he

would establish a fair amount of confidence that I was going to do things that he didn't need day to day oversight on. So, we met weekly one on one, and we had regular bureau meetings, as well. It was the same thing with the Undersecretary, just keeping that office informed. They would come up with ideas that they wanted all of the different bureaus to do, and one of them, as I mentioned, was this strategic communications plan.

So, we worked with them, as well. The undersecretary would come back from her meeting with the secretary and learn what were the hot issues talked about on the seventh floor. She would then interact with the separate bureaus. In this case, it was most specifically with Haiti and the earthquake in Haiti. Up until then, I think there was a confidence that WHA wasn't the center of the world; there was much more interest in the Middle East and Iraq and Afghanistan, and that's where she wanted to put her attention to. But after the Haiti earthquake, the secretary's vision also shifted, so the undersecretary's vision shifted to what WHA could do to support the disaster relief efforts in Haiti. So, she became much more involved in that, as did the whole department.

There was a regular communications meeting on how to get the word out in Haiti, outside Haiti, about what was happening around the world and what were the challenges, and what were the pieces of information that were causing consternation. Housing was a big one, because so many people were rendered homeless. I just remember big meetings about whether we build concrete structures or use tarps and tents to temporarily house them. AID kept saying, "We have to use tarp. That's the material that's recommended in this crisis situation," but that was something that senior leadership felt was flimsy and was not going to withstand a hurricane.

Meanwhile, the Chinese, in their wonderful pr sense, had a different kind of public communications model. They built 300 permanent structures and put them right outside the airport so that everybody would see them to and from the airport, and then they didn't do anything else. So, we're looking to house up to 500,000 people; we can't build concrete cinder block structures, but the Chinese get all the credit for building these permanent structures and then they're off. So, it was that kind of very tense work in Haiti, both on the ground in Haiti and here, for my final six months on the job. It continued. Certainly, after the January earthquake, the first couple of months were all-day, all-night efforts, from the seventh floor down to our office.

Q: Other USAID officers have also done their oral histories and described how difficult it was from their point of view, having been deployed initially as an initial strike force to save lives. As soon as the lifesaving was done, they would then begin the temporary housing until some kind of permanent housing was available. And you're right; there were disagreements, even over the type of temporary housing that could be used until more permanent housing could be created. Of course, you then also had the scandal over what the Red Cross was doing with all the money it had. That continued for years, and it was a mess.

DICKSON: Yeah. If I remember right, I think the earthquake was January 12th. One of our office responsibilities was to get PD officers down there as quickly as possible to

work with the hordes of international press. So, we had a regular turnover of people going in and out and doing that. They set up a small communications office that was inter-agency. I went down in February and did a three week stint myself in Haiti. Then, when one man left who had been leading that interagency communication effort, I headed that up for the last 10 days or so. But it was very intense, as you know. I don't know about your career, but certainly, in situations like this, whether they're official visits or presidential visits, it's very intensive, very long days with heated emotions and egos. Everybody wants to do the right thing, but people are pulling in different directions, and often not in the same way.

Q: Yeah. What I am curious about with regard to the Public Diplomacy aspect of this was, what was the goal? What were you trying to get out, as the U.S. began mobilizing humanitarian assistance and so on?

DICKSON: So, there were a number of issues that arose. Because of the intensity of it, different ones arose every single day. A lot of it was just to showcase what it was that the United States was trying to do and to get the word out, both in Haiti and outside of Haiti, and to try to overcome some initial images of people rushing helicopters to get food. We wanted to avoid that and to have more organization and organized distributions so that it wouldn't look so chaotic. One issue I do describe in the book was that I was sitting in Washington, one Saturday morning shortly after the earthquake, within the first few days, and I got a call from a journalist in Nicaragua. I'm trying to identify officers who can go down and work. So, I get a call in Washington from a journalist in Nicaragua who asks, did I have a response to Daniel Ortega's accusation that the United States was going to take over Haiti, and that our intent was to occupy?

So, your reaction of disbelief was my reaction. He said, "Well, there are all these military. Why are you sending all these military down there?" I had to explain that it was because the military is the only organization that has the people, the materials, and the ability to use them quickly. Our DART teams, bless their hearts, do a great job as the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, but they don't have that kind of broad disaster management. What I noticed was that they were operating contracts and managing contracts, and spending millions of dollars. We had a very small DART team in Haiti that was doing incredible work, working 22-hour days. They were really, as I have called them, the tip of the spear. They were in charge, and everybody else was running behind them. But only the military could get the airport up and running in order to receive assistance. Only the military could send down a hospital ship. This was what I tried to explain, but very quickly, this rumor and this accusation from Daniel Ortega was picked up by Hugo Chavez and other like-minded people in the hemisphere, that the United States had its eyes set on taking over Haiti.

Now, what I write in my book was that I didn't know that the United States had, in fact, occupied Haiti for 20 years, 100 or 90 years earlier. But people in Latin America did. So, the people who were inclined not to trust us were so inclined because of our history. It was a history I didn't know. I say in the book, and I would imagine this, that not many people of the thousands of Americans who were on site actually knew of this history.

So, that was one issue that we had to deal with. We had other issues on a daily basis. We had to come up with statements of how we were identifying and prioritizing people who would be airlifted for medical support. There were those difficult decisions. There were multiple people on the ground who were American doctors working with different agencies and who were involved in those kinds of decisions. There were also Americans who decided to come down on their own, and people were looking at it in different ways, but it was to help young children who were orphaned. What that often meant was that they were trying to ferret these recently orphaned children out of the country. So, a number of them were arrested, and that was a huge Public Diplomacy issue on the ground when I was there.

But most of it really had to do with trying to get the word out about what we were trying to do. In some cases, it was Public Diplomacy programs to talk about and inform different temporary housing settlements that tomorrow, be at this place at a certain time, and there will be a distribution of medicines and food. That will be in this settlement. So, some of it was very practical kind of public service announcements. Another was that there were reports of attacks on women, rape and sexual harassment, so we worked with these different temporary settlements to set up programs and lighting and so forth. So, there were 100 different issues.

One of the things that, from an interagency perspective, we had to really manage was that there was a huge U.S. military presence in Haiti and a very large military communications staff that wanted to get out pictures of all the good that the military was doing – and they were doing good. There was a much smaller AID presence, but they were also doing good. They were working with the NGOs. AID wouldn't let anybody else know when they were going over to a hospital, because they didn't want military guys in uniforms to follow them around and be taking pictures. So, the management of that kind of activity was really difficult. The military was chomping at the bit, and AID was very nervous about being associated with the U.S. military in uniform. They thought it would harm their programs. So, we had those kinds of wrinkles to sort out, and I'm not sure they were ever sorted out.

Q: Yeah. And of course, this is also part of the changing role of the U.S. military, once having gone in as occupiers and now going in as, essentially, humanitarian assistance workers. The same thing happens in West Africa with the outbreak of Ebola, going into Liberia and Sierra Leone and places like that where American occupation, or at least American military presence, would not have been welcome in other situations. You're right; it's a very difficult situation.

I think it's slowly changing for the better, because again, the Costa Rican experience was that one of the things the embassy was doing was creating permanent links between our two natural disaster relief organizations and trying to get down all the way to community level. In other words, if there is an earthquake or something and you can't get to roads or people, how do we, the U.S., get what is needed to you, Costa Rica, in a way you want

and in a way you can receive it? So, there was a lot more discussion of that bilaterally in Costa Rica, and I assume in other Latin American countries as well.

DICKSON: Right. You know, I remember coming back from Haiti, and, a few months later, the military did a big contract with an organization in Washington to find out how to work better on an interagency basis. We came over and did a tabletop exercise. So, I had a lot of admiration for all that the military was doing down there. There were thousands of people. We were all sleeping, as I mentioned yesterday, on the floor and in closets, anywhere we could. There were two showers for the entire embassy. Everybody was on the compound. In the middle of it, I was occupying an office that had belonged to the cultural affairs officer, who had died in the earthquake. So, among the FSNs, they were dealing with their own personal tragedies, trying to figure out how to fix their houses and sleeping in cars and stuff. So, it was a very difficult situation all around.

The one thing that I think is remarkable about this whole earthquake was that I think one of the reasons we stepped up in such a big way was Hillary Clinton's own personal experience in Haiti, both the fact that she and her husband had spent part of their honeymoon there but also because her husband's first term as governor had been drawn to a one-term-only political loss because of the issue of refugees and housing refugees from Cuba and from Haiti in Arkansas. So, I think that the combination was very present in her mind, and I can't speak for her, but I know that on the conference calls we had there was this urgency.

Every day, there was a conference call, and it was always asked, "What's the situation of refugees and people getting in boats, trying to leave?" What was really remarkable was how few people did try to leave. I think that, in fact, what we see along the border today with the Haitians trying to come across the southern border in Del Rio, Texas didn't happen in 2010. My speculation, Mark, is that the disaster was so great in Haiti at the time that people stayed to help. I saw multiple examples of Haitians helping Haitians, at the time. So, people felt that they couldn't leave and abandon their own family and cousins and extended family. They were in need of them and anybody else and whatever they could do. So, that's my take on it.

Q: Yeah, I agree. There's a funny story, mentioning the Clintons. Bill Clinton did go down there at some point, when it was safe, after the immediate earthquake. He had views, and they didn't always accord with what the U.S. government was doing on the ground. He got into little arguments, now and then, with some of the people who recall being there.

DICKSON: Yeah. That was another element of what Public Affairs people were doing down there. There was a regular cycling through of co-dels, secretary of State, presidents. I don't think Obama ever made it down, but Hillary certainly did, and the two former presidents, Clinton and Bush, who had come together as special envoys to raise money, also came down at the time.

There is one other element to the Public Diplomacy response in Haiti that I think is worth mentioning here. I do mention it in my book. That was the role of the Smithsonian

Institute. One of the things that the embassy was most worried about was so many Americans in country. Everybody wanted to come down. Everybody wanted to help. So, they really had a very tight control on country clearances. All of a sudden, I'm sitting in my office in Washington, and I get a call from a State Department detailee over at the Smithsonian who says that he had just heard that his Smithsonian colleagues wanted to go down to Haiti to work with the Haitians on the recovery of their art archives and culture. I said to him, "Larry" – this was Larry Wohlers - "this is about the last thing on anybody's mind, of the needs that are there right now."

Well, the Smithsonian was insistent, and the embassy said, "We're going to refuse country clearance." By this time, I was just starting to come around to what the Smithsonian was really trying to do in the midst of all this tragedy. The Smithsonian had contacts all over the world, including in Haiti. Haiti had been featured on their National Mall Folklore Festival, so they knew a lot of people in Haiti at all levels, both cultural and archival. A lot had been damaged, murals and cathedrals. Haitian art is worldwide known, both at a very high artistic level and at a daily craft level. That's how important art is in Haiti.

So, they really made the case that they were going down. They also said to the embassy, "We're coming down. We don't need country clearance. We're not a government organization. We don't have to follow the country clearance rules." So, there were several days of back and forth about that, and they came down. The embassy wanted nothing to do with them, but the Public Affairs section of the embassy, despite that, organized vehicles for them to go out and meet their counterparts and to meet them at the airport.

Finally, I don't know how the ambassador did it, but the ambassador did meet with them down there when they came through. They made the case, as they were setting up a training program, for the need to protect the art, because there were beginning to be lootings of very important Haitian documents and artifacts. They were going to set up a training program. They weren't going to do it all themselves; this was part of the point, that Haitians would be helping themselves. So, the Haitians, over the course of the next year, could restore, preserve, and protect their own cultural patrimony that was damaged in the earthquake.

So, the reason I came around was that they made the case that every country has its own identity wrapped up in these symbols of national pride or national integrity or national identity. Haiti is no different. These were symbols that were important to Haiti's self-identity, so the Smithsonian wanted to protect them. They made the case of what would we do in the United States if there was an earthquake and our Constitution and our Declaration of Independence were damaged? While there would be tragedy around at a personal level, and a loss of life, many people would be worried about these documents and saving and preserving these documents. In fact, history shows us that with the War of 1812. What do people remember about the War of 1812? One of the few things we remember is that Dolly Madison saved a painting of George Washington when the British were burning the White House. That's something that every kid learns in third grade.

So, it's part of our identity, just as much as that was part of Haiti's identity, but it was an interesting thing. It was more than an exercise, because it happened, but it was an interesting feature of what was going on in Haiti amidst all the efforts to save lives, to relocate and house people. There was this other activity. What I said, Mark, is, "We're a big government. We can walk and chew gum at the same time. You don't have to do just one thing. If you can do something that may not be seen as important but us but could be important for Haiti." I think that for the Haitians, it was important that this was happening; it was very prominent.

Q: So, this activity that you were involved in in the Public Diplomacy office also lasted just a year, or were you extended in the office?

DICKSON: I was there for two years. Haiti really dominated the last six months of my time there. The reason I got onto that was that you're talking about the role of the undersecretary. She took a very active role. Principally, as the secretary and the counselor of the agency, Cheryl Mills, this was high on their mindset at every single senior staff meeting that the undersecretary attended for that time period. We did other things that were more traditional Public Diplomacy but were also very prominent.

As you know, in Costa Rica and in other places in Latin America, we had a very extensive binational center network that is little known and little heard of, little heralded. But I was struck, when I first went to Peru as PAO, that there were these organizations that had been operating on their own that might've been set up with the United States and U.S. embassy support, at one point, but are now very independent. But wow, these are our best friends in the hemisphere. They reach a different level, in terms of socioeconomic class. They're lower-middle class. These are people who are largely eager to learn English. They're predisposed to like the United States because they know the importance of English. They're spending money – not a lot of money – but because there are a lot of people, these binational centers are thriving, and they're also doing cultural programs. These were cultural allies that had gone through periods of being ignored by embassies and by the State Department.

I thought we should embrace them more. I wasn't alone. It was a colleague, Peter Samson, who really pushed this, that these are important organizations for the United States. So, we did a fair amount with them, supporting them. They didn't really need our money. They just needed, I think, to be seen to be close to the embassy. They wanted us to put our arm around them. They had more money than the embassy, in some of these cases, they were so profitable. But we did a number of regional conferences with all of the binational centers. I remember that once, we brought all of the directors up to Washington and we feted them. They paid, at their own dollar, and they came up and we had a conference and we took them on a cruise of the Potomac. It was just us hugging them, the way they wanted to be hugged by official Washington. They responded. But again, these were our best friends, and English teaching, as you know, Mark, was a huge and important component of Public Diplomacy in the hemisphere. It was one of our natural avenues for Public Diplomacy. We've put a lot of our money, the little money that

we did have, into supporting all of our countries' and embassies' efforts to do English teaching.

Q: Yeah. I did a research paper, once, on these binational centers, particularly in Latin America. Almost all of them originated during World War II and immediately after, for reasons you would imagine. We wanted to lock in the loyalty of these people, and one of the ways we did it was by offering things at binational centers that they couldn't get elsewhere. English language teaching was first among them, but there were also phonographs and records, way back when people wanted to listen to phonographs and records that they couldn't get elsewhere, and so on for many years. There were six or seven in Brazil alone, then there were some in Argentina, and on and on. Of course, over time, we backed out; we ceased to fund them. Some of them survived and were self-funded, as you mentioned. Some of them just became… They found other uses or were repurposed. But yeah, a few of them did continue.

DICKSON: Yeah. Certainly, in Peru, there were seven or eight, and they were gigantic. In Mexico, they were on life support. There wasn't as much a need, because there were so many other things. In Bolivia, they were huge. I remember going down to Bolivia when Evo Morales was president, and we were having such a difficult time in Bolivia. The ambassador had been PNG (persona non grata)-ed. All of AID had been kicked out. But the binational centers were thriving. You'd go to the binational centers, and you were like Mick Jagger, an American coming into the binational center, even in the midst of this hostility all around. So, I really did think that it was worth our effort to support them and be as close as they wanted to be with us. There was a little bit of an issue in Peru, because it was the tail-end, as I mentioned in my earlier talk, of Sendero Luminoso and the MRTA and the hostage taking. So, the first little while in Peru, the binational centers were worried about being too closely aligned with the embassy. They did not want to be the targets of bombings. They had been, by the Sendero Luminoso. But over the course of the two years, that became less and less of a threat to them. They certainly grew as close as they could be to us, and we worked very closely with them.

Q: Absolutely. The other question about how Public Diplomacy was developing, now that it was part of the Department, is, how was it now ordering or managing the country strategies, the mission program plans? Did that change significantly also?

DICKSON: We had very little input into what was going on at the country level in their mission performance plan. I think that one of the things that I tried to do, and I think I had this every other week, was hold phone calls with any PAO who wanted to get on conference calls. I tried to let PAOs know what, regionally, our assistant secretary was trying to accomplish, and what his goals were. One of the reasons I tried to do that was that I didn't think that people knew the broader picture. I certainly didn't, when I was in Canada or in Mexico. I didn't really get a sense of where the bureau priorities were. I think that Tom Shannon is a strategist. He thinks in big, strategic terms.

One of his biggest challenges, for example, was how do you deal with Hugo Chavez? How do you deal with his ilk, who are every day throwing out outrageous, hostile

comments? Tom was unlike the assistant secretary before him, Roger Noriega who felt he had to respond every single time to Chavez, and it just made it worse, really, because you had this tit for tat, and the rest of Latin America was kind of turning their head like, oh no, here they go again. Shannon really made it a point that he wasn't going to take Chavez on every time he speaks. "There will be a line, and if he crosses it, I'll have to, but I'll try not to."

One of the things that I saw pretty early on in my tenure in Public Diplomacy was that Shannon's focus, his approach to Venezuela, was really an approach to Chile and Brazil and Mexico. Chile and Brazil are sick and tired of us taking on Chavez every other day. They don't like Chavez any more than we do, but mum's the word. They're just going to ignore it. So, when Shannon developed this strategy, he was going to work with all of Latin America. You know, it's a strategy that because I had been a junior high school teacher at one point, I recognized. If you've got 30 people in the room, and there are a couple of kids who just want to harass the teacher so that they can get the attention, what you try to do is ignore them and try to work with the other 28. I think that this was what was going on. Tom Shannon would probably laugh in my face when I described this right now, but he was probably adopting the junior high school strategy for Latin America. "I'm going to work with those who want to work with us."

Q: I had forgotten that you had that teaching experience. It's a teaching experience I had briefly, as well, and it definitely resonates right. It's just pitch perfect on dealing with not so much Morales but Chavez. He was definitely the sixth-grade recess bully.

DICKSON: Yeah. Anyway, the only other thing I would say is just one more experiment and the role of the undersecretary in Public Diplomacy and the Department. We had set up in Dubai, I think it was, a regional press spokesperson who spoke Arabic and could do outreach from there in Arabic on American policy. It was very successful. These regional hubs were all over. Our undersecretary thought, well, this could be a model that we could use in other regions. So, in my two years, we set up a regional hub in Miami. We kept thinking, where in the region could you put someone? You couldn't put someone in Mexico for reasons that the rest of the hemisphere would think, oh, Mexico is dominating. Colombia, Brazil, every country, had its problems. I guess we took the point of view, and one of the jokes about Miami is, that you have to get a visa to go from New York and Miami because it's the capital of Latin America. So, it was one place that every country had a direct flight into. We decided that, as opposed to Dubai, which made sense – and I'm not sure if it was Dubai; it might have been Doha or something – we were going to put this person on their own down in Miami.

Well, we did have someone, Greg Adams, who went down there and set up an office and was living there, working on his own. He did a very good job in the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake, because he spoke Portuguese and Spanish. He could get on the radio in all of these countries and refute this accusation that the United States was seeking to occupy Haiti. And he did a few other things, as well. When somebody from some media outlet in Brazil wanted a Portuguese soundbite, our embassy would put them in touch with Greg, and Greg would talk to them. He did a lot of radio and a little TV.

That was an experiment. I don't think that it lasted beyond Greg, just for a variety of reasons. The urgency of having someone like that in Latin America, as opposed to someone in the Middle East, was not as great. The difficulty of Greg finding an office and finding enough to do was also harder. So, I would be stunned if that office was still there today. But it was an experiment that we did. It served a purpose, at one time in particular.

Q: Yeah. It's certainly one of the ways that the Department was trying, at least, to integrate Public Diplomacy throughout all of its functions. IIP, the Information Bureau, eventually becomes integrated into the Office of the Speaker of the State Department. It always seemed, to me, to kind of be an orphan after the integration of USIA. There were three bureaus – ECA (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs), the Spokesman's Office, and then everything else under IIP. Did you have a bead on what was happening to IIP or what the Department was trying to do with it at that time?

DICKSON: So, what I remember of IIP and its predecessor in USIA was that they were a very important component of what we did overseas, as opposed to ECA, which did exchanges and educational programs. IIP's outreach programs, speakers going out to these foreign countries, whether they were academics or NGOs, and we used those a lot in the countries that I served in, having people come down. They did video conferences. They were way ahead of Zoom and even WorldNet. They were more reliable than WorldNet. They had teleconferences, where they could hook up people across continents and do speaker programs.

They had a number of other offices, as well. They did magazines. They did what they called policy guides. They sent out a daily press feed, The Wireless File. The Wireless File we used, in the early parts of my career, to clip and cut and send out a press release right off there. By the time IIP had come around and had new technologies, they started the websites. They dropped all the magazines and did e-zines. They still did speakers, to some extent. So, they were evolving to try and take advantage of the new technology, as opposed to the brick and mortar.

IIP was also organized geographically, and we worked very closely with the WHA office in IIP. It was, interestingly, run by a PhD in history, Peter Cozzens, an author of Civil War history who has since written books on the U.S. and Native Americans, the conflict with Native Americans. So, we did a number of things with Peter and his staff that were really history-focused, as well, especially as we moved towards the bicentennial of these four countries in 2010. But we did other things. 2009 was the bicentennial of the Abraham Lincoln birth, so we worked with IIP to highlight the presence of Lincoln in Latin America and his bicentennial.

Now, when I look back at this book about history and foreign affairs, I really, in almost every assignment, drew on and tried to do something related to history in each of these assignments. That was one of them, the Lincoln bicentennial and the 1810 and the 1809

bicentennials. I knew it was in flux and fluid and people at IIP were worried, but nobody really had long-term plans for it, like the changes that have happened since.

Q: Yeah. That is all the questions that I had for you in this office, but I may have missed something. Was there something else consequential that you recall from that time?

DICKSON: The only other thing that I would highlight was yet another activity we did that I suspect, again, as PAO in Costa Rica you were aware of. We had an officer in WHA/PD (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, Office of Public Diplomacy) who started a project on race across the hemisphere. It specifically began with Brazil. We signed a joint comprehensive agreement with Brazil that we would work together to address issues of race. It was mostly in academic research, but we wanted to see what policy things could be done on a joint basis on the issue of race relations in each of our countries. We did exchanges, academic exchanges, meetings, conferences. We really put a little substance to that. As I was leaving, we were beginning to do these kinds of activities in Venezuela, Colombia, Honduras, and other places where there were other large Afro-Latino communities. So, this was a novel program that we helped launch, and it gave the United States a different way to interact with Brazil, specifically, over an issue of importance to both of us.

Q: Yeah. A very brief comparison is that in Costa Rica, we opened an American Corner on the Atlantic coast, which was the coast where most Africans and occasionally East Indians and other people of color landed and ended up working in the banana plantations and then made it their home. By opening an American Corner and a library there, we were then able to engage in all kinds of programs related to African Americans coming to the Americas. I recently saw online another event that they're hosting there, so that American Corner seems to have had some pretty good sustainability.

DICKSON: That's good. Well, Blakeney Vasquez really was, I would say, the person who initiated this program. She was the cultural officer in WHA. I think she's still working on these programs out of WHA and again, it helps us highlight the issue of race relations. A country like Brazil doesn't see itself having the racial problems, but they're not looking very closely, I think, at the way we would examine issues of diversity and education, prison populations and leadership and government. So, all of those ways of tracking race relations and progress, I don't think they do in Brazil or other places.

Q: Yeah. So, as you're coming to the end of two years in the Public Diplomacy Office, what is your thinking? Are you still thinking about retiring, or are there other opportunities you wanted to pursue?

DICKSON: No, I was definitely thinking of retiring. I had moved in that direction two years prior. I saw this as my final assignment. There was a very brief effort to have me stay on as the first DAS in WHA, but my mind was already elsewhere – elsewhere being right where I am. I had already lined up a few projects in my retirement and was ready to get on with the next chapter in my life. That includes completing my recent book, *History Shock.*

Q: I do have one question about the book. You had mentioned throughout your oral history the need for more history teaching for Foreign Service officers going to these countries. What was the motivation for you to write the book? Did you speak to someone who encouraged you?

DICKSON: It struck me while serving Mexico, pretty early on, that Mexicans had a very different recollection of history than I did. I should say I, but I would then venture to say probably most Americans have that very different view. I noticed it almost on a daily basis. The Mexicans kept bringing up the War of 1848 and other interventions. In fact, Mexican foreign policy was very much rooted in the protection of national sovereignty. It was a defensive foreign policy. That really had a lot to do with it defending itself and its territorial integrity against the United States. So, to me, I was struck by how much that got in the way of the broader relationship. There are many other things that get in the way, but certainly, the history was there.

So, I was perplexed by this. They had such different memories than I did coming into Mexico. I read a lot, I traveled a lot, but I just didn't have that kind of reference point on the history that they did and that they carried with them and that they had learned as part of their national identity growing up. It was definitely not part of our national identity growing up. They see it in their murals on the national palace, in murals in the national art museum. This is how, absent books, many people learn history in Mexico.

In my last assignment in WHA we did a fair amount of history projects, principally because of a colleague who had a PhD in history. This was his area of interest. We did some projects that were related to the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth, and then projects that were related to bicentennials of independence. Then, I remembered that almost every place I went, I did some projects in PD, and even as DCM, that were related to history.

I remember that in Mexico, I worked with the American Chamber of Commerce, which cleaned up a statue of FDR (Franklin Delano Roosevelt) that was very prominent in Polanco on the edge of Chapultepec Park. I didn't know it was there. They had statues of Lincoln and Gandhi and many international figures, but I was surprised that there was this bust of FDR that was kind of overgrown with hedges and stuff. So, the AmCham paid for it, and then we got the current president of Mexico, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, AMLO, to come to the relaunch of this bust. He was then mayor of Mexico City and was very happy to do it; it was easy to get his approval, even though he was kind of a far left – from our perspective – in a country where the national administration was run by conservatives. He accepted right away, with no qualms. I was struck, first, that he gave a little talk at the bust, and he knew all about FDR. One of the reasons, and why I shouldn't have been so surprised that he accepted, is that he really liked the progressive policies of the New Deal and FDR really reaching out to people in distress. So, this appealed to him, and that's why it was a no-brainer for him. Anyway, it was again, yet another example where I was struck that even their understanding of American history was much deeper than I thought.

In Canada, we did a project connected to history. The consul general in Halifax worked with a group that had identified a cemetery of American soldiers from the War of 1812. It was Dead Man's Island. A group of Canadians were going to put up condos on the site, and this group of American veterans, with some historic preservationists from Canada, decided to make an appeal to block that condo. The Americans, a group from Ohio, paid for a marker. There was a big opening ceremony that I went to. The lieutenant governor general, who was the provincial representative of the Queen of England – Canada is part of the Commonwealth – was there, and they had all kinds of speeches and so forth. Here, again, was history in the present. What struck me there was how Canada is among our closest partners, and at the time, it was ruled by England, but how close we are after having just fought two centuries or less earlier. We forget how we were bitter enemies at the time.

So, anyway, when I left and retired from the Foreign Service, I had this troubling aspect of history in my mind, and I had an intention to apply for a graduate program in history. I really wanted to investigate this. I retired to the state of Massachusetts. They have a wonderful public university, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. I took the GREs (Graduate Record Examinations) and did just well enough for them to accept me into the program. I started there, commuting from Pittsfield, where I live, all the way to Amherst. It's an hour and a half commute, just slightly longer than my commute in Washington, D.C. to the State Department, and that's eight miles versus 50 miles of traffic.

When I went there, I couldn't articulate it, but I was just curious about this nexus between history, memory, and national identity. I got involved in a number of side projects, because I was just distracted enough, and everything seemed interesting. I was involved in local history projects here. I had to do an internship. I went to the local history society that's based at the Herman Melville House and started giving tours on Melville. I got into historic preservation and wrote my thesis on historic preservation. But in the meantime, I still had this other, lingering interest. It kind of gelled in a number of different classes of global history, and also public history, and another one on the history of the United States as an empire. Finally, there was one on historic writing.

That's why I chose UMass. I wanted to do writing. One of the assignments, the final projects for this writing class, was to do a writing sample, either a longform essay, a series of op-eds, or a digital website, or a book proposal. We had spent a week with an author who had written a long book, a jazz book, on Thelonious Monk. Professor Marla Miller, who was also my advisor, had given us a format for a book proposal. When I thought about what kind of project to do, I decided that, oh, I'll do a book project. Then, I ended up thinking, maybe this is a way to really begin exploring this issue of history and memory in the Foreign Service. That's what happened. That's when I came up with the topic. Again, it was just for an assignment. I called it *History Shock,* because I saw it as a slice of culture shock, history that shocked me.

So, I worked on it. The book proposal is, you write a chapter, and then you write summaries of other chapters, and then you write an introduction about why you think your book would sell, what the book's all about, who you are, and why you think you're

the right person to tell it. So, anyway, it was very easy to put together the first chapter on Mexico. It just flowed so quickly. What was harder was that I wanted to lace it with historical analysis. I wanted to intertwine the history with my memory of what happened on a daily basis, whether it was walking with journalists on the site of Monte Alban in Oaxaca who later claimed that the U.S. was taking over Monte Alban because Madeleine Albright and the foreign secretary closed it off for their visit.

So, anyway, that was a useful exercise, but it also helped move me to prepare other short resumes of what the other chapters might look like. I never thought, at that time, that it would actually turn into a book. I wasn't sure if I was going to continue working on this. Like I said, my other interest at UMass was historic preservation. I did a big project on the rehabilitation of a building here in Pittsfield. But things just conspired to work together, and I taught a class here for the lifelong learning institute on *History Shock*. I went out to Cornell and talked to a former colleague who was a Jefferson science fellow with me at the State Department. He wanted me to give a talk, so I just thought that history shock would be my topic there. The number of talks kind of pushed me along to continue to investigate and explore. Over the next eight years, I would write a chapter here and there amidst my other projects, and eventually, there came a threshold where I thought, I've got to finish this. So, that's what happened.

As I was writing it, I just remembered all of these instances of when history intruded throughout my career. In all of my assignments, and even when I was back in Washington, working on Cuba and Haiti, I just noticed that we had very different versions of history. Either I didn't know the history, or I had such a different view of history than the people we were trying to interact with and trying to find common ground for cooperation. That's what led me to finalize the book. I was happy that somebody was interested in it. I could get it off my computer. I was extremely pleased that it was with a university press. They really did a great job in terms of editing and doing an index and getting it out there.

Anyway, it helped me make sense and helped me… I don't like the phrase "coming to closure," but it certainly helped me make sense of the 26-year career.

Q: So far, other than reviews, have you gotten reactions?

DICKSON: So, it's interesting, Mark. My biggest worry was talking with former colleagues about it, because I was worried of their response being, "Oh, Dickson, of course. You're just dumb. Why didn't you know this? We knew this." What happened with former colleagues is that there were so many people who said, "Yeah, I've had similar experiences where history got in the way, where I didn't know the history," from all over the world. That was interesting. People said this was important. Your organization was very positive, too, in response. I think Susan and others and you found that there is a need for more training in history. We get such a short time in training and then we're thrown out there and left to our own devices, which is what we're all supposed to do; we're all generalists and smart.

One person, actually, a guy who went on to become an ambassador, wrote to me and said that he noticed it. He said that what he did was he developed his own reading list for incoming officers. I had my reading lists. People would just say, "Oh, you've got to read this." But all of my reading lists, almost to a book or whatever, were not books that talked about bilateral relations between the U.S. and whatever the country was. It was all about the history of that country. So, in South Africa, I read about the history of South Africa and where I was serving, going back to pre-colonial times, *The Washing of the Spears* and the British and the fighting of the British at Isandlwana. But I never really got, where were the Americans at that time? So, I think that was a big gap that I would recommend filling.

Of course, that's what you do, talking to people who have served in these countries. Of course, the Office of the Historian does the Foreign Relations History Archives and also has that, but I never tapped into either of those. I should have, because they were there when I was. But for some reason, in the rush of things, as Susan said, we have an email inbox of 90-plus unread messages, and we don't have time to sit back and reflect or pause. So, anyway, that was one group of reactions.

The other group were people who have no idea about the Foreign Service. This was my pitch to publishers. I got this principally because of a woman, a friend of a friend, in Holland who had read it. She was in the Netherlands and said she never knew what it meant to work in an embassy, what kinds of things we did. She said she liked the anecdotes much better than the history. She told me to get rid of the history stuff.

Q: Not surprising. In our interviews, we always ask for anecdotes for just that reason. They often provide context and color and certainly interest readers from all kinds of backgrounds.

DICKSON: Yeah. What I think people think of what the Foreign Service does or what the State Department does is they think about Tony Blinken going off or shuttle diplomacy at this very high level. I remember Trump saying this: "I don't really need a State Department. I am the top diplomat." Okay, I thought, then you handle the missing American in the jungles of Peru, and put that on your desk, too. How many other things are there? I was mentioning earlier the crises that we had to deal with on a daily basis in Mexico. Hopefully, it never rose to the level of the Security Council, because that was the job that we all have, is to try to deal with these at a local level, without calling in the cavalry from Washington.

Q: The other question I had about the reaction to the book is, does anyone advise you on sort of a book tour or who you should talk to about distributing it to get it where it's needed?

DICKSON: So, when I was working with the University Press of Kansas, they sent me a long marketing questionnaire about organizations and media outlets that were natural, where I went to school, all of that. So, book tours now are very hard because of Covid. Book stores started doing them in the early summer and then shut it down. So, I have

done quite a few on Zoom, including with your organization, but it's mostly virtual. Zoom is helpful because you're able to be in Pittsfield, Massachusetts and talk to people in Washington or wherever.

But the most interesting and very positive reaction was right here in the Berkshires. The Lifelong Learning Institute did a book talk on Zoom, and 500 people registered from all over the country. Slightly over half of those people actually attended, but I got a lot of very positive feedback, again, from people who don't really know what diplomacy is. I see that, now that AFSA (American Foreign Service Association) and others are trying to, and have been for years, get out and tell the American people what it is that we do. For many of these people who are my age or older, this was all new to them.

When I read a book, a memoir like Bill Burns' *Back Channel* or Henry Kissinger's *On China* book, they all start with history. They give a little bit of background, and then they move into the past. Not always do they make the connection that this event happened because of that event, but they feel the need, which is accurate to start historically. Burns says it right away, that when he got his master's degree at Oxford, he had a teacher who said, "You can't do foreign relations without knowing history." I quote another ambassador in the book who says that people arrive at a post and think that history starts with their arrival. I think it's just the rush of daily activities.

I'm not saying that history's the answer to everything at all, but I do think that it would improve our ability to interact and work with people overseas. One of the things I say is that I did refer to culture shock because, having been in the Peace Corps, we were all about cross-cultural stuff. So, I was really prepared for culture shock and cross-cultural relations. But I was totally unprepared for history shock. I know that history is part of culture, but when I think of the cross-cultural things that I went into the Foreign Service or the Peace Corps with, it was about food, interacting with foreigners, how you present yourself in an environment, shaking everybody's hands as opposed to getting on an elevator in Washington and not saying anything to anybody, for example. In South Africa, everybody talks to each other. I was prepared for that culture shock, but not the history shock. And that's the title of the book, History Shock, When History Collides with Foreign Relations, published by the University Press of Kansas.

Q: So, you have talked about the need for better history training in the Department to make U.S. diplomats more effective. Are there other recommendations you would make to improve the way the State Department does business?

DICKSON: Well, one of the things in relation to that is, I reflect on why did I rush through this career? Why didn't I get more training?

I think this is a reflection on the career as a whole, Mark. I had just an incredible career. I didn't go to a lot of places. I only went to five countries. I had colleagues of mine who had served in eight or nine. But I really think that it was just marvelous. It was marvelous for my family. I would recommend the career to anybody. I liked it because of the variety. I can't imagine having gone to work with an organization and having stayed with that

organization 26 years without that kind of variety. So, being able to move every three or four years is really a built-in variety that helped me each time get inspired and ready to go and reinvigorated. So, I liked that part of it. They were very good to my family, all of that.

I was scared as a junior officer that I would not get tenure. I never thought I would even get tenure, and here I go on to have a great career, because that was really in the back of my mind, starting off, that I couldn't rise to that level. So, just being able to finish out a career, every year was an added gift, I thought, to me as I worked. But the one thing that happened was that at some point, I lost that, "Oh, I'm not up to snuff," and I got on what I call a moving sidewalk. You know how you have in airports? I couldn't get off. I was just looking around at who was getting promoted, thinking I've got to get up and get moving. So, the idea of stopping and getting off that moving sidewalk to go for more training, I didn't want to do it. I just wanted to keep going. I hit that next level. I think that that pressure to move up, a lot of it was internal, there's no question about it.

Q: I'll just tell you quickly that I had a supervisor who told me frankly, "I'm not sending you on any training because I don't believe in it. I don't think that any of the training they're offering is worth the time."

DICKSON: You know, there's probably a little of that that may be accurate. Some of the training may not be worth the time. But the fact that you're away and you're not answering emails, even if you go to a worthless lecture at FSI. The fact that you have time to reflect in your daydreams is, I think, really important. I know you're not going to go to Congress and say, "Please give us time to reflect and daydream," but still, I think that that's valuable. I always approved training for people, even back in Washington. But I never did it for myself. I had six weeks of French language training to start off with. I had three months of language training with Spanish. I had a DCM course and two area studies courses. And that was all I had. It was less than six months in my entire career. So, I think that that's on me for not looking for it.

But I think that that pressure is there. I think that if it was a built-in requirement, like the military, to do some of these leadership training modules. Like, I looked at Ray Odierno, who just recently passed away, the general. He had come to Mexico when I was there, and I was just stunned by this guy. He was 6'6" with a bald head, and I thought, woah, I'm glad he's on my side. When I looked at his career, I wanted to see where he was and why he would've come to Mexico. I saw all these years off to go get a master's degree. They have this path where they want people to do that.

Here's one other thing that I think was internal, Mark. I was running a sprint. I wanted to retire early, in my fifties. I wanted out. I wanted to enjoy life. If I had thought of it more as a marathon and it didn't feel like I had to get out so early, I probably would have taken more time and done the marathon rather than the sprint. But part of that, again, is personal. I said early on that my father had a heart attack at age 54 that really crippled him. He had a nice, long retirement, but it was very limited. I wanted to enjoy my retirement, and I have.

So, those are all things that were pressuring me internally but also externally. If there had been this kind of systematic path for training and it wasn't seen as something on the range from worthless to unnecessary, I might have been able to make more contributions.

Q: Now that the book is completed, do you have other ambitions?

DICKSON: So, there are two things. Somebody advised me when I retired to get out of Washington. You're just going to be drawn into foreign affairs things. There's a whole world out there besides foreign affairs. That's what happened when I came to Massachusetts, and I got involved with other activities at the university but also in local history. Then, what happened – and the book was part of this – is that I was drawn back into this world. I teach foreign affairs for the Lifelong Learning Institute. I stay abreast more than I probably thought I was going to initially because of the teaching. But I do have two others – and probably more than two. As you probably noticed in leaving, you probably have a hard time saying no, so people ask you. So, I'm on a number of municipal commissions, boards, mostly having to do with local history.

The other thing was that I got back in touch with Peace Corps colleagues who we had worked with in Gabon, and we started a little NGO. We've gone back to Gabon for years and done small, month-long projects there in small villages, renovating schools and distributing mosquito nets. So, that's also been really quite inspirational.

Q: Yeah. That's fantastic. Just out of curiosity, when you do this, do you notify the embassy?

DICKSON: Yes. What happened on this, Mark, was in 2011 a group of volunteers who I had served with decided to have a reunion. We had not had a reunion ever. A lot of groups had reunions, but we had not. So, in 2011, I had just retired, and I looked around at these former volunteers who I was with in the 1970s, and there were people who had worked in government, with the Defense Department and Agricultural Department and Foreign Agricultural Service and AID. There were people who were engineers; there were people who were public health professionals. There were teachers. I thought, oh my God. Look at the talent here. Look at what this two- or three-year experience, how it propelled us in all of these different directions and really changed our lives and gave us this interest.

We all went up to Middlebury, Vermont for this reunion, some of us paying almost 1,500 dollars just to go to a reunion. I thought, wow, we also have resources, and we're at a time in our lives when we have time. Why don't we do something? So, we came up with a project, a social service project, as we called it. We were going to do something on our own, but we were all volunteers from the '70s. When we started out, we had ideas, but then we learned that there was a volunteer from the '80s who had stayed in Gabon. He had worked with Peace Corps as a volunteer and staffer. He married a Gabonese woman. He was Peace Corps director in Congo and his wife worked for Citibank. He's the head of the American Chamber there. So, he heard about what we were doing, and he had

some ideas to renovate old Peace Corps schools that Peace Corps had built in the 1960's. He said, "This is what you really ought to be doing."

So, just to have this guy on the ground was great. Because he's head of the AmCham there, he has regular, routine contacts with embassy officials. So, every year we went there, we went to the embassy, met with the ambassador, told them what we were doing, and it was largely because of this former volunteer who stayed.

The embassy did a wonderful thing that they were going to do anyway. The woman who was about to head out to be ambassador, her name was Cynthia Akuetteh. She said that she had been in touch with the family, during her confirmation process, of a volunteer who had been murdered in Gabon. Her murder was never solved. Karen Phillips was her name. So, she said that she wanted to plant a tree and have a plaque on the embassy grounds. She told the family that. So, when she told me that, I said, "You know, there was another volunteer that we knew who died in service. Why don't you do the two of them?" She didn't know the other volunteer. Her name was Diana Fillmore. So, the first year we went back, we planted a tree on the grounds of the embassy, and there's a plaque there in memory of the two volunteers who had lost their lives in service.

The woman's murder, by the way, has since been solved.

Q: Holy cow. Even at that great a distance in time?

DICKSON: Yeah. It was about 10 years later. People had an idea who it was, but it was the wrong idea, and it was somebody else. The FBI was involved and solved the murder, and the man who committed it is in jail. But the woman had been murdered in '96, so I think it was solved in 2012 or '13.

Q: Wow. Remarkable.

DICKSON: Yeah. Anyway, that was a nice thing, and every year when we go back, we head over to the embassy and take a picture of the tree and send it to the families.

Q: That's really a lovely tradition. As this concludes the interview, I would like to thank you for recording your oral with ADST. There is much that students, teachers, and the general public can learn about the ground truth of U.S. diplomacy you portray in your narrative. Thank you for your service.

End of interview