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

AMBASSADOR LARRY DINGER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: All right. Today is the 4th of March, 2014, interview with Larry Dinger, D-I-N-G-E-R. This is being done on behalf of the Association of Diplomatic Studies and Training and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. And I assume you just go by Larry, don't you?

DINGER: I do.

Q: Larry, let's sort of start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

DINGER: Charles City, Iowa, August 8, 1946. My parents lived in Riceville, Iowa, about 30 miles away.

Q: All right. Let's take the Dinger side of the thing, we'll go to your mother's in a minute. But can you tell me about the background, how did the Dingers end up with Iowa and all that?

DINGER: All my grandparents were farmers. The ancestors had started out in various places in Western Europe, but by the mid 1850s they had all gotten to the United States. Some of them had come in the 1600s.

Q: Do you know from whence they came? Dinger, sounds German.

DINGER: Dinger is Pennsylvania Dutch, German. They may well have suffered religious persecution. One way or another they got to Pennsylvania and then they migrated on west and ended up in rural Howard County, Iowa. My mother's family is Miles. They came to this country in about 1630 or '40, I gather via Philadelphia, and eventually migrated on west and ended up in Iowa. And the other branches similarly. I'm a quarter Scottish, the Lockies and McClains. I'm an eighth Irish. I think those ancestors probably were starving and left Scotland and Ireland for better pastures, ending up in Iowa. The Wildmans came across at some point early as well, via New York. By about 1850 my ancestors were all farming in rural Iowa and many of them farmed throughout their lives.

Q: Well, how about, take your grandparents and father and mother. Where did they -- were they farming too?

DINGER: Grandparents were all farmers. My mother's relatives, the Miles family, were pretty prosperous farmers in Iowa. My grandfather and both uncles retired from the farm. The Miles family is not farming now, although my brother and sister and I still own 160 acres of inherited land near Riceville. We went to the Iowa State Fair a couple of years ago and received a "Century Farm" certificate for the Stella Miles farm, named for my grandmother.

Q: When you say they're farming, what kind of farming?

DINGER: This was typical Iowa farming, where they were raising cattle and pigs and also grain farming, mostly corn and soybeans. And so in childhood I was out helping to hay and pick up rocks, and stuff like that.

Q: Did your grandparents and your father and mother go to college?

DINGER: My grandfather on my mother's side went to teachers college for a couple of winter quarters when he wasn't busy farming. My mother was the first person going back in my branches who graduated from college. She went to Iowa State Teachers College, now the University of Northern Iowa, and graduated with honors as a French major. That choice was not the smartest move going into the Great Depression, jobs were very scarce. She ended up being a teacher in a number of schools in the Iowa area and during World War II went to Chicago to work in a bank. She and my father, who had enlisted in the Navy, married during World War II. My dad's family had no college in its background and my dad did not go to college. He was a high school graduate.

Q: That is often the pattern. If anybody -- so many people I've interviewed -- I'm still dealing with a generation where their parents, if anybody had a college education it was usually the mother in often sort of a teaching or nursing degree. Mine didn't, both -- mother never went to college, anything, father had one semester I think.

DINGER: No, it's not at all unusual. I do have older cousins who went to college, but in that previous generation my mom was the only one.

Q: But interesting thing is that knowing this, that generation was heavily into reading. It wasn't as though we're talking about an uneducated group. It's just that college was for the rich and the others you had the Carnegie Libraries and the free libraries and all and they did very well, thank you.

DINGER: That's right. There wasn't a Carnegie Library in Riceville, Iowa, but they had access to books one way or another and, and they'd get a newspaper now and again, and they were avid readers. There's no question about that.

Q: Yeah. Well then --

DINGER: I should mention my father's side. My grandfather, was a part-time farmer. But he also was a small businessman. He owned the Acme Store along the railroad that went through the Riceville area, and serviced the community there for a while. And he eventually ended up in Minnesota. But that was after his first wife died of what they called consumption.

Q: Well, it's Riceville? What was it like when you were a kid?

DINGER: Bucolic *(laughs).*

Q: (laughs)

DINGER: It was the perfect place to grow up. It truly was one of those places where you knew everybody and everybody knew you. My friends when I was two-years-old were my friends when I graduated from high school. I don't think anybody locked the door when I was a small child. We lived right next door to my mother's parents, my grandparents. I wandered over there at will to sit on Grandma's lap and have her read books to me and -- yeah, it was just practically a perfect way to grow up *(laughs).*

Q: And you had brothers? Sisters?

DINGER: Had a half brother, older, considerably older. He was from my father's first marriage. And he lived in Riceville for most of my life. And then I have a younger brother and younger sister.

Q: As a kid, were you much of a reader?

DINGER: Oh yeah. I practically exhausted the town library. I think I still remember the first time my mom took me to the library, which was then in the high school. And I think it was probably Bobbsey Twins that I checked out. I still remember the corner of the library where those books were.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: Maybe five years, six-years-old.

Q: Well, later on, looking back on sort of your early years up through early high school, were there any books that particularly influenced you or excited you or not, or any type, or?

DINGER: Not in particular. I was an eclectic reader I think. Through junior high I probably wasn't reading that huge a variety. I remember the Hardy Boys and things like that. But no, nothing particularly special. By the time I got to high school I just read through the entire library. Whatever was there I was reading.

Q: Yeah. Was -- I mean how were little kids, boys, girls, treated in those days? Kind of turned loose on the town? I mean, you know, under everybody's supervision, but, but what was sort of -- how was playtime organized?

DINGER: Well, there was some organization to it. There was summer baseball, and I played that. I was a lousy hitter but a good fielder so I generally got to play second base. Beyond that, outside of school activities play was not really organized, we just did our thing. We played cowboy -- usually Cowboys versus Cowboys because we all wanted to be cowboys.

Q: Nobody wanted to be an Indian.

DINGER: Didn't really want to be. In the wintertime we'd go down to the river with our ice skates and we'd skate. And nobody worried about us.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: We were a nice group of kids and we just played.

Q: Yeah. Well, what about, say, the family came out of the Amish or the -- that, that type of -- was religion important to you all?

DINGER: It wasn't at all Amish. I mean Pennsylvania Dutch was the heritage way back on one side of the family, but we went nearly every Sunday to the Congregational Church. That was an important part of our lives.

Q: Was Riceville sort of a -- where did the population come from? Was it a mixed population, or was it not?

DINGER: Well, it depends on how you define mixed. It was all European, all white. There was one Jew in town, no blacks, no Hispanics. The big division was between Catholics and Protestants. And that was a significant division.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: When my cousin married a Catholic my grandma was *really* upset. By the time I married a Catholic no one cared. But when I was a little kid it was a big deal.

Q: No, I recall, you know, being warned at a certain point, it's not a good idea to date Catholic girls because if you do the children will be brought up as Catholics. And that was abhorrent to...Today it makes --

DINGER: Not at all, yeah. And today in my hometown there are now blacks and there are now Hispanics.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And I don't sense that is any big deal at all. But when I was a kid that just didn't happen.

Q: Well, was there any sort of divisions?

DINGER: Riceville was and still is a farming community. And the businessmen cultivated the farming community. The veterinarians and the doctor and the banker were kind of special I suppose, but not that special. We all went to the same churches, people all went to the same Legion club. But some of the communities around were clearly ethnic. One community very nearby was a Czech community. Another was a German community. Riceville wasn't really any particular nationality from Europe. It was an amalgam.

Q: Well, how about -- you were too young to get involved, but where did your family fit politically?

DINGER: My grandfather who lived next door I guess was a Democrat. He didn't really talk political things much, but he was among the first ones I knew who had a TV. And I remember him watching and listening to the 1952 Republican Convention. He was getting elderly at that point and he would be talking back to the screen about whether Eisenhower was the right one to choose.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: My dad and mom I think probably split their ballots, one a Democrat, the other Republican. We didn't have a lot of political conversation in the household. That wasn't where we were.

Q: Was there much --

DINGER: My dad was a carpenter, by the way. My mom was a homemaker who returned to teaching when I was graduating from high school.

Q: Was there much talk of the world around or events or anything like that around the dining room table, or?

DINGER: Not that I recall. I think we kept track, sort of. Mostly via the evening news on TV. And then we always took the newspaper -- I was a paperboy.

Q: <u>Des Moines Register</u> or --

DINGER: No, although the Register was delivered in town. But I took around <u>The Mason City Globe Gazette</u>, and so that's the paper we subscribed to and I'm sure all of us read it once we got to the point where we were able to read. But we weren't a family that had deep political conversations at dinnertime.

Q: Where was the big town?

DINGER: Riceville is the hub of northeast Iowa, with spokes to a bunch of towns 40 or 50 miles away. Rochester and Austin, Minnesota; Mason City, Waterloo, and Decorah, Iowa.

Q: When you say Mason City, of course --

DINGER: River City.

Q: The Music Man.

DINGER: Absolutely.

Q: But well, it really does sound like, you know, a slice of Americana as everybody wished it would be, but.

DINGER: Yeah, I think I could have been Opie, you know, in Mayberry RFD. One thing that was unusual about the time, and that I think kind of started me off on my adventurous life, was that the main English teacher in the high school was the wife of the superintendent of the schools. And she believed in debate and speech programs. They'd had a healthy speech and debate program for a number of years and I leapt into that, as did a bunch of my friends. And we were extremely successful. That sort of set us off.

Q: Mm-hmm. Did they have sort of contacts?

DINGER: Oh yeah, we went all over the Midwest debating. We won three state championships, from that little town of 900 people.

Q: What sort of things would you debate?

DINGER: The topics were given to us each year. One year I think it was -- I'm not sure they used the term -- but it was something like, "Should there be socialized medicine?" *(laughs).* And I got to thinking more about the politics of things at that point, because my debate partner was a recent immigrant from Northern Ireland. His father was the minister at our church. And Paul and I had the negative side on the debate topics. Paul had done a lot more thinking about politics globally than I ever had. And I'd sit back now and again and listen and absorb a bit. Also I competed in extemporaneous speaking contests, which required a degree of knowledge of the world, and I also participated in the Iowa Student Senate, a speech program. Amazingly to me, I was rated the top speaker in that contest during my freshman year.

Q: Did events in Europe or in China interest you at the time, or the Soviet Union, or?

DINGER: Yeah. Sure. By that time I was curious about the world and I was keeping up with it by newspaper and television. And we were getting into the early stages of Vietnam by the time I graduated from high school in 1964. That was a curiosity for me. I was also interested in what was going on with the Soviet Union and to some extent China I suppose.

Q: The men coming back from World War II and all, were they talking about what they did and --

DINGER: My dad was in World War II, my uncle was in World War I. I don't remember my uncle talking much at all about his experience, but he got to the Western Front just in time to get sick, with the flu I suppose.

Q: Oh boy.

DINGER: And at the same time my mom and her family were all desperately sick with the flu on their farm. But returning to my dad. He was old enough that he would not have been drafted for World War II but he was between lives at that point, enlisted in the navy, and ended up in the Pacific. That's the period when he and my mother got to know each other well via letters. And just before he embarked to the Pacific they rendezvoused in Denver and got married. Afterwards, from the tenth anniversary of the end of the war, every year he and his Seabee friends would have a reunion somewhere. We went to the very first reunion when I was nine-years-old in Chicago. I listened to them telling their stories about Saipan and Okinawa, things like that.

Q: The Seabees are the Navy's construction battalion?

DINGER: They were. Dad had been a farm kid, sold pots and pans during the Depression, barely scraped by, and after the war he ended up being a carpenter. But his job in the Seabees was censoring mail.

Q: Yeah, you know, well, what was high school like?

DINGER: It was great. My high school class had 72 students, which was one of the biggest -- well, I'm the beginning of the baby boom generation.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: But it was still a small enough crew that you could do almost anything if you had some ability, so I was involved in everything. I mentioned the speech and debate. I was a wrestler.

Q: Wrestling is quite big in --

DINGER: Big in Iowa, but it hadn't begun in Riceville until my freshman year in high school. So I was on the wrestling team, captain of the golf team. I was first clarinet in the

band, got the John Philip Sousa Award in my senior year. Sang in the chorus, participated in all the plays. If there was an activity I was probably involved in it in one way or another. In the science club. And so you could do that in a little town and little school. I thought it was absolutely wonderful.

Q: What was the dating pattern?

DINGER: The dating pattern?

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: I did very little. I was pretty shy.

Q: Uh-huh.

DINGER: My wife was one year behind me in school and we were friends, knew each other, but didn't date at that period. We got together later.

Q: I mainly went to all boys schools and so we were terribly interested in girls.

DINGER: Oh, I was very interested, I just wasn't ready for anything serious.

Q: Yeah. But you know, being shy I would think that the girls would take care of that matter.

DINGER: Well, some of them were reportedly interested, but I wasn't at the point of dating seriously. But we had lots of friends, and so we would just go out as groups of friends and do things.

Q: Movies a big deal, or?

DINGER: Movies were a *big* deal. We had a movie theater in our little town when I was in my childhood, but there were also movie theaters in every town 20 miles away.

Q: Did you get a car early on, or?

DINGER: I didn't, but I had a bachelor uncle who lived with my grandparents next door. And he had a 1950 Ford that I think he probably bought so my mom could first drive it and then we kids could drive it. So whenever I needed a car Uncle Manley's car was it. I didn't buy my own car until I was in the navy.

Q: Well, when you got out of high school what were you pointed towards?

DINGER: I knew I was going to go to college, not exactly sure why I knew that, but I was valedictorian of my class and was a National Merit finalist, and, you know, clearly there were options. I was being recruited to go to college. And it seemed like a good idea

anyway. My mom had done it and, and it ought to be the future. So I was prepared to go to college, I didn't really know what I was going to do, I thought maybe math because I was good at math. Thought maybe political science because I was kind of interested in political science. But I figured I could make those choices later. So I applied to three schools, got into all three: Iowa, Michigan State, and Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Mac was just coming into massive funding from DeWitt Wallace of the Readers Digest, including money for merit scholarships. It ended up being cheaper for me to go there then it would have been for me to go to a state school. And I went to Mac.

Q: OK, well let's talk about -- I've heard the name often and well spoken, but I've really never talked to anybody who went there. What was --

DINGER: It's a wonderful place.

Q: What was it like?

DINGER: Well, it was probably the perfect fit for me. It moved me beyond my small town life into a more cosmopolitan environment. It was St. Paul, Minnesota, an urban area. Very international in retrospect. I don't think that's the reason I went there, but it certainly colored the rest of my life. Kofi Annan had been there, although I didn't realize it at the time. It was maybe the second college in the United States to routinely raise the UN flag. And I started taking a variety of courses trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. Came to realize that calculus was not the direction I was going to go, but political science was really interesting. And that faculty had a great set of teachers. One in particular, Dr. Mitau, kind of became my mentor. So I ended up orienting towards political science. But I liked biology, I was an economics minor, I was broad-beamed. And Mac had lots of interesting people, mostly from the Midwest, but some from the coasts as well, minorities for the first time. And it was an incredible period in American history, including on campuses, that period from 1964 to 1968. I was not at the head of the protest movements, but I was kind of watching what everybody was up to and absorbing.

Q: What'd you think about the, one, just looking at the protestors sort of as a phenomenon in themselves? Did you feel that they were serious? Did they have -- people having fun, or what?

DINGER: They were serious. Particularly the civil rights protests. There was nothing fun about that, all seriousness. And I respected the efforts that were being made.

Q: Minnesota of course being so far north people think of it as being very liberal. But what was your impression of the treatment of blacks as you came into awareness of them?

DINGER: Well, at Macalester I didn't perceive big problems. The minority students seemed integrated well into campus life. But reading and watching TV about what was

going on in the South, or later in urban flare-ups elsewhere, obviously there were deep grievances that needed correcting.

Q: Had you formed any ideas about the Communist Movement or various -- that sort of thing at the time?

DINGER: I'm sure I was anti-communist.

Q: Well, kind of hard to be pro-communist, but --

DINGER: Even in high school, one of the things that my Northern Ireland friend tried to correct me on was my one-sided perspective on all the various isms of the world. He attempted to broaden my perspective, suggested that many other views ought to be respected as well. And I suppose to some extent that sank in over time, but I never became a fan of the communist philosophy.

Q: Did you have an interest in any foreign country? Any area per se?

DINGER: I don't think any particular interest, but one of the things that Macalester offered and that the Readers Digest money funded in my case, was an opportunity to go abroad. And so the summer after my junior year I went on what they called the Study Work Abroad Project at Macalester. They bought my air ticket and found me a job in a coffee factory in Norway. I worked at that job and earned enough money in two months to travel through Western Europe for a month afterwards. My parents had loved to take trips, sometimes long trips towing a camper my dad had built; but SWAP was my first foreign travel beyond Canada. And I loved it, another inspiration for eventually joining the Foreign Service.

Q: Well, what was Norway like from your perspective?

DINGER: Very pleasant. Very nice people. The coffee wholesaler was importing from all over the world and then grinding and selling to shops. I came to like the smell of freshly ground coffee. Everyone was kind to me. I don't have any particular recollections beyond that.

Q: Where else did you travel?

DINGER: At that point?

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: Three Mac acquaintances and I rented a Volkswagen. I didn't really know any of the three very well, but one guy was in Norway working at another place and two women had been working in Holland. We gathered in Denmark, went to Germany and into Berlin, crossed Checkpoint Charlie, came back out again, went into Prague where one of the friends had a pen pal. We had a good look at what Eastern Europe was like in

1967. Then we visited Vienna, over to Switzerland, down to Italy as far as Rome and Naples, back up along the Riviera, and ended up in Paris. An absolutely wonderful experience, soaking in the cultures.

Q: Vietnam wasn't particularly an issue, was it, during this time?

DINGER: Vietnam was becoming an issue. And the closer I got to graduation the bigger an issue it became, because graduate school deferments had ended and the lottery had not begun and draft boards were very serious about taking people when they came right out of college. My draft board told me that they were going to take me. And that was true for many of my male classmates. And so we had to figure out what we were going to do. In my case, I think in part because of my father and his service in World War II, I didn't want to choose the Canada or jail options. I didn't particularly want to go into the army either, so I followed my dad and went into the Navy, but in my case as an officer.

Q: What did you major in?

DINGER: Political science.

Q: Did that have a focus, I mean in your own studies, within political science were you looking at the West, the East, the South?

DINGER: My political science was mostly domestic U.S. politics, but I took a few international affairs kinds of courses. But I hadn't intended that my career would be foreign affairs at that point. Hadn't really intended that my career would be anything in particular. In my senior year hoping that somehow the draft board thing would work out, I did two other things as well. I applied for the Peace Corps, thinking that I'd enjoyed being overseas in Europe, so maybe I should try some more foreign adventure. The Peace Corps offered me a spot in Southwestern India, which sounded intriguing. And I applied to law schools, Harvard, Michigan, and Stanford, figuring that training would be excellent preparation for practically anything. All three accepted me, but the war loomed.

Q: How did you feel about the involvement in Vietnam?

DINGER: I wasn't very excited about it. I understood the arguments, but I wasn't completely persuaded. On the other hand, people a lot smarter with a lot more knowledge than I had made the decision so I was prepared to serve my country.

Q: Well then, you graduated in '58, was it?

DINGER: '68.

Q: '68. Had the protest movement hit Macalester or not?

DINGER: It hadn't really. Not in a massive scale. Protests were certainly happening in '68, and some from Macalester were very much involved. They were protesting the war,

but I wasn't part of it. And most people at Macalester were not. The transformation at Macalester happened sometime in the next three or four years after I graduated. When I came back from my navy time in '72, the place which had been a fairly conservative small school when I left, was a radicalized school.

Q: Well, how did the navy come about?

DINGER: As mentioned earlier, I felt an obligation to serve my country. My dad had been in the navy, so I applied to OCS (Officer Candidate School) and got in.

Q: So what specialties did you get into?

DINGER: In the navy? I didn't really have a specialty, I was a line officer, a generalist. In OCS they asked us what we wanted to do in our first tour. And in fact they said, "If you do really well here we'll give you what you want for your first tour." I was naïve enough to believe them. So I asked for sea duty, thinking that would be fun, and I did very well at OCS. When it came around to the assignments, the top five of us in the class were all sent directly to Vietnam. So no sea duty for me. My initial assignment was to a non-self-propelled barracks ship that was decommissioned before I could join it. I ended up being what the Navy calls the Shitty Little Jobs Officer at a small riverine base, taking care of the swift boats, the sorts of boats John Kerry served on. But my job was taking care of the library and the swimming pool and --

Q: Where were you located?

DINGER: Nha Be, just south of Saigon.

Q: Is it on the Rung Sat River or are they --

DINGER: It's on the Saigon River.

Q: Saigon River.

DINGER: Yeah. But the Rung Sat Special Zone was just south of our base. Were you there?

Q: Yeah, '69 to '70, I was consul general.

DINGER: Oh, were you? Wow. '69, '70 was when I was there. May of '69 to May of '70. We could have met.

Q: If you needed a passport I would have issued one.

DINGER: In 2010 when I was in Yangon I went back with my wife just to take a good look at Vietnam again. I had been a couple of times to Hanoi, but I'd never been down to Saigon. Have you been there lately?

Q: No.

DINGER: When I was there in 1970, as I recall, it was at least 10 miles of rice paddy from Nha Be up to Saigon. Nothing but rice. When I went back and got in a taxi and said, "Please take me to Nha Be," I never left a heavily urbanized environment the entire time. It just completely overwhelmed.

Q: Well, Rung Sat -- Saigon --

DINGER: Yeah, there was something called the Rung Sat Special Zone, and it seemed to be a Vietcong stronghold so it had been defoliated to beat the band. The only people I knew who actually went there for operations from our base was our Seal detachment. But I joined the base medical unit for some Med CAPs and Dent CAPS, volunteering to provide health services to the villages.

Q: What'd you think of Vietnam?

DINGER: Thought it was sad. I had limited experience, but we could see the village just outside our base. Also a whole lot of army troops came in by helicopter every day for lunch because we had really great food at our base *(laughs).* So I talked to people, watched a little bit. My basic impression was that the people of Vietnam, the vast majority of the people of Vietnam really just wanted to have peace. They didn't care who was going to bring the peace. And they would probably be better off under any kind of peace than they were under the war. And so I wasn't sure what we were fighting for.

Q: Yeah. Did you have trouble with, as an officer, with enlisted people at that time?

DINGER: Not at all. We were a pretty congenial base and we had a great commander of the base. We had a great atmosphere. Nobody was fragging us.

Q: What sort of things were the swift boats doing from your area?

DINGER: Well, it's second or third-hand, I never went out on one, we just serviced them. But they were heading out into the more swampy areas of the Mekong Delta looking for Vietcong.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And I was there just as the Vietnamization was happening.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And so we were starting to do the training process of getting the Vietnamese Navy ready to take over our functions.

Q: Well, did you have any thoughts on what you wanted to do beyond the navy?

DINGER: Well, sort of. I guess I'd come to a decision that I wanted to be a public servant and I wanted the law degree to do that well. Maybe I wanted to run for elected office, I wasn't sure. So I was thinking that when I would leave the Navy I would take up the Harvard Law School option. But Vietnam was not the last stop in my navy career.

Q: Where'd you go after that?

DINGER: Well, the Navy said since I had been good enough to go to Vietnam even though that wasn't what I had asked for, how about London? And I said, "Yeah, London will be all right." So I went to the Fleet Operations Control Center Europe, which was a support unit for the Commander in Chief of Naval Forces Europe, then located right on Audley Square in London. And it was just a fantastic life *(laughs).* I was a watch stander. We had a 24-hour watch and usually five of us standing it -- which meant we worked hard and odd hours, but then we'd have lots of time off, and I was young and single and in Europe with what I thought of as money. And so I had a good time.

Q: What did -- from the navy perspective, what did you see if you got involved in the Soviet Union the navy would be doing, or?

DINGER: Well, we were watching the Soviet fleet movements all the time. If I had the mid-watch I would prepare the brief to give to the senior leadership in the morning, and our brief was almost entirely what the Soviet fleet was up to, where they had moved from and where we expected they were going to go next. We were just providing plotting and speculation of onward movement and intentions. I was often curious about what was going on, but I don't have any insights.

Q: I mean was there sort of table talk in the units you were involved in about what might happen, or?

DINGER: I can't remember that there was, no. Some elements there may have been involved in table talk. My particular watch standing group was just busy accumulating data and spewing it out.

Q: Mm-hmm. And did you get any feel for the British attitude toward Vietnam?

DINGER: Hm. Not that I recall, no. Vietnam was the other side of the world.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And we were dealing with Europe.

Q: Did you work closely with the Royal Navy, or?

DINGER: I'm sure there were elements that did, but I didn't.

Q: So then what'd you do?

DINGER: After the navy?

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: I went to law school. Well, not quite. The navy let me out a bit early because they were starting to downsize as they saw the war starting to move toward its end. And so I left the navy at the end of January, 1972. And law school wasn't going to begin until September, so I had money, the GI Bill, and I had time and I decided to see a bit of the world. I put on a backpack, started out in Italy and then Greece, and then I hit the perfect window for the Middle East. There was no war on that year.

Q: This would be '70 --

DINGER: '72.

And so from Greece I went to Turkey. In Turkey I couldn't decide whether I was going to continue on east towards Afghanistan, which I'd always wanted to visit, or whether I should turn south towards the Levant. A truck driver came into the teashop I was sitting in and said he was on his way to Tehran. He would love to have company, anyone want to go? Well, the decision was made. I said, "I'll come with you." He said, "Great, I just need one permit to get you past the border. It'll cost about five bucks. But if you're willing to spring for that we'll leave shortly." So I gave him the five bucks, he went out, I never saw him again.

And that made me decide that instead of going east, I ought to go south. I went through Central Turkey, Ankara and Cappadocia, and down into Syria, where I wandered for a while. I went all over Lebanon, came back out, went to Jordan, crossed the Allenby Bridge into Israel, came back out, flew to Egypt, eventually came back to Greece, and took a cruise ship across the Mediterranean to Spain. And then, after a bit of time in Iowa concentrating on golf and winning the Riceville championship, I began law school.

Q: Did you get much of a chance to talk to people?

DINGER: On the trip?

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: I spoke no Arabic, no Turkish, no Greek. But there were always people who could speak English, and they always showed up just when I needed them. A lot of them were young. Met some wonderful young people in Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon. And we would talk -- they'd invite me into their homes for tea and hummus and we'd chat about the world. It was a wonderful time. Interestingly, when I was in the Arabic speaking world I think everybody thought I was probably Israeli, and when I got to Israel they all

thought I was probably Arabic. I have a look that could pass for either. But no one held it against me so I thrived. *(laughs)* --

Q: Well, did -- I was consul general in Athens from '70 to '74. And we spent an awful lot of time --

DINGER: You could have helped me out at one point.

Q: -- visiting young people like yourselves in various jails.

DINGER: Yeah. My first job in the State Department I ended up doing that, but in Mexico, but I did not get into trouble.

Q: You didn't get into trouble. Shucks. But did you get any feel for the Foreign Service, either --

DINGER: No.

Q: -- as a profession, or --

DINGER: I didn't interact with any embassy. Wasn't thinking about the Foreign Service at all at that point. I thought I was going to be involved in domestic American politics, but I wasn't even sure about that. And so no, it wasn't an orientation cruise for the Foreign Service. But I'd fallen in love with foreign travel, probably because of my Macalester experience, and so I wanted to do more, and I did, I had a great time.

Q: Well, in law school, where'd you go and how'd you find it?

DINGER: Went to Harvard Law. I did very well at Macalester, and I did very well on the various tests at Macalester. So my advisors said aim for the top. I only applied for three law schools, Harvard, Michigan, and Stanford, geographically diverse but all really good. I got into all three of them and Harvard was the best of the bunch. I accepted that offer, and when the draft board made immediate attendance there impossible, Harvard understood. They were prepared to accept me again four years later, so I went there. And again, it was an amazing experience. Fantastic faculty, fantastic fellow students, and a wonderful city.

Q: See the movie, "The Paper Chase."

DINGER: I was that era, yeah.

Q: It was --

DINGER: Harvard Law was as competitive as you wanted it to be. Actually, it was not the same era in a way. I was there at about the same time as One L and "The Paper Chase" came out, but the Harvard of my time was poorly reflected in those depictions.

By the time I got there, I think it was true that the hard part was getting in. Once you got in you were going to survive, unless you were really negligent. And I did far better than survive, I did very well at Harvard. I didn't feel pressure that I was about to get flunked out or anything. I just wanted to succeed. A lot was being tossed at you and there were a lot of competitive people around you, and so I enjoyed it a lot, a whole lot.

Q: Well, in the competitive/non-competitive world, did you feel that you were being looked at or knew that you were -- where you went to be a working lawyer depended obviously on grades and standing and all this? Did this push you?

DINGER: No. One, I didn't expect that I was going to be a working lawyer. I went to Harvard Law School to get an education, not to get a job in a law firm. I clerked two summers in law firms, one in London, which was a great experience, and the other in Alaska, for adventure. And I got a job offer from the firm in Alaska, but it was a commercial law firm and I knew I'd be bored to tears. I didn't take it. I went to law school thinking I'd work in one way or another in government service. And I guess I'm naturally competitive. I wasn't going to do poorly. I was going to study and I was going to do well, and I studied and I did well.

Q: How did you find the case system?

DINGER: I kind of liked it. In a way it's not the most efficient way to teach law if you're going to go to a law firm and practice the nuts and bolts of law. But it was a wonderful way of sharpening the mind if you just wanted to get your mind sharpened, and that's what I was after.

Q: Well, did you feel that the law school, the faculty was trying to mold you in a certain way, or?

DINGER: Not into a particular philosophy. I had a particularly stellar group of faculty members my first year, which is the real molding year there. And no, they weren't trying to move me in a particular philosophical direction; they were just trying to make me think, and think rigorously. They were really, really good at their jobs.

Q: I would think -- I've never taken law, and just looking at it from the outside, it seems so boring.

DINGER: Well, again, it depends on what you're there for. I mean yeah, property could be incredibly boring, or civil procedure I suppose could be really boring, or maybe even torts. Although I thought torts was a pretty interesting course. But I wasn't there for the nuts and bolts. I could have gone anywhere for nuts and bolts. I was there to get an education. And the way they taught law was not at all boring. You were stimulated every single day.

Q: Well, as you were doing this had you picked up a significant other at this point or --

DINGER: Significant other? Oh, that's a good question. Yes, I had actually. And we were together for a couple of years. But then we split.

Q: Mm-hmm. But all this, OK, you're learning and you're getting experience and all, did you see this culminating in doing something for the rest of your life, or?

DINGER: I thought I was going to be involved in politics. And I wasn't sure how, but when I finished law school I went down to Washington and literally knocked on doors to see what I could get, including to the presidential campaigns preparing for 1976. By that time I saw myself as a Democrat. The Udall campaign was willing to hire me to be volunteer coordinator, which was kind of a curious starting job for a lawyer I suppose, but it was a foot in the door. And by the time the campaign ended I was the southeastern regional coordinator, which sounds more exciting than it was given that Udall had no chance in the southeastern United States. But nonetheless, I learned a lot, it was a very interesting year, and I developed another "significant other" relationship there, which also eventually didn't last. So that began the political side of me I suppose. Following that campaign I got a job with Senator Culver from my home state of Iowa doing his judiciary committee work, which utilized my legal training.

Q: Which Udall -- I mean --

DINGER: Well Stewart was the secretary of interior for Kennedy and Mo was the congressman from Arizona who ran in 1976 for president. Mo is the one I worked for.

Q: How did you find him?

DINGER: I liked him a lot! In many respects he was spectacular. He was really smart, he was really funny, he was really thoughtful. He had his priorities straight. I liked him in so many respects.

Q: Did you come away with any impressions about the American political system?

DINGER: Yeah, it can be fickle. Learned that you can't count on success. 1976 might have been a good year for Udall, but he came in second repeatedly to Jimmy Carter. I became impressed by a lot of the volunteers who showed up, including some State Department officers who came over to volunteer for the campaign. I kind of liked the grassroots effort. Not sure what else you're after.

Q: I'm just looking at, at this. Did you find that the political environment where you were working, was it sort of polarized as our --

DINGER: Not at all. Although I wasn't able to observe that as much in the campaign as I did when I started working for the Senate. The senator I worked for, John Culver from Iowa, was considered a rather liberal Democrat. And he was on the judiciary committee. And it was *really* fascinating to observe that committee in action because the chairman of the committee was an extremely conservative Democrat, James Eastland from

Mississippi. You had extremes and everything in between on the Democrat side. And on the Republican side you had, again, the same kinds of extremes. From really conservative southerners like Strom Thurmond to Maryland's Mac Mathias. You had enough diversity in both parties that they had to find ways through things; they couldn't just be rigid. And that was fun to watch. Of course as a staff member you got to participate to a degree. You were drafting amendments and encouraging conversation, and that was good. It was entirely different from what seemingly is there today.

Q: Well, did -- were civil rights still an issue, or?

DINGER: Not a major issue for the judiciary committee at that moment. I think follow-up on the major civil rights bills from the '60s was still taking place, though I imagine Senator Eastland had no inclination to take new leaps.

Q: (laughs)

DINGER: I worked for the senator for only about a year and a half, maybe even less. We were working on a major criminal-law reform bill, and I recall a juvenile justice bill I worked on. I traveled to a prison in Michigan to meet with a sex offender because we were curious about how we should be dealing with pornography issues. Had a very interesting time. The senate staff was amazing. I really enjoyed working with them.

Q: Well, was there a sense of collegiality on the staffs of the committee, or were they kind of divided?

DINGER: My closest relationships were with people on the personal staff of the senator, because as is often the case on the Hill you may be paid by the committee, you may work most of your time on that committee, but you're really the senator's person. And that was true for me. I worked for Culver in his personal office, but I was judiciary committee staff. I don't remember significant distinctions between the majority and minority staffers on the committee. I think we worked pretty well together.

Q: Well, Culver being you say a progressive, wasn't this -- was this in tune with Iowa, or not, or because Iowa I think would be a fairly conservative state?

DINGER: Iowa's had a history of diverse politicians, not necessarily conservative, not necessarily liberal. Recent examples are Tom Harkin from the Democrats and Chuck Grassley from the Republicans. Pretty different political philosophies, but they both have had very long tenures in the Senate. In the late 1970s the two Iowa senators were both liberal, Dick Clark and John Culver. But Culver then lost in '80 to a Republican. And Clark later lost also. I think Iowa's a place where, if you develop enough relationships and do enough good citizen services, you can last quite a long while but you're never really confident.

Q: Did you have any tickling of ambition to run for political office?

DINGER: Yeah, I don't know how long I had it, but I think by the time I was in the Senate office I thought I ought to give that a try at some point. And that's one of the reasons why I left the senate office and went back up to Iowa. I didn't have any immediate aspirations, but I figured if I were to run it would be from Iowa and I should be back there. But before I did that I went on another long trip. I, again, had some money in my pocket. My significant other who I had met on the campaign and I had broken up at that point. My brother was already with the State Department and was in Rio de Janeiro. The World Cup soccer tournament was going to be on in Buenos Aires, so I took six months and backpacked around South America. I went nearly everywhere, including the Galapagos and Easter Island and Tierra del Fuego, and spent some time with my brother in Rio. And that's when I started to think about the State Department as a possibility if other things didn't happen. Because he had a really good life. He was doing interesting work with interesting people in a fascinating place. After the trip I went home to Iowa, wrote an unpublished book about my trip, and then ran for state representative in 1980.

Q: How'd that go?

DINGER: Against the Reagan landslide it didn't go as well as it might have, but I came within an eyelash. I was running against a Republican incumbent and I came the closest of any Democrat to beating a Republican incumbent. I lost by 49 votes.

Q: How did you see you should -- in a difficult time for coming from the Democratic Party, how did you see you should fix your campaign? I mean did you look for vulnerabilities or emphasize your strengths or your opponent's weakness? How do you calculate this?

DINGER: Well, who knows if I did it right, but it seemed to me that I should convey what I saw as my strengths in as humble a way as I could, but also point out the vulnerabilities of the incumbent, because he had a record which was pretty undistinguished, without creating too much of an enemy. And so I tried to do all that. I raised money. I was pleasantly surprised I could raise money. I got volunteers together, including my now wife who became my campaign treasurer. I ran a good campaign and probably won the election actually. There likely was a mistake in the vote counting. And the effort to have a recount of the votes was stymied by the Republican legislature. So I at that point decided maybe there were other things I should be doing with my life than playing politics.

Q: So then what?

DINGER: So then I actually practiced law for a short while. Became a member of the Bar, practiced law in Iowa, just a small town lawyer. But I also had applied for the Foreign Service. And passed the tests. Actually my wife started the process with me, because she was kind of curious about it as well. I was the first one to get in. We had an agreement, if one got in the other would come along.

Q: Well, obviously with your experience in government you had heard about the Foreign Service, but had you thought about it at all?

DINGER: Well, my brother had been in the Foreign Service since 1974, right out of college. And I was watching him. I think he never would have joined except one of his professors in college had suggested it to him. As I mentioned to you, the folks I saw who were around him were interesting people doing useful work, public service, which I wanted to do. My travels made me realize I liked being in foreign places. I had done lots of different things, but never for all that long. The Foreign Service could institutionalize that for me, while moving me from place to place. So it sounded like it might be a pretty good fit, and thus I went through the process. I entered at the end of February 1983.

Q: Somehow the jump from sort of the political side to the discipline of the Foreign Service seems -- it seems like kind of a real leap, was it?

DINGER: I don't know what you mean by the discipline of the Foreign Service.

Q: Well, you're, you're putting your hands -- it's like the military again.

DINGER: Ah, I see, into an organization.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: Well, yes, but it also it was a more flexible organization than some. Every two or three years I figured I would be going to a new place. I would be working with a different set of people. I would be working on different issues. It seemed kind of lively to me. And yes, it was a decision based in part on a realization that elective politics probably wasn't where I ought to end up. I was urged to run again, since the election had been so close and maybe I'd won the first time. But as I thought about it, I wasn't sure that I wanted to have my life so uncertain over and over every two years, whether I would still be in office or not and if I were to lose whether I'd want to practice law, which didn't sound that exciting. So I changed my perspective and decided that the State Department kind of public service might be a good fit. It turned out to be a really good decision.

Q: How did you find the oral exam?

DINGER: Kind of enjoyed it. My soon-to-be wife and I both had passed the written text and we went to Chicago for the oral. I thought it was reasonably challenging. I particularly liked the negotiating session and at that point they had a prioritizing paper exercise. I don't remember exactly what they called it.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: But I thought that was useful and showed how much efficiency and common sense you had. I don't think I was overly impressive with the interview portions, but apparently I did well enough that I made it through the process. I was happy that I passed.

Q: Your wife was taking --

DINGER: She took it too, but she didn't pass the oral. And then she didn't get around to think about the tests again until we were married and then we started having kids. And then she decided she was going to be a full-time mother.

Q: Do you recall any of the particular questions in the interview process?

DINGER: No.

Q: You came in when?

DINGER: Came in last days of February or first day of March 1983.

Q: What was your class like?

DINGER: It was the fourteenth class under the new system. And I liked many of them. There were a few -- I mean the State Department's process of choosing new officers is probably still not perfect. And looking at the group you could see that some people were more likely to succeed than others and that a few were probably not going to succeed at all. And that turned out to be pretty much true. But I liked an awful lot of them. And many of them are still friends of mine.

Q: What proportion were women and what proportion men?

DINGER: I should have counted, but I don't remember. There were a reasonable number of women. There were 32 people in my class, four of them midlevel entries, and I think three of the four midlevels were women. I don't know how many. Sorry.

Q: Well, how about minorities? Were there --

DINGER: There were minorities, both black and Hispanic. I don't recall any other minorities.

Q: As you're going through this, did you fix on a specialty and an area?

DINGER: Well, you had to choose a cone beforehand. And I thought political. I'd been a political science major. I'd done enough traveling and thinking about the political side of the world that that sounded good. And people told me that political was the hardest to get in and maybe the best way for succeeding. So I put political down and got it.

Q: Well, where'd you go?

DINGER: Well for the 14th Class, of the 32 jobs on the list something like 23 were in what was then ARA, Latin America. We only had one Spanish speaker in our class. So

the system was going to have to do some heavy Spanish training, sending a lot of people to Latin countries. Personnel insisted that each of us put at least one ARA post on our wish list of six. While I didn't have any opposition to going to Latin America -- my wife and I had gone to the Yucatan for our honeymoon, I wasn't particularly excited about it either. And I was curious about Asia. Having been in Vietnam during war, I thought I'd like to go back to Asia in peace. So I put down the two posts on the list in Asia, but my first choice was Khartoum. I figured no one else would want Khartoum. It would be a great place for a young couple who didn't have any kids yet to make a lot of money and get started. As I apparently was the only one to have Khartoum number one, I figured it was a sure thing. But the State Department gave me Mexico City.

Q: Well --

DINGER: Which ended up being a fantastic tour.

Q: What was -- how -- where did you fit in the section? I mean, no, did you -- I'm just trying to think of the -- what were the -- what were the political elements going on at that time?

DINGER: Central America was happening. Lebanon. Grenada happened sometime in the mid '80s. But I don't recall that any of the places to which my class was going were hotspots. We had a couple who went to Haiti. Somebody went to Colombia. But there wasn't a sense of urgency, either of threat or of fantastic political opportunities

Q: And you went where?

DINGER: Mexico City.

Q: Mexico City. Who was the ambassador, was that --

DINGER: John Gavin.

Q: John Gavin. There are lots of stories about John Gavin.

DINGER: Well, we can talk about that.

Q: Yeah, let's talk about John Gavin. He was quite a well-known movie star, but not top, top-drawer movie star.

DINGER: He was a good friend of Ronald Reagan.

Q: But a very good friend of Ronald Reagan.

DINGER: And he spoke Spanish.

Q: And he spoke Spanish, he had a Mexican mother I believe. And was president of the Screen Actors Guild too, I think.

DINGER: I believe you. Sounds right.

Q: Yeah. But did you find -- I mean was he at your level a significant presence?

DINGER: Actually it turned out to be, but maybe not in the way that one would have imagined. I don't know if you've talked to anybody about the Mexico City embassy in that era, but it was a pretty controversial place. And you've probably interviewed some people who left there early.

Q: Heard about the temple dogs and --

DINGER: That I don't remember, but Gavin didn't get along with his first DCM (deputy chief of mission), and maybe not a second. But the story is that when he'd gone through his confirmation process he had a 03 desk officer who shepherded him along and they got along great. And so Gavin asked that guy to come with him to Mexico City. And then a while later, Gavin fired his DCM and made the 03 acting DCM. A lot of very senior State Department people were not enamored with that result. And many of them departed. They either got fired or they curtailed. But while the senior levels were having a horrible time, incredible opportunities were opening for some of us at the junior level *(laughs).* We had to fill in. I started out in the Visa Section, which is where I assumed I was going to spend my whole time in Mexico, but the Embassy had openings because of the senior departures and they asked us junior officers if we'd be interested in filling some of those openings. One of the openings was in the Narcotics Assistance Unit, where the senior person had left and the deputy was going to be in charge. I put in for that one and got chosen. So I left the visa line. And within a very short period of my arriving in the Narcotics Assistance Unit the acting chief's wife became seriously ill and they had to curtail. So very early in my first tour in the Foreign Service I was running a 10-million dollar narcotics assistance program.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: Which was a great opportunity. I did the desk work and frequently traveled to Sinaloa State to observe anti-narcotic operations. For the six months or so before a more senior person arrived, I had a wonderful first tour experience which resulted in a Superior Honor Award.

Q: What were you doing?

DINGER: The narcotics assistance that we were mostly doing was helping the Mexican police find ways to reduce the production of opium poppies there. We had a spraying program underway through the International Law Enforcement portion of the State Department. Small planes and helicopters were spraying the poppies. The next-door office was DEA and they were deeply involved in all of the counter-narcotics activities as

well. From my perspective it was a fantastic opportunity to show some management skills. And then when the new person came in, I moved down and did what you said you did at one point, I became the arrest and detention person for central and southern Mexico. I went around and visited prisoners, another fantastic job.

Q: Were you there when the -- our Drug Enforcement Agency essentially kidnapped somebody that had been involved in the killing and torture of narcotics people or --

DINGER: Yeah, I remember that case, but I certainly wasn't involved in it. Whether I was there or whether it was after I left I couldn't tell you.

Q: Probably after you left. Well, did you find, I mean as you're working on this did you feel you were working with an uncertain instrument, i.e. the Mexican judicial authorities?

DINGER: Well, I remember as the acting director of the Narcotics Assistant Unit I got opportunities to interact with senior people in the Mexican system, including the attorney general at the time. I remember going to cocktail parties that he hosted. We had senior people from Washington come down and I escorted them to visits. I had no real way of knowing whether these people were straight or whether they were corrupt. But as I recall some of the officials were later convicted of having been on the take.

Q: Did you feel that there was a unity of purpose between the Mexican government and the American government over --

DINGER: Yeah, to the extent that I could judge. They seemed to be fully cooperating with us on the spraying program. When we sought things they tended to provide the access we needed. For my particular 10-million dollar program I thought we had pretty good relations and that they were pretty helpful.

Q: I think the problem that maybe at the very top, the Mexican justice system, is trying to do something, but at the local level the police are so -- there's so much money.

DINGER: Yeah, and there were certainly reports that the spraying program was being oriented toward only some fields. There was no way for me to really judge out of Mexico City whether that was actually the case. Spraying was happening. Some fields were clearly being destroyed. We could see that. How many others there were that weren't being destroyed and whether only certain ones were and others weren't, you heard the reports, you passed those reports along to those who might be able to do something about it. But I never saw any particular outcomes on it.

Q: Mm-hmm. Did you sense there was any problem between directions from the Department of Justice and the Drug Enforcement Agency and the embassy in Mexico City?

DINGER: During my time in that job I didn't sense that. The guy who was in charge of the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) effort there was very senior, and he seemed to get

along fine with the ambassador. They worked well. He didn't seem to have any issues with what my unit was doing, so I thought that kind of cooperation was pretty good.

Q: Mm-hmm. How would you say morale was within the embassy?

DINGER: It depended who you were. Those senior people I was telling you about were very unhappy. My group of friends -- and several of them are still among my closest friends from the Foreign Service -- we really bonded and had a great time. We worked diligently, and had a lot of fun playing and traveling around Mexico. So I would say the junior level morale for most of us was very high. Even the visa process was less painful than it can be in lots of places. We were doing tons of visas. I think my personal high was a bit over 200 interviews in a day, which is a lot. But there was one guy who did well over that, which means very short interviews. But as I told many people I would go home sleeping well at night because I knew that if I gave them a visa they were going to the United States, and if I didn't give them a visa they were still going to the United States.

Q: Ah.

DINGER: Mexico had that advantage in a way. It was not the be all and end all. I still tried to do a good job. I think you learn to make judgments pretty fast. And I think I had pretty good judgment.

Q: One of the things that -- I'm a consular officer by work -- one of the things I've noticed is that sometimes some people come into the visa processes with a law background have a hard time. Because you know they're being lied to or the law is such that almost any officer can refuse almost anybody.

DINGER: Yeah. I don't think it's the legal background that does it, but there are certain personality types. A couple of my colleagues on the line I thought were not suited for doing that job. They just didn't exercise nuanced judgment. They were either too hard or too easy or, or --

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And rigidity is part of it I think. You don't want too much rigidity. You want to have someone --

Q: It really is an art, not --

DINGER: That's right.

Q: Well, did you have much interaction with, on a social level, with Mexicans?

DINGER: Not too much. Got along fine with the local employees. But there wasn't a lot of mixing outside. And most of our socializing was with others in the junior officer community.

Q: Did you have much of a chance to -- you say you traveled. Where did you go?

DINGER: Oh, when I was doing my arrest and detention stuff?

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: The Mexico City Consular District included everything from a ways north of the city to the Yucatan Peninsula. The Yucatan had Merida, and the border posts had the border posts. But we did most everything else. And so I occasionally went to the small consulates. At that point we would take the official mail periodically to these places. So I got to Mazatlan, Acapulco, and things like that. But we had an American in prison in Veracruz for drugs who was leading a wonderful life. He came and went as he willed. He seemed far happier in prison in Veracruz than he would have been in the United States. There was a pilot who was in prison in the central part of Mexico who had been smuggling electronic gear, and he too was doing OK. I decided that if I would ever have to be in prison somewhere in my life, Mexico would probably be the right place so long as I had $100 a month. Because for $100 you could buy what you needed, unlike in an American prison system. Some of the best trips were to the far south, Chiapas, Oaxaca. Just amazing cultural experiences, but there were prisoners there so I needed to visit them too. My wife and I did some trips by car. We adopted our first child in Mexico, at six weeks old, and she came along with us a lot.

Q: Well, I'm looking at the time. This is probably a good place to stop.

DINGER: OK.

Q: But where did you go after that?

DINGER: I hadn't really intended to spend my career in ARA, which I didn't. I looked to see if I could move to the East Asia and Pacific Bureau, probably because of my Vietnam experience. EAP chose me to be a staff assistant, and I was told afterwards that Paul Wolfowitz who was then assistant secretary for East Asia personally decided that I ought to get the job. I gather he liked my resume. I had never met him.

Q: OK, well we'll pick this up when you're off to the State Department in -- this is before Wolfowitz went out to Indonesia.

Break.

Q: OK. Today is the 7th of March, 2014 with Larry Dinger. And you were with Wolfowitz and you were -- this is before he went on -- he was what, assistant secretary?

DINGER: That was when he was Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific.

Q: What were you doing for him?

DINGER: Grunt work. I was a staff assistant. And in that era before the computers took over there was a whole lot of paper to move. So I was mostly passing along taskings, trying to make sure that the front office paper flowed efficiently, and then working with the various other parts of the State Department on paper issues. So I worked a lot with the secretariat up on the seventh floor and with other front offices in the building. For a junior officer it was a great way to make contacts, but there was a lot of drudgery.

Q: How did Wolfowitz operate?

DINGER: He was very smart, very into all the issues. Not a good mover of paper. He needed to have people kind of force the paper to move off his desk. And so that was one of our jobs in a diplomatic way.

Q: Did you stand behind him and sort of nudge him, or?

DINGER: Given the status of the staff assistants we were reminding his secretary, the special assistant, and the deputy assistant secretaries that this piece of paper or that piece of paper needed to be moving, and encouraging the pressure to have that happen.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: Nice guy, I liked Wolfowitz.

Q: You know, Wolfowitz became very controversial as far as being sort of subscribed to the neo-con -- The war in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere when say most of the people involved in foreign affairs were very dubious about this. Did you see any traits of this, I mean of the, you might say the neo-cons, seeing things from almost a Cold War perspective or anything like that?

DINGER: Well, not in particular. I mean this was the Reagan administration.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And there was a more conservative cast to foreign affairs I suppose than at some other times in Washington. But East Asia Pacific issues in that era I think carried across administrations pretty well. The big subject that I recall getting a whole lot of attention during the one year that I was in that job was the Philippines. This was when the pressure came upon Marcos and pressure came upon us as well. And so watching the senior levels handling that set of issues was interesting. There was a whole lot of cooperation I'd say among the NSC (National Security Council) and the defense folks and State Department and as well the intelligence community. My impression was it was a very collegial operation.

Q: On the Philippines, I mean we had Marcos there. Marcos was there at the time, wasn't he?

DINGER: Mm-hmm. He was on his way out.

Q: He was on his way out. Was there a sense -- was there a division that Marcos sort of had to go? I mean were your colleagues and all --

DINGER: I was a staffer. I wasn't part of the actual decision making process, I wasn't part of the meetings where those decisions were being made. But the impression I had was that everybody I mentioned, all those various players in the foreign policy establishment were working their way to consensus positions.

Q: Mm-hmm. How did China stand in the equation? I mean not just that, but in foreign policy? Is this front-page stuff pretty much, or?

DINGER: I don't remember it being front page very often. I mean China was going to be an important player. We could see that.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: But we had established relations, efforts were being made to figure out how best to pursue relationships with China. But again, it was the Reagan administration and people moving with a degree of caution. But I wasn't in the policy arena at that point.

Q: But one thing that I would like to get -- from what you're saying it sounds like sometimes you have the National Security Council sort of running in one direction, the State Department trying to hold them back. The relations aren't -- and particularly later on the Department of Defense -- but, but the period that you were sort of in the process you saw this as pretty much a team.

DINGER: Yeah. At least once a week there'd be a meeting of the leaders of the various Asia oriented entities in the National Security bureaucracy. Usually held at the East Asia Bureau, at Wolfowitz's office. And Rich Armitage from Defense would be there. Guess maybe it was Jim Kelly from the NSC at that point. I don't remember who the intelligence community folks were, but they met -- and I wasn't sitting in those meetings at that point -- but my impression is that they all appreciated each other, they all stated their perspectives freely, they tended to come to agreements. They talked, they worked things through.

Q: Well, your assignment to go to Indonesia, had that been nailed down by that point, you knew you were going there?

DINGER: No, not when I arrived in the East Asia Bureau. But as I mentioned I was aspiring to get out to Asia, particularly to Southeast Asia I think because of my Vietnam experience.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And so coming into the bureau in Washington I hoped would open a door or two for me. When I started to think about next tours, Wolfowitz by that point had already been appointed ambassador in Jakarta. And it wasn't particularly that I wanted to follow him, but there looked to be a really good job opening up in Jakarta timed right for me to have the language training and go out there. It looked to me that Indonesia over time would be a big player, already was in some respects a big player in that part of the world. And if I was going to pick up a language from East Asia Pacific, Indonesian might be a good one to do. So I sought that particular job. And I gather Wolfowitz was consulted to some extent. I didn't talk to him about it. But he apparently had no problems with it. And I think I had developed some good relationships across the bureau. Staff assistant was a good job for that. If you were a decent human being while pushing all that paper and making all the demands on people you could develop relationships. And so there was no problem. I was assigned to the Jakarta job and went through a year of language training and got out there in summer of 1987.

Q: And you were there from '87 --

DINGER: To '90.

Q: How did you find the language?

DINGER: Loved it. If you're going to have a real Esperanto, Indonesian would be a good choice for it. It's rational, it's built out of the Malay trading language, as you may already know. So it was a bottom-up built language, as I suppose most are, but it incorporated from lots of various sources. The grammar works rationally. There are no tones. The vocabulary works rationally. You build adverbs and adjectives and verbs and nouns off the same basis. And I thrived in that language. I came into the State Department without any strong language background. I'd had Russian in college, but I proved quickly to FSI (Foreign Service Institute) that I had no Russian on entry *(laughs).* And so I took Spanish to go to Mexico, and did well at that. But with Indonesian I did even better. It was a good language for me.

Q: Often one learns from your, your language teachers, you get a pretty good impression of the country you're going to. What were you picking up from the language teachers about Indonesia?

DINGER: They had very fond impressions of the cultures of Indonesia. Although I think they were all Javanese, they did make sure that we realized lots of different cultures were involved in Indonesia. They tried to be careful about politics because there'd been over time divergent views on politics in Indonesia. Suharto, how he was undertaking the political development of Indonesia from his perspective might not have been the preferred course for lots of people inside the country. So I don't remember that we talked at great length about the specifics of Suharto's policies, but we certainly got a good cultural base.

Q: Well, so where'd you go? Did you go to Jakarta?

DINGER: Yeah, I was in Jakarta and I was in the Political Section. It was my first actual political job in the State Department. Political cone, but first tour consular in theory with the narcotics stuff rolled in, and then staff work. So I was a bit nervous about actually entering a Political Section. But I lucked out in that the political counselor, Tim Carney, was an amazing guy. And he was a wonderful boss. He taught me a lot. I thought I was a pretty good writer when I joined the State Department. Tim corrected that quickly *(laughs).*

Q: (laughs)

DINGER: But I'm a good learner I think, and so once he started showing me how to write State Department cables, which was a different style than I'd ever used in the past, I picked it up. Everything was initially handwritten back in that era of course and my handwriting's horrible. So it would be scrawled on yellow pads and then we'd put it -- or the secretary, the OMS (Office Management Specialist) would put it into the system. But the first cable had Tim's red pen all over it. And after that, the red ink was less frequent. An aspect of Tim that I really appreciated was he judged quickly that I was able to work on my own and he assigned me the opposition political parties and the transmigration program, both of which gave me an opportunity to get around Indonesia, to get out of Jakarta. Tim, to his credit, encouraged that. I did a lot of travel and most of my travel was not on the big islands of Java and Sumatra. I was out in the sticks.

Q: Well, tell me. So much of our focus has been of course on, on Java and Sumatra. What about these small islands or groups of islands and all? What -- were these different? Were they really attached to the government? I mean --

DINGER: That's one of the beauties about Indonesia to me. In general it's a success story in that regard. Originally they had been incredibly diverse communities, kind of isolated islands. And I don't think they'd really thought of themselves as one country.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: They ended up being one Dutch colony. But the Dutch were pretty harsh and I don't think they particularly encouraged a unitary perspective. It was really the independence movements in the 1930s that decided, one, they didn't want to remain under the Dutch, and, two, they wanted to find ways to build unity. That's when the Indonesian language became adopted as a unifying factor. And that worked pretty well.

Q: Were the Sumatra and Javanese dialects quite dissimilar, or not, or?

DINGER: I don't know much about the various Sumatran languages. Javanese is quite different from what is now Bahasa Indonesia, a much more complicated language. I wouldn't have liked it as much *(laughs).*

Q: (laughs)

DINGER: But the Indonesian language really began as a trading language and it is capable of being picked up. I expect many, many people in Indonesia still speak their Javanese or their other local languages. But practically everybody also now speaks Indonesian and it bonds people together. So all these other islands were out there. And I got to many of them. I spent time in what they call Kalimantan (most of Borneo). I went to Sulawesi several times. I went with Wolfowitz out to a place called Banda, which was one of the Spice Islands. I went to the western side of Papua New Guinea, what was then called Irian Jaya, a couple of times, one of the most exotic parts of the world from my perspective. I learned a lot, I reported a lot. I wrote lots of cables on transmigration.

Q: When you say transmigration, what's that?

DINGER: Part of Suharto's effort to develop a more unified Indonesia was to transmigrate Javanese in particular, but also some Sumatrans, out to the rest of the country. Java was heavily populated. Sumatra in some areas pretty heavily populated. Lots of other parts of the country appeared to be under populated. So from the central government's perspective it made sense to spread these people around. In addition to spreading the people around you added people you knew, like the Javanese, to the mix in places where a lot of people you didn't know. And that was controversial out in those other places.

Q: Oh, it would be so, yes.

DINGER: But nonetheless the government did it. And I think over time in at least some of those transmigration communities an integration process took place.

Q: Well, were the Javanese adept at moving positions of power on these smaller islands and all that?

DINGER: Well, there was resentment against the Javanese for sure in a lot of these places. I remember particularly sensing it in Iran Jaya, the west half of New Guinea, where most people wanted independence. The Dutch and then the Indonesians had blocked that course. To have a bunch of Javanese coming out and transforming what had been, quote, unproductive land, unquote, into palm plantations and things like that was not particularly popular. And the central government very much dominated the local governments there because of security concerns and resource interests. And so they quashed dissent. There were undercurrents of displeasure, but nothing too much popped out, except in East Timor during the period when I was around.

Q: How about Timor?

DINGER: Well, East Timor was not part of my portfolio, so I didn't spend time there until the very end of my tour. And I spent time there then because my follow-on assignment was to be as the Indonesia desk officer at the State Department, which looked

to be a good job and played into what I'd just been doing. To prepare for that I was asked to go to East Timor to take a look around in the spring of 1990. My bosses realized that once I got back to Washington lots of people would be wanting to know about Timor and I ought to have some local knowledge on it. At that point things were relatively calm for a small-scale war zone I guess *(laughs).* There were places I couldn't go, but there weren't major eruptions happening. So the impression I got during that visit of a few days was relatively positive. The Indonesians realized they had a problem in East Timor, and I guess you could say they tried to develop their way out of it. They put *a lot* of resources into the development of East Timor, which was an incredibly undeveloped place before that. The Portuguese colonists had been horrible. And so the Indonesians brought education, they brought some sorts of business. They, in their own kind of oppressive way, attempted to develop the place and hoped that people would appreciate them for it. And the impression I got at the time was that, yes, development was occurring, and maybe over time there'd be a way to normalize the relationship and have East Timor be a province like a lot of other provinces that weren't overwhelmingly happy but were content enough to stay in the system. So that was 1990.

Q: What about the problem of corruption and Madam Suharto was --

DINGER: Madam Ten Percent.

Q: Madam Ten Percent, which doesn't speak very well. How stood it when you were there?

DINGER: Oh, the rumors were there that corruption was occurring on a major scale. It wasn't part of my portfolio, so I was just kind of observing from the sideline. But I don't think anyone doubted that a fair amount of corruption was going on in Indonesia and that the Suharto family was directly benefiting from it. That was certainly an issue and a very troubling one.

Q: Was the Sukarno daughter at all prominent during that period?

DINGER: Megawati wasn't really. After I left, in the late '90s, she came back to the surface. One of my jobs was working with what was called the PDI (Indonesian Democratic Party), the opposition that she was a part of. But they were a minor influence on the politics at that point. And I never met her. The people I met from that party were modest in their accomplishments.

Q: Did the army play much of a role in those days?

DINGER: Oh sure. I mean "dwifungsi" (two functions) was the term that Suharto used. He believed the army had to play a vital role in maintaining the unity of the country and in having it develop. And so the military was military but it was also maintaining local order and assisting with development. And a side that wasn't stated was that they were making money out of the economy, too.

Q: What about the Communist Party there?

DINGER: Well, it had been pretty well annihilated back in the mid '60s. And so to the extent there was still a Communist Party it didn't raise its head much. I can't recall any major moments when I was there when the crowds turned on the Chinese community, but that had happened from time-to-time in the past and such moves had included a search for communists along with frustration with Chinese migration patterns and business success.

The Muslims were an interesting group. Abdurrahman Wahid, also known as Gus Dur and one of the presidents after Suharto, was a player. I took notes for a meeting he had with Wolfowitz one time. He was nearly blind. He had a huge following in the local Islamic communities. And everyone wanted to hear his perspective on the future. While Suharto was still in control, there wasn't a lot going to happen. He maintained a strict control over any form of democracy that was going to occur.

Q: Well, while you were there what was going on in the Philippines? I would have thought that given the background, the relations and all, that the Suhartos and the Marcos', I mean there's an awful lot of parallel there.

DINGER: I don't think anyone was assuming that Suharto was going to fall in the near term. I mean everybody dies eventually and I think most people thought he would either retire of his own accord at some point well into the future or die in office. He showed no indication that he was preparing successors or looking for ways out. He was just going to maintain his control.

Q: Did you find that the center in Cornell where there seemed to be an awful lot of anti-Suharto feeling and teaching. And this is a preeminent place for scholars dealing with this in that area of the world. Did you feel the tension there, or?

DINGER: Not particularly regarding Indonesia itself. I mean there was kind of a realpolitik (realistic politics) approach to the Suharto regime I think. No one was entirely happy with some of the things that were happening, or the way they approached governance. But it was a pretty stable place, or appeared to be. And no one saw a reasonably convenient way to change it to another stable place that would be more amenable to our values. So, so we kind of went along.

Q: Was the question of the responsibility and the numbers and all of the slaughter of so many communists earlier on, was that a subject that was debated in your time?

DINGER: I don't recall it being debated much out in Indonesia. I mean that had happened more than two decades earlier. There were still many people who remembered those days I'm sure, but it wasn't a big subject among the people I talked to. Back in Washington, in the think tanks and in the academic communities, there were still major debates going on, including about how many people had been killed. But I had no role in any of that.

Q: I was just wondering whether, you know, as a political officer did you meet American press people? Or were they pretty well taken care of by public affairs people?

DINGER: Well, one, there weren't a lot of American press people.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: There were only two who were resident there as I recall. One from The Far Eastern Economic Review, Michael Vatikiotis, and another from The Wall Street Journal, Richard Borsuk. All other American press came in when they needed to. But I actually did spend time with the press, including the foreign press. A Foreign Press Association gathered frequently, and I found them to be interesting people.

Q: Yeah, they're getting around too.

DINGER: They were getting around. So they'd get together at a bar once a month or something like that. I often joined them, and it was always interesting conversation. They wrote good articles and I learned from them.

Q: How did you find the students?

DINGER: Didn't deal with students a whole lot. I was mostly dealing with the various politicians at both the national and local levels. I don't recall a major student protest while I was there. I think they were pretty passive. They were just looking for a way on to the next part of their lives.

Q: Did you find that the people were fairly open, particularly the politicians, with you? Or was there sort of a Suharto Secret Police watching --

DINGER: Probably a little of both. Although when I went out to the various provinces -- and I went to a lot of different provinces in the outer areas -- I didn't get a sense that I was being watched constantly. That was unlike some places later where I served, where I got a sense that I was always being watched. I was pretty much allowed to go off and do my own thing, which I enjoyed doing. I spoke the language well enough that I didn't have to have a translator with me. I could get in a taxi and go off to meet people. East Timor was different though. I remember that first visit I mentioned to East Timor -- we'll have to talk about the second visit later -- but my first visit I was being watched. I went with a member of another side of the Political Section in Jakarta. And the two of us were being watched all the time. They wanted to be sure what we were doing there because that was a particularly sensitive security environment for them. Elsewhere I didn't have that sense.

Q: How were the Australians? I would think that on our -- we would do a lot of chatting back and forth about what was going on because Australia obviously were interested in --

DINGER: They were, and we did. I had good relationships with Aussie junior diplomats, also New Zealand diplomats. I remember having good contacts with a Thai diplomat and a Singaporean diplomat. All were kind of doing the domestic political scene in a big country. We collaborated a lot on perspectives.

Q: How was social life?

DINGER: It was fun. The embassy was reasonably large and within the embassy community there were a fair number of very enjoyable junior to midlevel officers. Our housing was in a small compound where we got to know the neighbors well. Our next door neighbor, the wife, taught cake decorating, which my wife picked up and utilized repeatedly to create contacts at later posts. Out in the general community, we mingled with other diplomats and to some extent the Indonesians themselves. They didn't invite a lot of interaction with us, but occasionally we'd have things with the local community.

Q: Did you get to the universities?

DINGER: Not much at all. It wasn't my job.

Q: How about events, at that particular time, events in Vietnam? Were they -- were we looking at what was happening there?

DINGER: Well, I suppose they were, but I wasn't doing so from Indonesia. When I got to Jakarta it had been 12 years since the end of the war. Vietnam was still consolidating its approach. Cambodia was a different issue. My boss, Tim Carney, had a long history with Cambodia. And Jakarta informal meetings happened when I was there to help attempt to build a post Khmer Rouge Cambodia. And so Tim -- again, I really appreciated him -- decided that while I didn't do external relations much, I ought to get into the Cambodia issue. He and I were the ones who worked the Jakarta informal meetings and the Cambodian issue for a year or more. If Tim talked to you he's already given you much more detail than I could ever do. But I remember Sihanouk came down, both Sihanouks, father and son at one time or another, and the whole Cambodia political group flowed through Jakarta reasonably often.

Q: Yeah. How about the State Department? Was there much interest there, or?

DINGER: In things Indonesia?

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: Not as much as I think there could have been, I suppose. There's a whole world out there and they have to have priorities. Indonesia was clearly going to be a major player over time, but it wasn't playing a particularly major role on most issues at that time. Later when I was doing the Indonesia Desk I sensed that at the desk level we could have real input on Indonesia policy. Whereas at the desk level in say China issues

or Japan issues one probably has less input on policy. Lots of senior people are interested in those places. There were fewer senior people interested in Indonesia.

Q: OK. Well then, did you feel that you wanted to become Mr. Indonesia or not, or I mean --

DINGER: I thought I was going to be. I really liked that assignment. I had the language, three- plus/three-plus out of FSI. I went back to do the Indonesia Desk, which again, I thoroughly enjoyed. And so I presumed that I would be doing Indonesia a lot for the rest of my career. Instead I didn't do Indonesia at all for the rest of my career.

Q: What was Indonesian food like, by the way?

DINGER: Oh, a wide variety. Each ethnic group had its own types of food, and many of them were absolutely delicious. Plus, there was the Dutch overlay. It wasn't the most cosmopolitan place I'd ever been, but I remember there was a wonderful and incredibly inexpensive jiǎozi restaurant, Chinese dumplings. And a phenomenal Indian restaurant, both of which were really inexpensive. You could take somebody there, not harm your representational account much at all, and have a really good meal *(laughs).*

Q: How about Bali? Was Bali -- you know, later it became quite a spot for particularly Australians, but for others. Was there much tourism going in?

DINGER: Well, a reasonable amount. I didn't have any formal responsibilities for Bali because it was under the consulate in Surabaya, and it had its own consular agent. But everybody went there from time to time, including my wife and family. I don't know if you've ever been there, but it's an absolutely amazing cultural spot. It is the Hindu bit of Indonesia that has really retained Hinduism more completely than any place else I've been outside of India I guess, just a wonderful location. Certainly many tourists went through and there would be big meetings there occasionally. That's how I would get there from time to time, because I would be pulled in to help with the meetings. But other than that I didn't have a formal role.

Q: Well, trying to think of -- did you feel -- were we watching China and thinking that they might try to expand their influence there, or not? Or was it way over -- too far over the horizon at that point?

DINGER: Well, I think there was always an interest in the Chinese community. Many of the people in the Chinese community had come to Indonesia way before communism had arrived in China. But Chinese cohesiveness seemed to be a concern.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And certainly it was a big concern for the Indonesian government itself. I don't know that the U.S. was overly excited. There was no sense that the Chinese community was interested in somehow overthrowing the Indonesian regime. They were

very involved in business. They kind of kept their heads down. They did not want to be seen. And that worked usually for them.

Q: Well, I would think too that at that point the Chinese weren't messing around in the South China Seas and all that.

DINGER: Not much, no. They had just gone through revolutions internally, and so I think they were still working their own way forward without spending much time worrying about what was going on in Indonesia.

Q: How about -- was it Kalimantan? Was that sort of a -- I think they'd be almost a bit indigestible from the Indonesian point of view, or not?

DINGER: I think there were four provinces in Kalimantan at that point, Indonesian provinces. And I visited all of them.

Q: For somebody reading this, we're talking about Borneo.

DINGER: Borneo, the southern about three-quarters of Borneo. I went out to an oil and gas rig one time off the east cost of Kalimantan. Indonesia cared about oil and gas. A lot of logging went on in Kalimantan. Some would call it rape of the landscape. But there wasn't a big population there. And the local populations had come out of the jungle not that long ago. They weren't going to be major fomenters of problem so long as they were allowed to live their lives. Culturally it was an amazing place to visit. Even in the late '80s you could wander into shops in Samarinda in East Kalimantan and find the most amazing artworks, traditional Dayak crafts. I'm not a big buyer of things, but I became a buyer of things in Indonesia. They were just beautiful. Orangutans were an issue. People were worried about their survival, and a lot of environmental groups were focusing on that. But I don't think Kalimantan was ever perceived by Jakarta as a likely hotbed of dissent.

I also traveled to all the provinces of Sulawesi, to the Malukus (the Spice Islands), to the western part of New Guinea, then called Irian Jaya. I would meet with provincial leaders, political party workers, activists, and usually would have at least a bit of time to experience culture. Irian Jaya was a real highlight. I went there twice, including to the highlands where people looked like they had just emerged from the stone age, wearing almost nothing, living in smoke-filled huts. I recall on a visit to the parrot's beak part of the province a good-sized town put on a welcoming parade with me as the honored guest. I figured part of my job was to show the U.S. interest in even the remote parts of Indonesia.

On one occasion I accompanied Ambassador Wolfowitz to the island of Banda Neira, the seat of government for that part of the Malukus. The island is small, and at least at that time the only airfield was a short, slanty strip on a narrow isthmus, a scary prospect but we made it. In the evening, the governor hosted us to dinner which concluded, as meals often do in Indonesia, with singing. After the governor sang, he turned to Wolfowitz who

turned to me. On the spur of the moment I translated "Goodbye Old Paint" into bahasa: "Selamat Jalan Kuda Tua." It was not a professional performance, but it seemed to go over well. From that point on until today I always have had in my billfold, just in case, the lyrics for "On the Road Again," the perfect karaoke song for a diplomat.

Q: Any concerns from Malaysia?

DINGER: Not that I'm really aware. Indonesia is such a big country with such incredible potential that I think other Southeast Asian countries always have a little bit of, well, respect bordering on concern over what it could do if it wanted to. And other countries try to accommodate Indonesia.

Q: Well, what about this sort of boil on Sumatra? Aceh?

DINGER: Aceh is an area I never got to. It was kind of like East Timor at the time. Indonesia was very, very careful who they allowed to go there and what people were allowed to do there. Had I gone I'm pretty sure I would have been watched constantly. But we had a consulate in Medan that had the responsibility for Aceh. I didn't have a particularly good excuse to go, and so I never got up there. But it was a worry to the central authorities, because oppositionists were armed and fighting in Aceh.

Q: What was your impression of the central government, the people, the bureaucracy and all?

DINGER: I didn't do a lot with the central government. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was probably the one place that I had some degree of interaction. Even then, since I was doing domestic politics it wasn't much, mostly a bystander view. As with many places in the world the bureaucracy was kind of overwhelmingly stifling. A lot of red tape. Not a whole lot of efficiency. It took real perseverance to get things done.

Q: Yeah. And going into an Indian office or something just, just an office or anything, all these papers piled high and all. Daunting.

DINGER: As I say, it wasn't my issue, but I'm sure that was true there.

Q: Yeah. Well, then you left there in 1990? Where to?

DINGER: Back to the State Department to be the Indonesian Desk officer. The political side of Indonesia was my portfolio. Another person spent half of her time doing the economics side as well.

Q: Uh-huh. How long were you doing this?

DINGER: Two years.

Q: Well, while you were both in Indonesia and on the desk, were you -- this is -- you were there -- both of these were Suharto the whole time, is it?

DINGER: Yeah.

Q: Were you asking yourself after Suharto, whom?

DINGER: Well, idly, but there was no sense at all that Suharto was leaving the scene any time soon. And in fact he continued on for another eight or nine years. Many thought that he would continue much longer than that. So it was not at the forefront of anyone's discussion, I don't think. And if you looked at who potentially could replace him there weren't a lot of obvious names.

Q: No.

DINGER: He had not built up a particular second string, probably deliberately. So, so it was a question that didn't have any answers if you did decide to ask it.

DINGER: The biggest single issue that happened during my time on the desk was East Timor. I did one trip out to Indonesia from the desk. That was about all that the department could afford to send me for, particularly because I'd already been for three years. And we set it up for my departure sometime in November 1991. The night before I was to leave I got a phone call from Jakarta saying, "All hell's broken loose in Timor, we thought you were going to come to Jakarta. But why don't you just go right on through Jakarta and straight to Dili." And it turned out the Dili Massacre had happened that night before I was to leave. So indeed, I got on a plane and stopped in Jakarta long enough to pick up the political counselor, Tim Hamilton was his name. Long since deceased. And the two of us were the first American officials to hit the ground in Dili and among the first foreigners to arrive there after that massacre had taken place.

Q: What had happened?

DINGER: Indonesian troops had fired on demonstrators in Dili with live ammunition and they'd killed -- estimates varied -- anywhere from a few dozen to well over a hundred. There was no way for me to make a determination of what the totals were, but clearly a number of people had been killed. We still saw shell casings in the street and cemetery where it had happened. We didn't see the bodies, but by all accounts it was a real tragedy, the military suppressing Timorese demonstrators. Not a pretty scene. In my mind I was comparing things to my previous visit, which had seemed relatively pleasant with some signs of hope. After the massacre, immediately after the massacre, the tension was incredibly high. My impression was that this was not going to be a subject easily overcome for Jakarta, that the people within East Timor were just totally alienated. But in a complicated way. Because the Timorese themselves were not a unit. They were split into various factions, several deep factions with centuries of history.

Q: Were they -- I know Indonesia's really multi-ethnic place, but were the Timorese sort of, did they stand a part? Had they been -- it'd been in Portugal, hadn't it?

DINGER: They were a Portuguese colony when Indonesia was a Dutch colony, and that didn't do them any good at all because the Portuguese were horrible colonizers, I gather most everywhere, but certainly in Timor. They spent no money on education. There was one person with a college education in the entire province of East Timor when the Indonesians arrived. The Portuguese exploited what they could from the local economy, but they didn't build a local economy. It was just a disaster area. And so comparatively, the Indonesians did a better job of attempting to develop. They did pour a lot of resources in, more on a per capita basis than anywhere else in Indonesia. But they were still the foreign oppressor and they couldn't overcome that. Among the Timorese themselves, there seemed to be really distinct divides. There were some who were out in the jungles fighting, the FReTiLIn (*Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente* (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor)). There were others who were collaborating with the Indonesians. There were geographical divides. And a lot of the divides seemed to be almost family based and going back in history for hundreds of years. The sorts of things that aren't easily bridged. And so during a colonial period, as the Portuguese had and as the Indonesians had, you could nail bridges down I suppose or put a carpet down to hide all those problems.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: But I worried even then about what the post colonial period might look like, because those divides are serious. And I think they're still playing out. So far so good. But it's an issue that will be resolved only over time.

Q: Well, was there sort of relations with East Timor, or even Timor, and Australia? Was there much going on between the two?

DINGER: Well, not much at that time because Timor was still very much a part of Indonesia. There was a sense of some oil and gas waiting under the Timor Sea between Australia and Timor, but the negotiations over exploiting that hadn't gotten very far at all. Those who saw an independent future for Timor perceived that the oil and gas reserves might be the crutch that would allow a relatively prosperous independence to occur.

Q: Did we have any interest in the area?

DINGER: East Timor itself?

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: A human rights interest. There were advocates in the United States who were talking up East Timor a lot, worried about Indonesian oppression. And that probably triggered to some extent the U.S. interest in what was going on. We wanted to as accurately as we could report what the actual state of play was.

Q: Well, why is there East Timor and I guess a West Timor? Why --

DINGER: That goes back to the colonial days. For some reason the Dutch and the Portuguese split that island in two. They did it and it stuck and I think the Dutch side probably developed a lot more rapidly because the Portuguese weren't oppressing that side. Nobody's really ever talked about uniting the two sides that I'm aware of.

Q: Well all right, back in Washington how did you treat this Timor issue?

DINGER: Well, it was a firestorm of criticism. I mean we had had a kind of realpolitik perspective about Indonesia, including East Timor, that I mentioned earlier. And the Dili Massacre just infuriated a bunch of people who thought that we should have been doing something very, very strong to counter what they saw as the oppression. One of the ways that it affected me personally was that I had to draft testimony for my bosses. Ken Quinn was the DAS for my area. And he had to go up to the Hill to testify about East Timor. At about the same time Harvard's Kennedy School decided they wanted to have an evening panel discussion on East Timor, a Case Study in U.S. Foreign Policy. I will always remember the title. They asked for the assistant secretary, or the deputy, or the office director *(laughs),* and none of them really wanted to do it. And so it fell to me. So I went up to join a panel which included a professor from Cornell, and a couple of young American activist journalists who had been in Dili on the day of the massacre who came back with bandages, and Noam Chomsky, who's never had a good thing to say about U.S. foreign policy anywhere, and a Harvard Law School professor who dealt with conflict areas. And me *(laughs).* I was kind of the sacrificial lamb I think. I pretty much used the same testimony that Ken Quinn had provided on the Hill. It wasn't going to be of any benefit to get into a debate because no one was listening. It was just two sides putting out their perspectives. And so I went through the agony. About the only good thing that I can recall from it is that the Kennedy School put me up for the night in John F. Kennedy's freshman year dorm room, which is one of the guest rooms. I'm the least distinguished name on the guest book there ever I think, but it was fun to do.

Q: Well, did you find that -- what were the academics after? I mean did they want us to -

DINGER: I think the academics probably would have wanted us to back East Timor independence. Who knows, maybe they would have thought that we should actually invade and save the people from another Dili Massacre. There have always been people who advocate us going in everywhere. But I don't think that was really what they were after. They were probably thinking we should either advocate East Timor independence, or advocate with Jakarta a great deal more autonomy than the Timorese had been allowed at that point.

Q: Well, was there anything -- I mean during the time you were on the desk was there anything you could really do outside of --

DINGER: No.

Q: I assume we were going on a fairly regular basis to the Indonesian government and saying please be nice.

DINGER: I think we urged them to be sensible about things. But they weren't taking our guidance on the matter. They had their own perspective on what their security interests were.

Q: Was there a feeling that this was -- Indonesian Army had stepped behind normal controls? It -- acting kind of on its own?

DINGER: Well, there were uncertainties about that. The relationships between the government and the military in Indonesia were opaque to the outside. I mean clearly Suharto still controlled the army. But so far away from Jakarta might the local army commanders have been doing their own thing? They might have. And it may be that the central government would not have wanted to have that massacre occur. I don't think we've ever really known whom all specifically to blame. But certainly blame went on the army commander who was out there.

Q: Well, how did you find Indonesia dealt with the powers that be here in Washington? By this I refer to Congress, the congressional staff, the NSC, and the media? And the State Department.

DINGER: Not particularly intensely. We had relations. I went over to their embassy from time to time. They came in from time to time. On something like East Timor we would call them in and my bosses would have a demarche to give them and things like that. But I don't think they were particularly forceful players in Washington. They were there. When they needed to they went and worked various parts of the government. I imagine they went to the Hill occasionally, but I don't recall much evidence of that. Not major players.

Q: Mm-hmm. Were we watching Indonesia maybe with a little different eye in the game of Southeast Asia? I mean the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and China? I mean Thailand? I mean, did you find that you were talking to others or having joint conferences of what are we going to do about this area or not, or? We didn't treat the area particularly as an area?

DINGER: Oh, we did in structure. The office that Dick Teare ran was IMBS at that point, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore. Might have had the P added already, the Philippines. I'm not sure. To that extent we had them lumped together geographically. But in policy terms I think they were still individually assessed.

Q: Mm-hmm. How about the -- was there much of an Indonesian community in the United States?

DINGER: There is a community, there was at that point as well. You find Indonesian restaurants here and there. But I wasn't aware then and I'm not aware now that they're particularly influential. Just they're there. And as with most countries I imagine they've developed pockets here and there in the United States. But I don't remember particular pockets coming to my attention while I was a desk officer. I didn't do any domestic travel that I can recall.

Q: Well then, did -- by the time you left the Indonesia Desk in '92 how stood things with East Timor?

DINGER: Oh, unresolved. The specifics of the Dili massacre had receded a bit from people's minds, but not that much because it really was a horror moment. And the activist communities were still very much concerned about the future of the place and anxious that the sort of tragedy not happen again. I don't think Indonesia moved to change its approach in any particular way. They still were putting a lot of assistance money in. They still were fighting the rebellion of the FReTiLIn. So nothing too much had changed.

Q: Well then, what were you pointed towards?

DINGER: Well, thanks in part to Dick Teare who had been DCM in Australia and New Zealand in the past, I saw there was an opening to do the external political job in Canberra, Australia. And that looked like a good job to me. So I sought it and got it. And the next three years, from '92 to '95 were in Canberra, Australia.

Q: All right. What was Canberra like?

DINGER: I thought it was maybe the perfect place to raise a family. By that point we had three kids, all of them still young. I guess they were probably eight, seven, and two when we got to Canberra. Very easy place to live. The Australians were delightful people to be around. Two of our kids were in elementary school. We made friends in the school community. We got involved in quiz nights and had a successful run at that. And Canberra's an easy place to live: walking paths, bike paths, easy commute into town to the embassy, watching kangaroos and cockatoos, just a very easy life. Climate was good. We did a lot of travel by road around Australia. And I had a really fun job. Mort Dworken was the political counselor. My job was working with Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Defense. We had really close alliance relationships in both places. I had a pass that allowed me to walk into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade at will and just pop into doors as I wished. I'd usually try for an appointment, but if need be I would just pop in.

I didn't get involved in the economics at all. It was the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, but I was the foreign affairs side. All of my work really was involved with trying to make sure that the two close allies were on the same page on the whole variety of issues from arms control, to Asia, to UN (United Nations). I'd be over at the Department of Foreign Affairs nearly daily, and nearly daily I'd end up going back and

writing two or three or four short cables on what they had to say on this subject or that subject or the other subject. Very close relationship.

Q: I would think that, particularly as time was moving on, that China would become more and more important as far as with the United States and Australia looking at it.

DINGER: Not overwhelmingly so. Much more so in later years I think. The Chinese embassy was just around the corner. They didn't have anywhere near the degree of relationship with Australia that they developed in later years. But we were both interested in them.

Q: What was -- how would you describe Australian politics at that time?

DINGER: Amazing. Paul Keating was the prime minister. And they have something called "question time" in the Australian Parliament. They'd re-broadcast it in the evening so everybody could watch it. And it was the most amazing display of vitriol, in a humorous way. Keating was a master. Australian politics is hardnosed and it was fun to watch. It was always in the context of being a very good ally to the United States, but they had plenty of differences on domestic policy and sometimes on international policy. The ambassador when I arrived was Mel Sembler, who was a political appointee from the Bush administration. I thought he was a really good political appointee ambassador. He'd been a shopping center developer in Florida accused of no sufficient background to be ambassador when he went up for his hearings, but the guy was really smart and he had I think maybe the most important characteristic that a political ambassador can have: he knew what he knew, and he knew what he didn't know. And he was willing to have the Foreign Service folks take care of what he didn't know, until he knew it.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And so he stepped carefully, but he stepped appropriately, and he had good morale in the embassy. He took me with him one time to a meeting in the evening with Keating at his residence which I enjoyed. I thought it was a good embassy. It was run well.

Q: Well, that's -- I mean you think that Australia would suffer from not the greatest ambassadors. I mean were you fortunate, or had --

DINGER: Can't judge really. I started with Mel Sembler, and then with the end of the Bush administration he left, and Ed Perkins came in, a very senior career person. He had been DG (director general) of the personnel system, the position from which to get a job like ambassador to Australia. Perkins did a find job too. He had a different style, but he knew the State Department system really well. He delegated well. He allowed people like me to contribute, which I appreciated.

Q: Did you find that Australia really, these various states, did they sort of almost have their own foreign policy outlooks or not, or?

DINGER: To some extent I suppose. But I didn't think that was a big issue. The Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, was the personality at that time, a very, very big personality, and very smart. I don't think he would have abided having a lot of other foreign ministers running around.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And they didn't need to run around. He took care of Australia's interest very well.

Q: Yeah. What about -- was there any carryover in Australia of sometimes the not very harmonious relations between the left wing of the Labor Party in England and the United States? In other words, this, sort of the -- oh, the London School of Economics and its outlook to the United States did get translated into Australia?

DINGER: Maybe on social policies occasionally, but I think when it came to strategic interests, no. We were allies, we are allies, and very strong ones. And we had good reasons to maintain that relationship, regardless of whether it was the Bush administration, the Clinton administration, or whatever.

DINGER: Twice while I was in Australia I got the opportunity to go to other places on TDY (temporary duty). The first in the summer of '93 was to Papua New Guinea.

Q: Ah.

DINGER: Our embassy in PNG (Papua New Guinea) had a gap between political officers and when they asked Canberra if somebody could come up, I raised my hand immediately. I thought it'd be a chance to see the other, eastern side of New Guinea. I spent three weeks working there, and I got to travel a bit. I was very impressed -- or depressed -- by the physical security environment of Port Moresby. It was the most razor wire I had seen *anywhere* outside of Vietnam when I'd been in the war there. There was a sense of uncertainty in the streets of Port Moresby *all* the time. Local bandit types -- reportedly young men who'd come down from the Highlands figuring that they were going to find their fortunes in Port Moresby but didn't -- would attack anybody they thought might be a source of revenue for them, or just out of anger. It was a very difficult security environment, and thus the embassy drove around in convoys and I was discouraged from driving by myself, although I did some. But the relationship with the Papua New Guinea government from what I could see was reasonably good, though the government was inefficient and ineffective.

Q: Well, I was wondering, you know, you have a place where, I mean 400 languages -- I don't know how many languages --

DINGER: Eight hundred, I think. It's just incredible.

Q: How the hell can you govern a place like that?

DINGER: Well, they're still working on it. I mean it's not easy. Even with the best of government efforts it would not be easy, but they often haven't had the best of government efforts. It was a fascinating place to take a look at. Then in the summer of '94 APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) was going to be meeting in Jakarta. Barbara Harvey, who had been deputy office director when I was on the Indonesia Desk, was the DCM in Jakarta. She knew me and my bahasa, and so she asked Canberra if they'd loan me. So I spent at least three weeks helping them prepare for the APEC summit. East Timor activists threatened the Embassy compound in Jakarta while I was there, so that was kind of interesting.

Q: East Timor was not a state yet.

DINGER: No, they were still working out independence. I got to see Bill Clinton and Sandy Berger, which was all kind of entertaining. And I got to know Winston Lord, who was the Assistant Secretary for East Asia at the time. And that flows into my next job.

Q: Yeah. Well, what was sort of -- was there any particular issue during this APEC conference?

DINGER: The usual sorts of Asia Pacific trade and economic issues. I wasn't involved in the substance of it at all. I was just helping to facilitate.

Q: What sort of a role did you figure, did you feel that Australia was playing in Asia? I mean it's sort of --

DINGER: Yeah. They weren't playing a major role in Asia at that time though they were thinking about that huge Asia continent up there. But my impression from that era was they were still mostly affiliated with Europe and the United States, while starting to realize that the future was going to be up in Asia.

Q: Well, did you see sort of a internal debate going on, not only with the politics but in the society, about what to do about migration and Asians coming to Australia at the time, or how stood --

DINGER: That's become a really big issue since. Later I was ambassador for Nauru where Australia created a holding pen for potential migrants and I know Christmas Island was another such spot. There has been a lot of concern within the Australian community about that sort of thing. Back then I don't recall that boat people were a big issue. There were a lot of immigrants from Eastern Europe in Australia. And what was going on in the Balkans had some effect on us because there were Serbs, Croats, Bosnians.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And they all cared about what the United States was doing in the Balkans and what Australia was doing. And I remember one time there must have been 10,000 Serbs demonstrating outside the American embassy gates some of them with pickaxe handles in their hands. They were offended by what we were doing in the Balkans. Somebody from the embassy needed to go out and receive their petition. I was the one who was volunteered to do that. They were perfectly peaceful toward me, but they were fervent in their belief that we were on the wrong course.

Q: Did you run across many Americans settling in Australia?

DINGER: A few. I remember going out to a place called Wagga Wagga one time to participate in an Australian American event in that community in New South Wales. My stay was orchestrated by a family that had migrated from the United States. But I wasn't aware of a whole lot of Americans who had gone down there.

Q: Yeah. How about -- did you get any feel for Japanese relations with Australia? I mean obviously during the war it hadn't been very good.

DINGER: Nothing that really sticks in mind. After my time there a tripartite conversation started to happen and continues to happen among Japan, Australia, and the United States on mutual interests. But in my time I don't think that was happening yet.

Q: Did you get any feel for relations between Australia and New Zealand?

DINGER: Oh, sure *(laughs)*. I mean they're like siblings I suppose. In many ways alike and yet there can be rancor. And it's particularly true I suppose from the New Zealand side because they've been seen as the smaller, weaker brother that gets neglected by the bigger one. And so there are all sorts of jokes that go both ways between Australia and New Zealand.

Q: Can you tell me a joke or two?

DINGER: I think it was maybe David Lange who said that when someone migrates from New Zealand to Australia the IQ in both nations goes up *(laughs).*

Q: Oh God.

DINGER: But in many ways contacts are really close. That's what I have observed elsewhere in the world, particularly in the Pacific islands. I was working with both New Zealand and Australia, and they were extremely close mates, as they would say it.

Q: Well, how did you find the military relationship? I mean we've got collaboration within the middle of the desert or --

DINGER: I visited those facilities.

Q: How did you find this worked in the Australian context?

DINGER: Embassy Canberra had a large defense attaché office, largest that I was ever around, with very close relationships. We couldn't be closer on the intelligence side, as far as I can see. Very good collaboration militarily on trying to make sure that our systems integrate. We sold the Australians what they needed, we exercised with them all the time. On two occasions I accompanied Australian VIPs (very important persons) on visits to U.S. carriers. The first was up in Darwin where one of my opposition parliament contacts was included on the COD flight out to the carrier. So I flew up and went out with him. The other time was a COD straight from Canberra. Then shadow Defense Minister Alexander Downer, who later became foreign minister, was on that flight.

Q: For somebody reading, a cod, C-O-D, stands for what, carrier on deck or something.

DINGER: Something like that. It's a small propeller plane, but it still gets a hooked landing and a catapult takeoff. So it's a great adventure.

Q: Great adventure (laughs)

DINGER: And our carriers do it really well. I was impressed that we'd fly out to the carrier and do the hooked landing, which is pretty startling. We'd climb out and do all the touring, and then when the four or so hours were over, including lunch, as we were getting back on the plane to leave we'd each get a photo album with pictures of us coming in and landing and gathering beneath the plane on landing. They were *very* impressive events. And they were illustrative of the closeness of the relationship.

Q: Well, at that time -- and I don't know how it is today -- but was New Zealand still excluded from a lot of military stuff because of its stand on nuclear powered energy -- nuclear powered ships?

DINGER: Yes. That wasn't part of my portfolio, but we weren't doing anything like that with New Zealand at the time. And I mean just lately we've started to get that warmed up again. New Zealand had a different relationship with us.

Q: Well, and you -- did you see a change in society? I mean were the white Australians a little more welcoming would you say towards Asians or not, or?

DINGER: As with any place I suspect it depends on your individual Australian. I think there certainly were some who wanted to maintain the white Australia policy, probably are still some today who want to do that. But there were others who had a much more open perspective and they've pretty much won the day.

Q: I think to small children that the surf would be -- I mean the beaches wouldn't be very welcoming?

DINGER: The beaches were like beaches anywhere. On our vacations we did a lot of traveling into the interiors, but we also went to the beaches. You can get to a beach in about two hours from Canberra. And you have waves, but you also will have fish and chips and sun and sand and there just are many wonderful things to say about Australia.

Q: How'd you find the society in Canberra? I would think there would be -- would it be almost incestuous, or?

DINGER: It's big enough -- not a tiny town. It's probably a couple hundred thousand people. We made some very good friends there, including from the school system, but also from the Foreign Ministry and the Defense Ministry and we had lots of social occasions. Our next door neighbors were a Palestinian family, delightful people. It was easy to get together for everything from quiz nights to barbecues to whatever. And Canberra is small enough that you can get where you need to get reasonably easily. Traffic patterns were good. We were naturalists and so we were out looking at animals a lot. It was great.

Q: Well, you came back then I guess in what?

DINGER: Well, I mentioned that I'd gotten together a little bit with Winston Lord at APEC in Jakarta. But he also came to Australia a time or two in addition. I recall an international gathering in Cairns where again I was around him some. I knew his special assistant was going to be moving on. She said she enjoyed the work. When I asked if she thought I might be an acceptable follower in her role, she said, "Yeah, make an effort at it." So I put in my name to become the special assistant in EAP, and got it. I had no idea how much competition there was, but probably some because Winston was a great guy.

Q: Yeah, I've -- have you read my oral history with him?

DINGER: I'll do that, I have not.

Q: He's one of my longer ones. He spent quite a bit of time editing and really working --

DINGER: Well, he's a *genius* at editing and writing.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: He did my EER (Employee Evaluation Report) on a yellow pad. And I usually can think of some words I'd like to change. That time it was perfect.

Q: (laughs)

DINGER: *(laughs)* But the fact he actually wrote it himself was also indicative.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: He's a wonderful man and I thought did a wonderful job. He certainly knew how to handle a special assistant. He gave me lots of opportunities.

Q: You were doing that from when to when?

DINGER: That was 1995 to '96.

Q: What was your job? I mean what --

DINGER: I guess each bureau probably does it differently, each regional bureau. Some of them don't even have a special assistant I guess, but back then at least in EAP the special assistant was kind of the right hand man or woman. Supervising the staff assistants and supervising the front office staff below the DAS level, trying to make sure that the schedule for each day was staffed appropriately so that any briefing papers were ready and trying to make sure that paper flowed through the front office quickly, which was no problem with Winston at all. I traveled with him almost all the time. The only exception was when he went on Hilary Clinton's plane for a trip to China and there wasn't a seat for me. When I traveled I was the hands on person to try to make sure that everything was prepared for and got accomplished right on schedule with the right kind of responses. It was a useful job, particularly in an office with an assistant secretary who was inclusive rather than exclusive. Winston had been kind of a special assistant type for Henry Kissinger eons ago. And I think he learned from that how one should and shouldn't behave with a special assistant *(laughs)*, and he behaved wonderfully with his special assistants. He just was fantastic.

Q: Well, were there any particular issues you sort of got involved with?

DINGER: There are plenty of subject matter folks in EAP who immerse in substance of various issues. I didn't get deeply into anything except organizing. I mean we traveled a lot, we did several round the world trips, but the substance was not mine. I always sat in his meetings, but I wasn't a contributor in substance. I would edit and clear the reporting cables by note-takers.

Q: Although of course you were in it, so sometimes it's harder to judge from out, but how would you say EAP stood in pecking order within the Department of State, or is that --

DINGER: EUR had a lot more resources, I think that's been changing over time. But just because of tradition EUR had a lot more resources. And EUR attracted a certain kind of diplomat more than EAP, but I think EAP attracted a really quality group as well. I had a long career with EAP. After my Mexico tour the only time I left the bureau was when I went to Katmandu as DCM. I had lots of opportunities to go other places. I was about to go to Africa a couple of times, but EAP always came in with something better, something that would challenge me and keep me going. So I routinely kept coming back to EAP.

Q: Did you have much contact with your brother over time?

DINGER: Not that often, which was kind of too bad. The one time that we overlapped in Washington was when I was doing the special assistant job and my brother was running the press office. At that time we actually managed to confuse the corridors of the State Department repeatedly.

Q: Oh, I'm sure, yes.

DINGER: We don't think we look that much alike, but others do. And apparently we sound exactly alike on the phone. And I think some of our mannerisms are similar. If I go back to the department now I'm as likely to be called John as Larry. But that's the one time that we overlapped, and it was fun.

Q: Today is the 13th of March, 2014 with Larry Dinger. And Larry, we're talking about Winston Lord. How did he sort of get along with the rest of the department?

DINGER: My impression was he got along very well. I think he had a good relationship with Christopher and Strobe Talbott and P. He's a genuinely nice man, so as far as personalities go, easy to get along with. On substance from time to time there inevitably were some issues that had to be resolved, but he was always willing to try and talk them through.

Q: Let's just walk through a few of the places. How about during the time you were there, were there any particular issues with Korea?

DINGER: Well, the whole nuclear issue was sitting there with North Korea. But as I recall Bob Gallucci was really in charge working that issue. I'm sure Winston and Gallucci were coordinating. On the South Korea side we visited there I think at least once. I don't remember issues that particularly leapt out on Korea.

Q: Taiwan.

DINGER: It's always there. We did not visit Taiwan. I think it was kind of the standard range of issues there. How are you going to balance out the equities regarding our interests in Taiwan and our interests with China. China was a real problem during that period. The relationship was not warm and fuzzy. When I went into the job I just assumed I'd get my first chance to go to China, and would probably go several times. In reality, I didn't go to China once. It wasn't a productive time. And so in my year Winston never got there, except on the Hillary Clinton trip to the Women's Summit. We went to Hong Kong several times. And in fact, we may have strayed into China a little bit when we took a helicopter ride out to the new territories to look at Shenzhen across the way. I was never quite sure whether we strayed across the border or not. Hong Kong was very interesting. They were getting ready for the turnover from the Brits to a relationship with China. And Chris Patten was the lead British authority there. Every time we went Winston had a breakfast with Patten, and I got included. They had an excellent relationship. They really got along well. And they always talked thoroughly through the various transition issues.

Q: Well, did you get any -- what was sort of around the headquarters in State Department of EAP, how was this transition going to work? Was it felt that it would be a peaceful, generally a calm transition, or?

DINGER: My recollection is that was the expectation. The real question was just how complicated China would make it and how much of an effort they would make to really exert dominance early on. In Hong Kong, Winston would talk with various players in the community, trying to get their sense. But nobody really knew. They were just waiting to see.

Q: Indonesia, any problems?

DINGER: Well, we talked about Indonesia from when I was serving there. I don't recall any particular issues that were arising on Indonesia. I recall when we went to Papua New Guinea, the media asked him about Irian Jaya, the Indonesian side of New Guinea, and what we were going to do about that. But we'd accepted the incorporation by Indonesia of Irian Jaya for a very long time so that wasn't a big issue. Regarding Indonesia more broadly, Suharto was still in control, the Timor issue was still sitting there festering, but there was nothing exceptional about all that.

Q: I'll just mention Thailand? Burma?

DINGER: Well, Burma was a worry, always a worry. And I remember we met with Marilyn Meyers the then chargé in Yangon who had flown to Bangkok because we weren't going to travel in. The U.S. was trying to figure out what the next steps might be. I think Aung San Suu Kyi had probably been freed from her first house arrest at that point, and so there was a question of what we might usefully do. But given the military, Than Shwe, there weren't many positive options. We visited Thailand at least a couple of times I think, and Winston would always meet with the senior leadership there. Thailand was an ally and we got along well with them. We also visited Laos, which looked like scenes from back in the 1930s. It had not moved very far at that point, still a very controlled environment with not a whole lot of activity in Vientiane. I went back there later when in Rangoon and the pace of activity had sparked up quite a lot, but not back then. We went to Cambodia at least a couple times. We had lunch with Hun Sen once, and Winston had a useful conversation. The U.S. concerns about Hun Sen and his lack of embrace of democratic values were real; but there wasn't all that much we could do about it.

Vietnam, we went twice to Vietnam. I was kind of curious about it given I'd been there in the war in the south. So these were my first times to return, and to the north, only to Hanoi. We were there for the opening of the embassy in August of '95. It was a heady moment to get to that point in a new relationship. The U.S. was working lots of issues about the missing in action from the war. Winston did some touring of U.S. military activities that were trying to find the missing. Hanoi was startling to me. Everybody was very friendly. I wasn't at all sure how they would be taking us Americans. But I think

they rightly realized they'd won the war and they could be magnanimous about their relationship with the United States. So they were very pleasant to us and Hanoi was absolutely a bustle. It was still at kind of the bicycle stage, thinking about moving towards the motorcycle stage. But it was an awful lot of bicycles, huge volumes of traffic, a sense that business was buzzing even then in 1995. You had the sense that this was a country on the move.

Q: Mm-hmm.

DINGER: Never got to Mongolia. We got to the Philippines. Once -- may have been there twice. We stayed with Ambassador Negroponte. Winston and Negroponte had worked together for Henry Kissinger way back when. So they had plenty of memories and they were still friends. One day we took a helicopter ride over to Subic Bay to see what the former U.S. naval base looked like now that it was --

Q: This time -- this was after the volcano, Pinatubo, whatever?

DINGER: We didn't go over to Clark and Pinatubo, but we did go out to Subic. This was well after the turnover. They were making Subic Bay into an industrial park. And FedEx or UPS, one of those great big carriers, had built a big hub there.

I think we got to Australia at least once or twice. Winston and Gareth Evans, the foreign minister of Australia, had a really good relationship. They respected each other. So their conversations were always among the most simulating that I got to listen to.

We did go to Papua New Guinea, maybe twice. Once was for the twentieth anniversary of independence, and that was a big deal. They had all sorts of celebratory activities.

Japan, we visited several times. Not surprising, with lots of issues there, many of them related to the Department of Defense. I remember flying on Secretary Perry's plane out there one time. Kurt Campbell was the deputy assistant secretary of defense working on Japan issues. He was along on that trip.

Back in Washington, Winston and Stanley Roth from the NSC and the Assistant Secretary of Defense Joe Nye met usually at Winston's office probably once a week. It was very collaborative, kind of like I described the Wolfowitz arrangement back a decade before. Nothing had changed in that regard. Everybody was working together as a team. Different administration, completely different administration, but still the same attitude toward the East Asia Pacific.

Q: Well, on the Pacific you really had to deal with, with the navy much more so than anywhere else. I mean because it was certainly where we were exerting our --

DINGER: Except for Vietnam where it was an army subsidiary that was doing the searching for the remains or the MIAs (missing in action). Korea is another exception with lot of army activity there. And Japan, with a lot of army and air force activity.

Q: Well, did, did trade seem to be a major issue, or --

DINGER: Well, always there are trade issues. I didn't get involved in the substance of them at all, but the whole idea of APEC was gaining steam, getting better definition. We went to the APEC Summit in Osaka in the fall of '95. President Clinton at the very end didn't go there. But the vice president went. That was a useful meeting in relatively early days of APEC. My vague recollection is it was the APEC environment that had the most interest. Otherwise it was kind of routine trade issues with Japan.

Q: You probably wouldn't get involved in this thing, but how about immigration from Asia? Was this something that rose up, or was it pretty well settled at the political level in Congress?

DINGER: I don't have any specific recollections about immigration at that point. In subsequent years the sheer numbers of students certainly increased dramatically, including from China. But I think we basically were encouraging having Asians coming to the United States to study. They were going to be a generation that would then understand us better and perhaps work with us better when they got to positions of power.

Q: Well then, usually being in the front office, there's a good place to help set yourself up for your next assignment. Where'd you go?

DINGER: *(laughs)* I guess in a way that's true, well, I had options. The first option that intrigued me, -- even though I tried to spend as much of my career outside of Washington as I could --was still in Washington. I was in a one-year job. So I did look at the possibility of staying and working on the seventh floor. Strobe Talbott's office, Toria Nuland as chief of staff, offered me a job to be the EAP person in D staff. And I'd accepted that. But then a new political ambassador was going out to Fiji. Don Gevirtz was his name, an investment banker from the Los Angeles area. Somehow he came to meet me. I can't really remember what caused that initial meeting to happen, but he took a liking to me. And he knew that the DCM/chargé in Fiji had health issues that might be overwhelming, and so he was on the lookout to find a new DCM. He asked me if I would take the job. That was pretty early in my career, and I was too junior for the level of the job.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: But I said if the system can make it work, I'd happily be DCM in Fiji. So he and then Winston, who I guess believed enough in me that he thought I could do that job, pushed for an exception to the rules, a stretch assignment into DCM. The Deputy's Committee took some persuading from Mike Owens who was Acting DAS, but EAP finally got them to agree that I'd be a good choice for the job. So I had to go back to Talbott and his staff to say thank you, but no thanks, I'm going off to be a DCM instead. I don't know where my career would have ended up if I had gone to D staff, I hope it

would have been fine, but it certainly took a sharp turn when I went to the islands. So that summer I went out to be DCM in Suva, Fiji. This is the summer of '96.

Q: Mm-hmm. Well, what -- you were in Fiji from when to when?

DINGER: 1996 to 1999, first time.

Q: What was the situation there?

DINGER: It was unsettled in a way, in another sense quite settled. They'd had two coups in 1988, before my time out there. And a military guy, Sitiveni Rabuka, had deposed the civilian government led by Ratu Mara. Rabuka had really taken charge, and he became the leader of the government of Fiji. By the time Gevirtz and I arrived, well Gevirtz arrived about six months before I did, but by the time we got to Fiji in '96, it seemed Rabuka was interested in finding a way to return governance to a civilian, more democratic form. He had done some kinds of cosmetic efforts to make governance look civilianized prior to that, but he hadn't really gotten there. So Gevirtz very much took it on as a role to encourage the move to democracy. And he had a good relationship with Rabuka. Gevirtz was a very good political ambassador in my view. As I mentioned earlier about an ambassador in Australia, Gevirtz knew what he knew and he knew what he didn't know, and he delegated to me what he didn't know.

Q: Mm-hmm.

DINGER: So that really meant he delegated to me running the embassy, and he was Mr. Outside. But he was full of ideas, had far more ideas than we could possibly accomplish. So I screened his ideas, and he didn't mind that at all. In fact, he appreciated it. Often what would happen is he would come in the morning having generated all sorts of ideas overnight and having thought about various things that maybe were under way. We would sit down and go through everything. Then he might go out and play a round of golf with Rabuka or something like that, and I'd take care of following up with things. I think from both our perspectives it worked very well. Also he spent a lot of time cultivating business contacts since he had a strong business background.

Q: What were the business interests?

DINGER: One was something called Fiji Water. I don't know if you're familiar with that. It's a boutique bottled water.

Q: Matter fact I have a bottle -- my daughter had it -- used my car and I was driving with a Fiji bottle. What the hell that was.

DINGER: Well, Fiji Water was the idea of a Canadian entrepreneur, David Gilmour, a marketing genius. He must have been vacationing in Fiji one time and he got it in his head that he could make some money bottling Fiji's water and sending it to the United States. So he did some testing of water supplies and found a spot where he could lease the

aquifer beneath. It turned out that the water there was fairly high in sulfur. Then he studied the medical research and found that some thought sulfur was a really positive thing for the human body. So he put together a plan to bottle this water in a *very* attractive plastic bottle that could be produced on site. Then he put it into boutique environments in L.A., New York, and Miami. It took off, and this guy started making money off of Fiji Water. So that was one of the things that Gevirtz was very intrigued by. I was there when it actually opened, but Gevirtz was there for the beginning. Also a reasonable amount of U.S. trade happens with Fiji. Whatever was possible, Gevirtz was interested in trying to do. And even if it wasn't possible he was just an idea person who didn't want to worry about the details much. So I think we had a good experience in that regard. But I'd been there less than a year when I could see that Gevirtz was thinking about the U.S. economy, which was in an absolute boom phase in that point, yet he was in a position where he couldn't do anything about it. And he'd always been in a position to dive in when things were booming.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: So it got him very frustrated. Also, he did a fair amount of traveling back to the States, which gave me a lot of chargé payment. But at one point in early summer of '97 he said, "Larry, I'm going to resign from my ambassadorship. I have full confidence that you can take this embassy and run with it. I'm going to go back to the United States." And he did. So I was in chargé-hood. And it ended up I was chargé for the last two years of my tour.

Washington aspired to send out another ambassador, but the first one they chose would have been the first openly gay ambassador, Hormel. And I gathered both people on the Hill and people in Fiji were not excited by that. So eventually that nomination never went forward. They were still working on the subsequent nomination when I finally left after two years. I had a great opportunity as a pretty junior officer, an FS-2 at the time, to be chargé of a modest sized embassy with interesting issues. I followed on the Gevirtz themes and in particular the democracy-development theme, including work with Rabuka. By '99 there was a new constitution in place that we had encouraged, a good constitution. They'd had a new set of democratic elections. Politics was still kind of race based, but democratic within that environment. And a surprising winner came out of it, a guy named Mahendra Chaudhry who was an ethnic Indian from the Labor Party. So I established a relationship with that new government and with Chaudhry, always with the theme of encouraging a very democratic attitude in what was a very potentially divisive country, mostly because of the British legacy of race relations. When I left Fiji, cutting to the end, things were looking reasonably good. Chaudhry was in place, others were working in a parliamentary environment, and there was a degree of hope.

Q: Yeah. Well, I was just thinking, with the -- Fiji had this rather strong military tradition, didn't it?

DINGER: First off, Fiji is a spot where Melanesia and Polynesia, where those two ethnic groups, or even racial groups, overlap.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: And that in part brought about conflict over time, even before there were British around. Different ethnic, or different clan groups were vying for territory and vying for prominence. The British came in and set up a rigorous colonial environment, and they did establish military traditions. One of the stronger institutions in Fiji was the military when post-colonial democracy occurred. So when Rabuka decided to undertake his two coups in 1988, he had the guns and no one else had an ability to confront those guns effectively. So he won.

A major part of the Fiji issue is something else that the British did, to bring in indentured servants from India to do the hard work in the sugar cane fields. They wanted to have a sugar cane industry in Fiji. A large sugar cane industry is still there. By bringing in the ethnic Indians another racial issue began, which has never been resolved. Over time the ethnic Indians came to be over 50% of the population. It was an ethnic Indian dominated party that won the election in 1988 that brought about the first coup. It was an ethnic Indian who won the election in '99 that eventually triggered the third coup in 2000. It was very difficult for the ethnic Fijians, who thought of the country as really theirs, to abide having non-ethnic Fijians in charge. That was just a reality that was very hard to -- impossible to overcome. And so that ethnic divide colored everything in Fiji politics.

Q: I take it the Indians were -- had moved to the commercial side of things.

DINGER: Some of them. I don't know how many farm laborers moved into commerce. I suppose some, but what happened for sure is that as Indian laborers came to Fiji a bunch of merchants followed, Gujaratis. And the Gujarat area of India is famous for producing unlimited numbers of entrepreneurial sorts, successful businessmen.

Q: Mm-hmm.

DINGER: So lots of Gujaratis eventually came, and established businesses -- sometimes *extremely* tiny businesses, but they were very hardworking, they saved well, they invested well, and many of them thrived.

Q: Did they have, say -- I know the South Koreans have and I know the Vietnamese have -- sort of you belong to an ethnic group and they'll pass money around to help young people invest, but you bloody well pay. I mean in other words it's sort of self-enforcing.

DINGER: Maybe. My impression is it tends to be more within families. It might be extended families. You see it in the United States today. Almost any motel you go to on the East Coast of the United States, if it's kind of a modest hotel it's going to be an ethnic Indian who's the owner/manager of the hotel, often with the name Patel. And Patel is a Gujarati. They're very good at business. It can be a small business or it can be quite a large business. So a number of businesses formed and became very successful. And I got to know a lot of those people.

Q: Did they seem to -- I mean did they intermarry or mix or I mean was --

DINGER: There was *very* little of it, for which partly I blame the Brits. They did not encourage mixing of races. They kept all ethnic Indians out of the army. That was an entirely Fijian force at the time of independence. And there are very few Indians even today in the army. The police had mixed ethnicity. But there was very little encouragement to mix races from the top. And not much interest from the bottom. They just kept to themselves. The lady, who we loved, who was our cook, maid, housekeeper, babysitter for our first tour in Fiji, was one of the real exceptions. She was ethnic Fijian, she had married an ethnic Indian, and it was not easy for them. Eventually they split up. If you went against the mold it was tough.

Q: Mm-hmm. Well, did we have interests there other than -- I take it we had strategic denial, wanted to keep particularly the Soviets or the Russians or the Chinese from establishing bases or something like that?

DINGER: I guess we would have opposed them establishing bases. They hadn't really shown much interest in establishing bases. But they did want to have the ability to have port visits and things like that. Much farther north, when we get to my time in the Federated States of Micronesia we can talk more about strategic deniability. We did that clearly there.

I should say that when I was in Fiji as DCM and then chargé I had responsibility for several other countries too, and we can talk about them: Tonga, Tuvalu, and Nauru. Little places, but of some interest. The Soviets had been interested, but hadn't done particularly well trying to cultivate that part of the world. The Chinese were interested, particularly so because Taiwan was also cultivating that part of the world. Taiwan had relations with about half of the island countries, which meant that China needed to compete. And when Taiwan and China compete it's usually not a benign environment. A lot of money was moving and the way the money was moving was often opaque. That was a worry because it didn't encourage good government. But as far as I'm aware China wasn't seeking to actually have bases. They wanted to have influence and they wanted to have formal relations.

Q: Did we have a pretty good system for trying to figure out where the money was coming from or not, between the two Chinese elements?

DINGER: No. We didn't have a good system for that. We would hear things and be told by reliable sources sometimes about things, but we weren't seeing the wire transfers or anything like that. But millions of dollars were flowing in assistance, and sometimes in overt, relatively useful ways. But other times in far less overt and useful ways.

Q: Well, were there equivalent to rival Chinese newspapers? I assume that there was a significant Chinese, ethnic Chinese element there, was there?

DINGER: It depends on how you define significant. There was a Chinese community in Fiji. It wasn't all that big, but Chinese businesspeople had come. Some of them had become very successful, a few became members of government. A guy named Jim Ah Koy was half-Chinese, and became a minister in the Rabuka government. So they were there and were prominent in their own way. But they were never going to totally dominate the Fiji government.

Q: Did we have -- we the United States -- have any particular interest there?

DINGER: Given our history with World War II and, and all the difficulties that we had to overcome in rescuing back other Pacific islands from the Japanese threat, I think there was always an interest in trying to make sure that at the least freedom of navigation was going to be upheld and there weren't going to be bases and things like that.

Q: Mm-hmm.

DINGER: Also Fiji is the hub in many respects of the South and Central Pacific. It's the aviation hub. For several of these little countries, the only way to get to and from them is via Nadi Airport in Fiji. Then one can fly on to Australia or New Zealand or Hawaii. It's the educational hub. The University of the South Pacific is in Fiji and a lot of the island people come there for an education. The South Pacific forum is in Fiji.

Q: What is the South Pacific Forum?

DINGER: It's a regional organization of Pacific Island countries plus Australia and New Zealand that tries to work through policy issues of various sorts, and cultural issues. The South Pacific Community has a subsidiary body in Fiji. Its headquarters is in New Caledonia, but a third of its activities last time I checked were probably coming out of Fiji. They do a lot of economic development work and economic oversight work. So Fiji in many respects is a *very* important player in the islands communities. For the U.S., especially in one-country, one-vote fora like the UN General Assembly, little islands matter. We want to cultivate them. Last fall, I was the EAP person at the General Assembly in New York. One of my big jobs was to cultivate the 12 island missions up there, to try to convince as many of them as possible to vote our way on General Assembly issues. Well, back at Embassy Fiji that was important to us too. So we would be lobbying Fiji and the other islands to see things our way in the UN and in other international fora.

Q: How did the -- I mean did the Fiji government take its cue from any other country such as England, or anywhere else? Or was it --

DINGER: It has varied over time. In the Ratu Mara era, pre-coups of '88, they had a very close relationship with the Brits because the British had been the colonial power. And in fact, the high chiefs of Fiji back in the mid 1800s had given Fiji to the queen. They volunteered to be a colony. Once independence occurred, that colonial attachment remained. I remember -- I think it was the first time I was there -- Prince Andrew came

out to visit. One time I think Princess Anne might have visited too. But whenever royalty visited it was a big deal. Everybody would rush to be along the roadside to watch them go past.

Q: Well, I would think fishing would be a major issue there.

DINGER: It is for all of these countries. The Forum Fisheries Agency is based in Honiara in the Solomon Islands. Most negotiations on fish happened via that agency. They all, Fiji less than some of the others, take an interest in tuna, including with activities by distant-waters countries including the United States. There's an office at the State Department that negotiates our fisheries agreements.

Q: Did you get involved with fishing at the embassy?

DINGER: Literally yes, we would go catch fish in the ocean, but as far as the substance of the issues, not really. Only conveying messages.

Q: How'd you find the -- we were all talking about this first time, and may have changed, maybe not -- but how did you find the government? First place, was it a working government or was it corrupt or was there a problem?

DINGER: In Fiji an established civil service was reasonably good. It was not the most efficient ever in the world, but it was reasonably good. And we had pretty good relationships with the parts that we dealt with, particularly foreign affairs. We had a defense attaché and had a good working relationship with the military as well. Nearly all senior military officers had received training in the U.S., including at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu. We would deal with other elements of the bureaucracy on a case by case basis, but Foreign Affairs was generally our first point of call on things.

Q: Did Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, any of these other areas exercise much interest in Fiji, or?

DINGER: Japan didn't play that much. Australia and New Zealand played a lot. They both see the Pacific Islands as kind of their turf, as certainly areas of major interest for them. And so they took quite active roles in lots of issues. That was true back in the '90s, it was true later in the 2000s when I was there again. I'll go into that in much greater detail later. Australia had one of its quite senior foreign affairs officers as its High Commissioner (ambassador) in Fiji when I was first there, Greg Urwin. Since Fiji was then part of the Commonwealth, ambassadors from other Commonwealth governments were designated "high commissioners." Greg was kind of a mentor for me as a matter of fact. I was brand new to the islands, but he was good enough to give me advice on how to deal with things. New Zealand had a couple of pretty senior foreign affairs officers there also, one of them a Maori. And they, too, took a very strong interest. Conversely, lots of Fijians would go to Australia and/or New Zealand, often New Zealand, for education. A

lot of them had business interests there as well. Some had retired down there. So there were many, many connections with Australia/New Zealand.

Q: With Fijian society, was this one of these places where you got lots of connections with taro roots and all this sort of --

DINGER: They call it "dalo" in Fiji, but it's taro, same thing. And they eat a lot of it. They also have kava. I don't know if you're aware of kava at all. It's the root of a pepper plant, and it has a mildly narcotic effect. Germany at one point at least was extracting the essence of kava, putting it into pills, and selling it as a blood pressure medication because it tends to relax you. The ethnic Fijians have many Kava ceremonies that are extremely important culturally. So if you're a foreign diplomat, at least an American diplomat, you are expected to be drinking your kava. And you probably will be the first one to get a bowl at any ceremony. Ceremonies can last for hours, often sitting on a few mats on a hard surface. Actually the kava helps because otherwise *(laughs)* your butt would be so *incredibly* tired. Remind me to tell you an instance in Micronesia later, but when I was in Fiji I never had the experience of a kava high of any sort. I just had enough socially to do my job and to be appreciated for doing my job.

Q: Mm.

DINGER: Kava tastes kind of like gritty dirt. There's not a great flavor to it. But if you drink enough, it can kind of separate your mind from your body. And that's what real kava drinkers aim toward I guess.

Q: Well, was there -- I mean beyond sort of the ceremonial thing, were there kava addicts who sort of sat around in corners spaced out and --

DINGER: You know, I, I don't know if it's truly an addition, where you have to have it, but there were certainly people who enjoyed it and would do it a lot.

Q: Well, how was life there?

DINGER: Well, interesting. I think how diplomats did in Fiji depended a lot on what motivated them to go there. If people were motivated to go to Fiji figuring it was going to be south seas, beaches, palm trees, sun and sand, they probably were going to be pretty disappointed and there might be morale issues. If they went because they thought it could be an interesting job in an interesting place, they tended to like it a lot. In the wisdom of the British when they decided to set up an administrative capital in Fiji, they set it up in Suva, on the rainy side of the island, rather than over on the west, which has much better weather. Suva is not a particularly attractive city. It does rain a lot, it's cloudy a lot. There are no beaches at Suva, just mangroves. You have to go an hour or two away to get to a beach. There is a reef protecting the harbor.

Q: The mangroves were the roots that would pretty well preclude swimming practically.

DINGER: There were some nice beaches within hour and a half, but there weren't any right there. Suva was not sun and sand. And yet, my family and I thoroughly enjoyed our time there. We ended up spending a total of six years, three in the '90s and three again in the 2000s. The school was reasonably good, and we made lots of friends in the local community as well as in the diplomatic community. We did get out fishing and I convinced my two oldest kids to join me in learning to scuba dive while we were there. There was snorkeling. I'm a golfer, and many of the senior businessmen and government leaders enjoyed playing golf. Not all of them, but many, particularly the Fijians enjoyed playing golf so I was out on the golf course reasonably often. My wife had all sorts of friends in various clubs and we loved it. We had a really great time.

Q: I would think that -- you mentioned golf, and I think this would be a real attraction for Japanese businessmen and all. Was it, or not?

DINGER: I don't remember there being that many Japanese, but by the mid 2000s when I got back there the Koreans had discovered Fiji. And Koreans may be more avid golfers than the Japanese. Lots of relatively young Koreans had moved to Fiji and had their kids in school there, and they were spending lots of time on the golf course. Many did not know, or at least did not follow, the rules of etiquette of golf. So the main golf club in Suva had to have special education nights, really just for the Korean community to try to teach them how to play a reasonably rapid non-controversial game *(laughs).*

Q: Well, I've served twice in Korea, once in the military and once in -- as a Foreign Service officer. And the Koreans are kind of like, say about Ariel Sharon, they don't stop at traffic lights (laughs).

DINGER: *(laughs)* It was almost the other problem in Fiji golf, they were so damn slow! Every shot meant so much to them. I imagine there was a lot of money involved. And so to get them to move at a pace where the rest of us wanted to play golf was an effort.

Q: (laughs) Well, was there any institution -- or is there any institution -- educational institution, in the United States that particularly focuses on island cultures and all that?

DINGER: Well, one that clearly does is the University of Hawaii. The East West Center is also right there. It's a separate entity, but the East West Center plus the university itself both have very strong islands programs. Also, the University of Guam understandably would have a lot to do with the islands. On the mainland, bits and pieces I think. But it, it's really Hawaii where you see the strength.

Q: What about going to the United States? My sampling of Pacific Island culture is they like to travel a hell of a lot. They seem to always be on the go. Is there a Fijian community in the States and all?

DINGER: I'm sure there are a number. All the island folks if they can afford it like to get out and in some cases they need to do so to find opportunity. If they come to the States many tend to cluster. Somebody got to some place and liked it, or at least got along well

enough to have a better life than they had back in the islands. And so they told their relatives and friends. And the others then come to that same spot. It's less true of Fiji than of some others I think because, as we discussed earlier, a lot of Fiji citizens tended to go to Australia-New Zealand. But -- after this tour of mine -- the political life of the ethnic Indians became really bad, and they started looking to go anywhere they could possibly go for a new life. So ethnic Indians, around half of the population in the late 1980s, fell to more like a third or maybe even less. And it would have been far less if they could have gotten visas. They were looking to go to Australia or New Zealand or Canada or the United States. Those were the favored four. If those didn't work they might look for other places.

Q: Were ethnic Fijians big people?

DINGER: It depends of course, but many are. Both the Melanesian community and the Polynesian community tend to have rather large male bodies. I don't know that there are a lot of Fijians in the National Football League, but there are certainly plenty of Tongans and Samoans, Polynesians, who look like, and sometimes are linebackers. And Fiji has a big rugby tradition. For a country with a population of maybe 800,000, they produced a lot of really good rugby players, including those who played professionally in New Zealand and Australia.

Q: New Zealand of course, the All Blacks --

DINGER: Yes. Fiji was particularly prominent in the rugby sevens competitions where you only needed seven people on a side. It was a whole lot of action in a very short period of time, and so even a small place with a lot of talent could survive and thrive. When Fiji won the Rugby Sevens World Cup one year the government declared a national holiday.

Q: How about you might say tribal customs, dancing and, you know, one thinks of the islands as tattoos and tongue motions and all this. Was there much of that?

DINGER: You're thinking more of the Maori I think in New Zealand by your description. But every community has dances. And I quite enjoyed watching the dances. Tuvalu, another of the countries where I represented the United States at that time, has a total of 10,000 people scattered across I guess eight atolls. Just north of Fiji a ways. It was called the Ellice Islands before World War II, but they became Tuvalu later. I went up to there to represent the U.S. at the twentieth anniversary of independence when I was chargé. There were nine distinct ethnic groups in the eight atolls. Each of them had their own dances that they were very, very proud of and that were really great. I loved watching them dance *(laughs)*. They also produced craftwork, woven grass fans in particular, really artistic, detailed fans. Lots of other woven goods, some carved goods. There was a whole lot of culture going back a long, long time.

Q: Well again, going back to this first tour, did you cover all the islands?

DINGER: Not all of them, but the next biggest one besides Fiji was Tonga, the Kingdom of Tonga. That's east of Fiji an hour's flight. One moves beyond the Melanesian/Polynesian blend into pure Polynesia at that point. I visited Tonga pretty often. It was the second largest of the population groups, 120,000 people or so scattered across several atolls. And they have a king. The then king was particularly famous for being huge. He weighed about 400 pounds at one point. By the time I met him he was getting on in years and he'd lost down to I think about 260, 270. But he still was a big, very big man, and he was not in great health. He walked with canes -- but his mind was pretty good. And so when I met with him we had good conversations. His son, the then crown prince, now king, was the foreign minister. I got to know him quite well. If I would go over to Tonga, he and I nearly always would sit down and have a nice long chat about what was going on in Tonga, but he was interested in the rest of the world too. He had a rather lavish lifestyle, a bit of a jet-set group around him. I recall that my wife and I visited Nuku'alofa for a major royal event which included a black-tie dinner and a performance of operatic pieces. Afterward, the crown prince invited us to his villa, an Italianate small palace on a hill just south of town. We joined an international crowd for late-night, early morning pasta and wine, sitting in the large kitchen area having low-key, pleasant chats. The crown prince chafed at the responsibilities of being a royal and never having a chance to be free of responsibility, so eventually he resigned all positions knowing one day he would be king. He just went off to be his own person for a while.

Tonga at that point had small manifestations of democracy, but it was really run top down. There were a number of democracy advocates. Akilisi Pohiva was very prominent among them. They were striving mightily to gain more of a democratic system. It had not succeeded, but they knew that the United States was in favor of that outcome, and I was very straightforward in my conversations about that.

An element of U.S. activity that went over very well in the Pacific was Peace Corps. When I arrived in Suva, we had Peace Corps volunteers in Fiji, Tonga, and Tuvalu (also in Kiribati which then was under oversight from Embassy Majuro in the Marshalls). I visited the volunteers whenever possible, trying to treat them to a meal or at least some socializing. My impression was that the volunteers nearly always enjoyed their experiences. Villages were welcoming, work was at least marginally interesting and of some local value, the climate was pleasant. Unfortunately, Peace Corps Washington decided to close the Fiji operation while I was there, arguing Fiji had developed enough that volunteers were no longer really needed. I tried to fight that judgment but failed. We celebrated 30 years of Peace Corps in Fiji at the same time we mourned its closing. With Fiji closing, the operation in Tuvalu, overseen by the Fiji office, also had to close down. That was a real shame. Just about every PCV in Tuvalu had loved it, many had married Tuvaluans, and there was no doubt Tuvalu was still poor enough to merit attention. But we lost the battle. Peace Corps Tonga, though, continued to thrive. There, too, volunteers nearly always seemed content, and they immersed themselves in Tonga culture. A few years later, Peace Corps Washington revisited the Fiji issue and re-opened operations there. Unfortunately, re-opening Fiji did not result in re-opening of Tuvalu.

Q: This whole area that you were responsible for how avoided Japanese occupations. Was it too far south for the --

DINGER: Well, for Tonga and Fiji, you're right. I think some strafing from Japanese aircraft hit Fiji at one point, but they never actually invaded Fiji. I think it was just a little too far away. Then when we made our insertion into the Solomons and started pushing the Japanese back they had to focus over that way.

Turning farther north, in my first Fiji tour, Embassy Suva was not in charge of relations with Kiribati, which used to be called the Gilberts; but by my second Fiji tour the Embassy in Suva had received responsibility for Kiribati. Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati, was a major battle site in World War II. The Japanese had gained control of Kiribati and U.S. Marines took it back through an incredibly bloody battle, the first major amphibious battle of World War II.

Q: Yeah. Was there any special feeling towards the Japanese because of the Great Pacific War or not, or?

DINGER: I didn't really get a sense of that particularly down in Fiji and Tonga. And I didn't talk about it much farther north. When we get to Micronesia we can talk more about that, because the Japanese were colonial masters for decades in Micronesia. During my time, the Japanese weren't aggressive in their diplomacy out in the islands, from my perspective. They were just in business.

Q: I would think fishing would be --

DINGER: They cared a lot about fishing of course, as did a number of the European governments who weren't represented on the ground, but they wanted to get their fishing in.

Q: Well, then what about the great colossus to the north, the United States? Did it pay much attention to you?

DINGER: Well, I mean these are pretty small places. The United States was interested, we did have the embassy, and we did strive to convey our views on various issues where we hoped they would agree with us in international institutions. And we did convey our strong interest in democracy and human rights. But in the grand scheme of U.S. foreign policy, not a huge amount of attention was paid. The assistant secretary for East Asia would come through once in a while. There's a South Pacific Forum meeting each year. It moves around the region. And when the schedule permitted, the assistant secretary would get there. If the schedule didn't permit, a deputy assistant secretary would get there, which was appreciated. But it wasn't constant attention. Which from my perspective gave me lots of opportunities --

Q: Oh yeah.

DINGER: -- to contribute to policy and make suggestions that were probably going to be accepted back in Washington.

Q: I think of someone who's talking about the golden days of when Henry Kissinger was secretary of state, and being in Africa he didn't pay much attention to Africa (laughs), which essentially was a great blessing.

DINGER: *(laughs)* Well, I think I could get their attention if something really dramatic was happening. And there certainly were people in Washington who were interested enough, at least up to the DAS level, and to some extent the assistant secretary level.

Q: Were there any American firms that were really interested in development there?

DINGER: Not in a grand scale. Fiji Water is now an American company. A California company owned it when last I checked. That would be the biggest of them. There were also some U.S.-owned tourist facilities -- particularly high-end tourist facilities -- that would bring in superstars from the business and entertainment communities to spend their vacations. But we didn't see a huge amount of American business. We didn't have AmCham (American Chamber of Commerce) for a while, and then when it did revive it was mostly Fiji entities that wanted connections to the States, rather than American entities. In my second Fiji tour we facilitated a Boeing sale of commercial aircraft to Air Pacific.

Q: Well, you left there when?

DINGER: Left there in 1999.

Q: This was sometime in, but was there -- had you heard -- this was after say the disillusion of the Soviet Empire and all that. And at one point the Soviets had had considerable ambitions in the Pacific with its fleet and all. And this is all ended obviously, but were there any stories about -- had the Soviets been particularly interested in the area at all, or not?

DINGER: Well, not that I recall. The Soviet Empire was history and Russia wasn't spending a lot of attention in the islands by the time I got there.

DINGER: So towards the end of my time in Fiji, the new constitution was in place, there was an election, and Mahendra Chaudhry, an ethnic Indian, Labor Party background, became the prime minister in a bit of a surprise. He was interested in having a good relationship with the United States and I worked pretty closely with him. In one of the really warm moments of my time in Fiji just before I left, he hosted his first ever farewell ceremony for a foreign diplomat to wish my wife and myself a fond goodbye. It was a beautiful evening at a place called Boron House up on a hill about Suva. Everything was feeling warm and fuzzy. Political atmospherics were seeming pretty good at that moment. But a few dark clouds were looming, including his attitude towards roles for his son and his reluctance to accommodate the ethnic Fijian base as much as one might have thought

he should given the history of Fiji. So I left on a relatively high note but with some worries about how the future would unroll.

Q: Well, tell me about this. We're -- sometimes the United States has been described as the worldwide nanny. And I mean OK, we want peace and tranquility around the world and all. And here you're a representative in a very small place. But still, the, the ruling group may be making some rather wrong moves, not settling problems. Do you feel there's a call to try to get them to do the right thing, or is it a matter of sitting back and reporting?

DINGER: No, we did not just sit back and report during the time I was there. We felt charged to encourage a democratic future, a more clearly democratic future than had been the case in the past. But this was within an environment that was deeply fractured ethnically and politically. Even within the Indian community there were two major parties: a party led by Jai Ram Reddy which had worked with Rabuka on the new constitution; and the Labor Party that Chaudhry had been leading. On the Fijian side there were several potential players as well. We as an embassy, and I think Washington agreed, saw our role as just encouraging good governance, as democratic a governance as was reasonably possible given the environment. That's how I left it. I didn't attempt to prescribe particular solutions, but I did try to encourage thoughtful consideration of all the various issues that were out there within a healthy democratic system.

Q: Well then, how did you view some of the major figures there at the time, this first time?

DINGER: Well, I came to quite appreciate Rabuka, the guy who'd undertaken the coups. He'd had a transformation I think. He'd come to the sense that his initial solution wasn't the best way forward for Fiji, that there needed to be a more inclusive democratic future. And so Gevirtz before me and then myself worked to encourage those views. He set up the constitutional review commission that was headed by a New Zealander, and that did a very thorough job of trying to figure out a democratic way that would work for the Fiji context. Then Rabuka abided by the resulting recommendations. He moved to the elections and allowed them to go the way that they went, even when the outcome was a big surprise. With Chaudhry...I wouldn't tend to wave my finger at somebody in any case, but it was too early to be saying no, no, no, don't do this, do that. And it probably wouldn't have gone over well for the United States to take that kind of approach anyway. But again, the basic themes I was constantly giving out seemed to be pretty well received. I had great admiration for Jai Ram Reddy, a decent man and true democrat. During my first tour in Fiji, Frank Bainimarama was promoted to head the Fiji armed forces. At that time, the U.S. had a very cordial relationship with Bainimarama, who had received a great deal of U.S. military education and training over the years.

Q: Did you find that you, Australians, New Zealanders, were using the same hymnal more or less?

DINGER: Pretty much the same hymnal. The United States being a little bit farther from the geography, tended to be a little less preachy I think. But we pretty much had the same perspectives.

Q: Well, then in '99 you left.

DINGER: I left, and I guess I had just been promoted to FS-1. That's the point when War College may be offered to you.

Q: Explain it to people, FSO-1 is about the equivalent of colonel.

DINGER: It's about the equivalent of colonel. And the State Department system offers the opportunity for some who've been promoted to FS-1 to go to War Colleges. There are army, navy, air force, I guess there's a Marine War College, but there's also the National War College at Fort McNair in Washington. There are also some more specialized ones. National War College is considered the cream of the crop, and that's the one I sought and was offered. So I went back and spent another year in Washington. That was actually my last Foreign Service year in Washington, from '99 to 2000. Another wonderful experience.

Q: What particularly was the -- how did you find the War College? Was it concentrated on any particular field, area, or situation, or --

DINGER: No, it was pretty broad based. Being a military institution, it had some straight military themes. But it was more about international security themes. The master's degree that you got out of it was in International Security Studies. Seminar based. Lots of really good discussions, including on particular areas of the world, but also Clausewitz and grand strategy, more generally. I don't think of myself as much of a grand strategist, but I did enjoy the environment. There was some paper writing. I think State Department folks who go there don't see that as much of a burden, we've done a lot of writing in the past. I wrote one paper on U.S. policymaking regarding Indonesia and described it as making sausage. You don't really want to see the process too close up *(laughs).*

Lots of conversation, lots of friends made. You're put in with a smaller group and I think there were maybe a couple of us from the State Department in my small group, and others from all across the U.S. government. We're still in communication by email. My follow on assignment it turned out -- and I'll tell you about that later -- was to go to Nepal. I knew that before the spring of the War College year. We had a choice of regional studies, and the regional study would culminate with an overseas trip. So since I was going to South Asia, I chose the regional study for South Asia, which concluded with a trip to India and Pakistan. An absolutely mind-boggling experience with many interesting moments. One of the things I did at the War College, which I enjoyed, was gaming. The military does a lot of war-gaming. A particular course involved setting up a war game with all the other war colleges in a scenario that actually involved the Far East. I won't go into any more detail than that about the scenario, but I became the Premier of China and kind of led the opponents' team in a game that related to that part of the world.

We went down for several days, maybe even a week, to Montgomery, Alabama, to the Air Force War College, and played it out. And we opponents of the U.S. did very well *(laughs).* We tested some innovative concepts in a game environment and it was useful.

Q: Well, I mean it's a very good -- did you get any feeling about the different services, the intellectual interests or capabilities of the various services?

DINGER: Well, I guess I'd put it differently. I got an impression of the priorities of different services, and who they chose to send to war colleges.

Q: OK.

DINGER: The marines and the air force in particular I think chose their most up-and-coming to go. In theory all the services were choosing their best. But the navy kind of saw being out on ships as where their best ought to be, so they didn't prioritize it as much. There were some really great people from the navy who came to the National War College, but I think they had to work to get there. They saw the value and so they kind of forced it.

Q: I've heard people who say -- who've attended these in these -- in interviews I've had, often put, make special emphasis talking about the marines being -- that they've experienced that the War College as being particularly capable.

DINGER: Well, for one thing, first, marines have fewer officers than the other services. And it's a really rigorous program. That may be part of it. Certainly the marines I ran into at the War College were all really impressive folks.

Q: Did you feel that the State Department paid much attention to the War College graduates? This is something -- I mean obviously there's a selection process. But did you feel that there was a thought behind why somebody was assigned there?

DINGER: Conventional wisdom at least back then was that they took the promotion panel rankings, and the folks who'd ranked highest were offered National War College. They didn't have to go there. I guess they could have tried army or navy or something else, or do some other job entirely, but they were offered it.

Q: I, I attended the '76, '77, the Senior Seminar. I mean there were some high fliers too. But it seemed to me to be awfully uneven.

DINGER: Now, that's after you get to OC, is that right?

Q: Well, let's see. I guess I was OC. That's brigadier general in our ranking system.

DINGER: My brother went to the Senior Seminar and he had a wonderful time at it. He thoroughly enjoyed the people he was with. I don't remember that ever coming up as an option for me, but I guess I'd already done the War College, so --

Q: Yeah. I think in a way the War College made more sense --

DINGER: I don't know. It was certainly good for me. And particularly the chance to immerse a bit in South Asia was good.

Q: Tell me about the trip to India-Pakistan? What impressions did you come out of that particular combination?

DINGER: It was arranged by our military, although we did get a little bit of time at the embassy in each place. But it was a mil-mil exchange. We flew into Delhi and had a variety of sessions there, not just with military types, but with diplomats, with think tanks, getting a good sense of how India was looking at the world and at the United States. We had a little tourism in Agra. We went down to Mumbai. We went to Amritsar. I think it was from Amritsar, but maybe it was from Delhi, we took a helicopter up to Kashmir, which was a dicey spot at that point. We flew in a Russian helicopter with the fuel container right in the middle of the passenger compartment *(laughs)*. Caused me to take a step back for a second. But no accidents happened. As we flew into Srinagar, the helicopter was actually taking evasive action. It was dipping and gliding and trying to make sure it wasn't an easy target. We didn't get shot at, but going up and seeing Kashmir from the Indian side gave one a sense that they really were concerned about the security and they had an awful lot of military up there. They were anxious to maintain their position.

We drove from Amritsar via the land border into Pakistan then to Lahore. At the Wagah border point both sides do elaborate evening gate closing rituals, which were really photogenic, no expense spared. From Lahore we went to Islamabad and Rawalpindi, again meetings with a variety of people. We also took a bus over to the Afghan border, to the Khyber Pass and kind of looked into Afghanistan. That's the closest I've ever been to Afghanistan. We were supposed to fly up to Kashmir from the Pakistan side and we got on the helicopter to go, but it was foggy on that day so that adventure was cancelled. But we certainly got an impression of both Indian and Pakistani seriousness about sovereignty and their uncertainty about the motives and perspectives of the other side. We got to talk to them about global issues. With so many others from the War College not interested specifically in Nepal, I didn't go into Nepal issues. But I learned a lot about the area.

Back at the War College, at least at that time, the individual services had money. And most of the services gave a two or three-day excursion out to see what they do in the field. The navy was relatively modest. We went down to Norfolk, Virginia, and went on an aircraft carrier and a couple of other ships, things like that. The marines took us down to Camp Lejeune and showed us how they trained, which was very interesting. The air force put us on a jet and took us to Illinois and to Las Vegas and to San Antonio and to Whiteman Air Force Base where the B2s are in Missouri, and back. No holds barred, a fantastic and expensive excursion. The army had to cancel because they couldn't get access to a plane to take us around *(laughs).* We were supposed to go to Georgia but no transport. The domestic trips were great bonding experiences. We had a lot of quality

time with a complex group of both military and civilians from the U.S. government. The trips included plenty of education, including near death by PowerPoint in San Antonio, but also some social opportunities. I had an enjoyable year at the War College.

Q: OK, well say, one of the great things about these War College experiences is that it gets you to mix with other branches of the government, which carryover later on. I mean you can --

DINGER: It can. In my specific case, not much. One of my air force friends from the War College later had a senior job at Pacific Command. I ran into him later in Hawaii from time to time. Otherwise, I don't think that I ever in the work environment dealt with anyone from the War College again, except some of my State Department colleagues.

Q: Right. Today is the 19th of March, 2014 with Larry Dinger. And Larry, we -- we left -- you wanted to ask more about Fiji and we'll go from there.

DINGER: Just a little bit. Not exactly Fiji, but couple of things. One, we talked a little bit about China and Taiwan and their competition. Afterwards I thought of an example of how perverse that can sometimes be. I don't think I mentioned it the other day. But in several of the countries where I was representing the United States at that point there really was a competition. Recognition went back and forth between China and Taiwan. In Tonga when I first got there, the government had a very close relationship with Taiwan. The King of Tonga had been close to Taiwan for ages. That seemed really stable and in fact Taiwan had just built or was just building a brand new, very flashy for Tonga, embassy right down on the waterfront, a perfect location. Turned out it was on land that they had leased from the Crown Prince of Tonga as well. So there was something in it for the royal family. I think Taiwan was feeling very, very comfortable. Then all of a sudden during the time that I was there, Tonga decided to switch loyalties to China. In a matter of moments Taiwan was gone and China was coming in. One of the things I was curious about was what would happen with that flashy new embassy. Well, what happened was that the People's Republic of China, took up the lease and just moved right in where Taiwan had been. I've never really known how much Taiwan left behind in the embassy *(laughs).*

Q: How did you find the new Chinese presence on the island?

DINGER: Nothing particularly surprising. They were there. They were mostly there I think to say that Tonga was on their side and not on Taiwan's side. There wasn't a whole lot of military relationship that I'm aware of at that time. However, the King's daughter Princess Pilolevu had a contract with the Chinese for her business called Tongasat. Rumor had it that was a pretty lucrative deal.

Q: Did we -- I mean in a way we -- did we have any feeling about this, I mean we as a policy or anything like that?

DINGER: No, our interest as we expressed it was that there not be a surreptitious competition that dumped a lot of illegal assistance into the Pacific Islands. If they had an above board competition, including above board assistance programs or business relationships, I don't think we worried about who won or lost in that regard.

Q: No. Well, OK, anything more, or?

DINGER: Well, I realized I hadn't mentioned Nauru at all. By the time I got to Fiji the first time the embassy at Suva also was our U.S. embassy for the Republic of Nauru. And Nauru is quite an interesting place. It was one of the phosphate islands. When westerners first arrived there it was covered many feet deep in guano from the seabirds. A big industry arose, a lot of it affiliated with Australia, to dig out the guano phosphate from the whole island, and then ship it out for fertilizer. That was an extremely lucrative business, and those who had power and authority did very well by it. So for a while at least, Nauru was, on a per capita basis, with only about 10,000 people, one of the wealthiest nations in the world, if not the wealthiest.

Q: Could you give a -- for most of us, including myself -- could you give a history of Nauru, how come it was independent and all?

DINGER: Sure. Like nearly all Pacific Islands it had a colonial past. Germans were first, in the late 1800s until World War I. Then Britain, Australia, and New Zealand took control, with Australia generally in the lead. Except for a few painful years under the Japanese during World War II, the Aussie-led triumvirate ran Nauru until independence in the late 1960s. The phosphate mining was the primary item on the agenda.

So by the time I was dealing with Nauru, it was an independent country. It is so tiny that, as one of my diplomatic friends from Nauru told me, "All politics is *really* local." Every member of the parliament couldn't have been representing more than several hundred people, and everybody knew everybody else *really* well, and several local leaders always aspire to have the power and authority. So coalitions shifted constantly. In a matter of a year or two Nauru could have multiple votes of no confidence resulting in new presidents. It was hard to keep up with everybody. In the '90s I visited there a couple of times. These days it's a devastated place. Nearly all of the easily reachable phosphate had been removed by the time I first arrived and the whole heart of the island looked like a really craggy moonscape, all coral pinnacles rising up from what used to be fields of guano. So the Nauruans had very little to live off of, except what remaining phosphates they could find. They were becoming dependent upon assistance from others, particularly from Australia. Australia was where those people with money in Nauru would go for education, for medical care, for shopping.

In earlier, wealth-filled years, Nauru leaders managed to waste money spectacularly. One of the presidents decided the government should back a London play. Nauru had its own airline with a 737 jet, as I recall. The president stopped commercial use of the jet long enough to take a load of friends for the opening of the play that then promptly closed.

They invested in a lot of foreign real estate that didn't work out very well. So they ended up very poor. Now they're one of the poorer countries in the world. A pretty sad case.

Q: Did we have any program with them or anything?

DINGER: They wanted the Peace Corps, but the Peace Corps worried that Nauru was too remote, if somebody got sick help couldn't arrive quickly enough. We provided some degree of assistance, but it was usually part of a regional program rather than a specific Nauru program. Nauru at one point was under sanction for offshore banking schemes. But eventually they got that under control and we had a useful relationship, but not a big relationship.

Q: Well, did Nauru reach out to any other countries or they have embassies?

DINGER: The only Nauru embassies that I recall are in Australia, Fiji, and at the UN. Maybe there's more, maybe in Taiwan, but I think that's it. Australia remains the major player. As I recall, they and Taiwan (or China when that set of relationships shifted) were the only ones with resident ambassadors on Nauru. Australia also had set up a detention center on Nauru for boat people who had attempted to illegally immigrate from Asia. In exchange for Nauru permitting the facility, Australia added to its already considerable assistance package. The detention center became controversial when detainees, disappointed with their fate, protested from time to time, hunger strikes, etc.

Q: OK. Well then, should we go on to --

DINGER: Well, we talked about my year at the National War College. While there I was looking for an onward assignment. I liked being a DCM, and chargé for that matter, and I was curious if I could land another DCM job somewhere. I noticed an opening in Kathmandu, Nepal. So I got an appointment with the front office of the South Asia Bureau. As I was waiting for my meeting, a guy I didn't know came in and we started talking. He was the ambassador designate for Katmandu, and he'd known my brother. We chatted a little bit and he said, "Let's go have a cup of coffee," so we chatted some more. As an outcome of that serendipitous meeting, he offered me the DCM job, if the system would approve. I said yes, and the system did approve. I took that news home to my family, most of whom were really excited about going to Nepal. However, my youngest, then age 9, informed me he wouldn't sign the visa form. I should quit the Foreign Service and find another job. When we had departed Fiji, we left behind two rather big dogs, street dogs, that had become part of the family; but our little house in Virginia, with winter coming, couldn't possibly fit them. I found the dogs a good home with embassy staff, but the separation was hard on all of us. My youngest clearly hadn't forgotten. I suppose I might have just pushed the issue through, but, as a diplomat, I decided to negotiate. I offered a deal: if my son would come along to Nepal, we would find a small dog there that could travel on with us to every future post. With that, the whole family was OK with a Nepal tour.

Then it turned out the ambassador designate wasn't able to go to Katmandu. An issue

arose during the confirmation process that made him decide it was just too difficult to pursue the job. So he dropped out.

Q: But what was the problem?

DINGER: Well, I won't go into the details, but someone made personal accusations that the nominee denied were valid, but they were really painful for him and his family. He just decided it wasn't worth pursuing the job further. With that, I thought maybe I'd need another job, but I contacted the ambassador already in Nepal, Ralph Frank, who had agreed to stay another year. I made clear I would happily come to work for him, but if he wanted some other solution just let me know. He said to come, so my next job was in Katmandu, Nepal. We arrived as a family and I had arranged, via the embassy Community Liaison Office, for a puppy to be waiting on our doorstep. The pup's parents belonged to the music teacher at Kathmandu's international school who had named the litter Rock, Roll, Cha Cha Cha, and Tango. That little pup Tango is now 14 years old and remains at the center of our family.

We arrived in Nepal at an extremely interesting moment in its history. It was still a monarchy and the king had considerable power, but the government was fighting a Maoist insurgency. And the Maoists were vigorous, violent, and determined to bring change. The U.S. was attempting to help Nepal come to a stable future. We couldn't tell them what that stable future would be, but we urged decisions that would bring some sort of increasingly democratic, inclusive stability that would be helpful for the country.

Q: Well, why a Maoist?

DINGER: Well, they're right next to China, although China never did claim the Nepali Maoists. The leadership of the Maoists, as I recall, had come out of the university student circles in Nepal. They'd read up on the various ideologies and had bought into what they called Maoism. They recruited a fair number of supporters, in part because the regular government, both the king and the non-royal politicians who were involved, had not done a particularly good job of governing. There were many reasons why people in the general public could complain about governance. The Maoists fed into that. Most of their activity was not in Katmandu itself. It was out in the more rural areas. But from time to time flare-ups would happen in town. The house that the embassy had found for the DCM before I ever arrived was a rental quite a ways up beyond the ring road to the north towards the mountains. And right along the narrow road to that house was a Maoist affiliated community. Several times when the streets heated up in the Katmandu area I could not get home at night. I don't know if you've seen the movie "The Year of Living Dangerously," but there's a scene from that movie where young men throwing rocks came racing out of the flames. I had that happen to me more than once. And we would just have to turn around. I had a driver and on a night like that the RSO was probably with me as well. We'd see if we could get through. If we couldn't, we turned around. One night I remember staying at the RSO's house, a couple of other nights I stayed at other places. It was a tension filled environment at moments like that. Still, most of the time

Katmandu was a wonderful place to live and work. One of the more exotic capitals in the world.

One of the things that happened while I was there was around the end of May, 1st of June of 2001, I was charge' at the time. Ambassador Frank was at a chiefs of mission conference in Washington. Some U.S. army folks who had come in to do a building project at a hospital compound arranged a ceremony that day to hand over the project. Senior people from the military were there, and all seemed fine. That night at about 10:00 I got a phone call from one of our local employees at the embassy who had a relative at the palace who had let him know something really strange had happened. It sounded like the crown prince might have killed the royal family. I asked for a bit more certainty on that. We got sufficient confirmation from the source so I called the Operations Center. I think it must be one of the few instances in recent history where an embassy gave big news to the Op Center before the media broke the story. The media didn't get news for many hours because once the tragic events happened with the king and the queen and most of the royal family being killed, the palace shut down all communication out of Katmandu. We had our own communications so I could make my calls, but otherwise it was shut.

I called a country team meeting for the next morning at 9:00 and I still remember the ride into the embassy. Everybody was out and about, everybody through the grapevine had heard something about what had happened, everybody was curious what would take place next. Many Nepalese had viewed the king as a god. Literally a god. Now the king and the replacement king, the crown prince, were both dead. It wasn't obvious how Nepal would respond to that. The embassy's first priority was to try to make sure that Americans were safe. Everybody was really just ducking down and waiting to see how things would develop. This totally surprising development was something the Nepalese themselves would have to work through. And eventually they did. The late king's brother had not been at the palace that night, so he had not been killed. He'd been over at another city, Pokhara. So he became king and he continued on in a kingly way. Interestingly, a prophecy from years and years ago had forecast that the kings of Nepal would last only a certain number of generations, I think it might have been 20, and this was the twentieth. An accurate prediction. Between the Maoists and the royal succession and the sense that something had to change, Nepal eventually removed the monarchy and is still working out its democratic future. But that was after my time.

Let's see. The China-India relationship was always interesting. Nepal calls itself the yam between two boulders. And if you look at the map you can see why. They were always nervous about both giant neighbors. It appeared that India was far more influential than China in the day-to-day politics of Nepal. We tried to keep in close touch with India, and with China as well. But we had a better relationship with India. We had a Peace Corps program in Nepal that was vigorous and our Peace Corps volunteers enjoyed themselves a lot, did some good work. We had a good public diplomacy program that was mostly oriented at helping people in Nepal get access to information from abroad and find out about opportunities in the United States, particularly for students.

Q: Well, first place before we go any farther, what was the background of Ambassador Frank?

DINGER: Ralph Frank was management cone and had come from senior management jobs in Washington. I think he may have been the assistant secretary for administration. He'd been in the human resources area as well. He was interested in Nepal and he was active. He got around a lot, he made good contacts, and I learned from him. He was a good career ambassador. We were together for a year. Then he did go back to Washington in the summer of 2001 and the process was under way to have a new ambassador, Mike Malinowski, come out. But that process didn't finish until after I left Nepal. Malinowski got there in late December I think and I left at about the beginning of that month.

Q: Well, normally was Nepal for political ambassadors?

DINGER: Normally for career types, I think nearly always career types.

Q: Any particular reason for that? I would think --

DINGER: You would have to ask the White House. Nepal is exotic enough that I think there'd be some political types who'd be interested. On the other hand, Nepal is not first world. I found Katmandu incredibly exotic, but others might find it overcrowded, very polluted, not ideal living conditions. My family and I thoroughly enjoyed it, and I did some trekking in the mountains. It was just great. You would think some political appointees from time to time would want the job, at some point there must have been. But all those I can recall have been career types.

Q: Mm-hmm. Did you have Peace Corps there?

DINGER: Yes, although I can't remember visiting any of them. USAID was there in a particularly big way. They had a separate office compound, and I'd go over there reasonably often to coordinate on their plans. At the time they had a guy there, Bill Berger, who was the regional disaster assistance person for that part of Asia. Since there are lots of disasters in that part of Asia, we were glad to have him around.

Q: Well, did you -- how about ties with India from our point of view?

DINGER: Well, it was natural that there be ties with India, and there were plenty of them. Formal ties and also far more worrying kinds. An awful lot of human trafficking went down to India. I'm sure various kinds of smuggling of various sorts went across the border as well. We had a very active program trying to assist the Nepal actors who were trying to counter human trafficking.

Q: Well, India's got so many people, I don't see why they'd be interested in having people from Nepal coming in.

DINGER: Well, they do have an awful lot of people, but there were a lot of young Nepali women who were taken to India to work in brothels. The lucky ones escaped somehow and got back. It's a relatively long border across from some pretty poor Indian provinces, you're correct. But nonetheless, a lot of traffic happened.

Q: What about -- I would think that maybe it hadn't hit yet, but the one-child policy in China would leave -- and also the use of sonograms to abort female fetuses, eventually the Chinese would develop quite an appetite for Nepalese women, or not?

DINGER: I suppose it's possible, but the routes to China from Nepal all crossed very high mountain passes, not an easy trip to undertake. And what roads there were, were difficult. The routes to India were far less difficult. The traffic that did take place between China and Nepal, I recall vividly, was Tibetans who wanted to flee Chinese-occupied Tibet and get to Dharamsala where the Dalai Lame lived in India. The main route came through Nepal. There were some big camps in the Katmandu valley where those people were processed. In some cases they lived in Nepal for quite a long period of time. Our refugee people put in a lot of effort to try to make sure that those camps and processes were meeting world standards. Also, a fair number of refugees from Bhutan were in the eastern part of Nepal. Bhutan often is portrayed as kind of nirvana with benign rulers who made everybody happy. But Bhutan had another side to it. At some point before my time the Bhutanese decided to expel those people who had origins from Nepal but who may have been living in Bhutan for generations. And so they kicked them out. A lot of those people had no place to go. They hadn't had a touch with Nepal in a long time, so they ended up in camps overseen by the UN Refugee Organization. And the embassy, again, had people keep track of that as well.

Q: How stood the situation of the crown prince?

DINGER: The official report was that he committed suicide after killing his relatives. Some thought perhaps security people had killed him, but since he had instantly become king when he killed his father, and it is impossible for a Nepali to contemplate killing the king, no guard would ever admit to doing that.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: So the story that came out was that the crown prince, after killing the royal family, killed himself. His reported motivations were really a sad story. I don't know if there's ever been an official version blessed by the media or by the royalists in Nepal, but the crown prince had both a blessed and troubled life. He'd fallen in love with a young woman who was from the other really dominant family in Nepal. Reportedly, she was the perfect potential mate because of that heritage, except one of her grandmothers had been a concubine rather than a full-fledged member of that family. Because she wasn't quite pure enough, the queen, the crown prince's mother, refused to allow the marriage to take place. The story goes that the crown prince tried over and over to receive permission to marry. But his mother continually refused. So eventually he decided he was so in love that he would give up the thrown in order to marry. So he went to his girlfriend, told her

his decision, and she said, "No. I want to be queen." She was prepared to marry him, but not under the circumstance of being outside the royal line. After that -- the story goes -- he accumulated his weapons. He had access to weapons. He put on his camouflage fatigues. He got high as he often did, probably on both hard drugs and alcohol, and he went into the every Friday evening royal family gathering and shot the place up.

Q: Were there any other forces there? Like what were the Maoists, how did they react to this?

DINGER: Well, everybody I think was in shock. I had no direct contact with the Maoists at all. Many of them were out in rural areas. None of them were approaching the U.S. embassy. But I think everybody was shocked. I'm sure the Maoists saw it as a potential opportunity because one of their goals was to get rid of the monarchy. Another goal was to take power themselves, and many other players would also want to take power in the absence of the monarchs. But the monarchy did continue until several years after I left.

Q: Well, I would think that -- when something like this happens all sorts of forces would gather together to try to, you know, take over or do something.

DINGER: Well, I think they probably all started making calculations. Besides the king there was a civilian government which had to accept the king as the visible godson I guess. But yes, with the killings of the royal family, chess pieces started to move, but it took a while before the moves concluded. Initially the brother did become king. The brother had a son, Prince Paras, who by all rumors was not the kind of person you would want to have as the eventual replacement king. He had been reported to have committed all sorts of violent acts against others in nightclubs and elsewhere. He was reputed to be just a really nasty piece of work. No one wanted to see him end up being king, which may have contributed to the end of the dynasty eventually. Various civilians were already playing roles in the government, the Nepali Congress Party, Marxist-Leninists of various sorts. They all had to calculate how to move, particularly in light of the Maoists out there fighting. The Royal Army also was in the mix. But there wasn't an immediate, dramatic change in the state of governance while I was there.

Q: Well, you know, was sort of high society here, court society or just what passed for -- well, high society -- was it particularly dissolute? I mean was there a lot of pot smoking or equivalent of drugs or that sort of thing, or not?

DINGER: Well, Nepal, Katmandu is a place where drugs are available. A lot of Americans went there in the '60s just for that reason. The rumors were certainly rife that the crown prince when he killed the royal family was high on something. Other high society types most likely did have access to the same things, but I can't really confirm that.

Q: What about the American community there?

DINGER: Not a very big one. There were some. Aside from the embassy and teachers at the international school, which was a very good international school, several Americans were involved in NGO programs there, Save the Children, the Asia Foundation. Not a big American community, but a very professional and very active American community. They were fun to be around.

Q: Were you in Nepal when 9/11 occurred?

DINGER: Yes, I remember vividly being in the car on the way home from work when I received a call. By Nepal time the first plane hit the World Trade Center in early evening. Of course, everyone was in shock, though I must say I think the East Africa embassy bombings in August 1998 probably shocked the State Department community at least as much. Still, the World Trade Center was on live TV, horrible images.

I had been charge' for over a month at that point. I called the Embassy community together first thing the following morning to share perspectives. Shortly, we also held a U.S. community meeting at the American Club. The Embassy immediately set up a site inside the gates where people could come to pay respects. We had long lines for several days, Nepalis and others, all wanting to sign the condolence book, sometimes bringing along flowers or prayer shawls. I was invited to a number of condolence events in the Kathmandu area. One I remember well was at a noted Buddhist monastery where I joined a 24-hour prayer session in a room filled with monks, illuminated by candle light.

Q: Did the embassy get involved in the climbing of Mount Everest and K2 and all that sort of stuff?

DINGER: Well, yes in a way. The guy I mentioned who in the end did not go to be ambassador had many years before been in the Katmandu Consular Section. He let me know before I ever got there that the embassy had a morgue, maybe the only one at an American embassy in the world. It was a chilled room where bodies could be stored if need be. The reason was because so many climbers go to Nepal and some die. Something needs to be done with a body until a decision can be made about remains. Usually, given that Nepal is a very long way from the United States, the answer was cremation, which is the usual way of handling dead bodies in Nepal. But at least on one occasion the family back in the States reportedly had refused to allow cremation and had insisted on the body being embalmed and then shipped back. Nobody in Katmandu did embalming, so the embassy consul contacted a mortician in the States and received step-by-step instructions by phone as he accomplished the embalming. You wouldn't think a consular officer would have to do that, but he did. When I was there I don't know that we had any bodies come through the embassy storage facility, but certainly there'd be people who'd die on the mountains. It's a risky business climbing the highest mountains in the world.

Edmund Hillary came through a couple of times, and I was invited to some of the social events. Of course, he'd been the first westerner to climb Mount Everest, a New Zealander. And he was an interesting case, making me realize that the human body can change rather dramatically over time. When he was a young man climbing the highest

mountains in the world, he never suffered from altitude sickness. But as he'd gotten to be an elderly man he couldn't climb to more than 7,000 or 8,000 feet, which is pretty low in Nepal *(laughs),* without suffering. It was always a danger for him to come there, but he had to come back as Nepal and the Sherpas were still a major part of his life.

Q: Did the drug trafficking -- at least that -- that's what drug trafficking is, you had Americans going to Nepal and get high and sit around and contemplate their navel for a while, or was this a problem for the embassy?

DINGER: It probably was back in the '60s and '70s. "Freak Street" in central Kathmandu was famous for the drug scene and for welcoming the young hippies from abroad. That street still existed, but not much seemed to be happening there. I don't recall that we had many instances at all where the Embassy needed to assist young Americans who had gotten into trouble over drugs. There might have been some, but I don't remember.

Q: What about the Gurkhas, in particular retired Gurkhas. Did they constitute any particular element in society, or?

DINGER: Yes. Some of them had opportunities to make real money abroad in the security sector.

Q: I know one of our colleagues, Tom Boyatt, worked for a Carlisle or some, one of the big events. He had Gurkhas at his disposal.

DINGER: Well, I'm aware of at least one Gurkha story because the embassy rented the house I lived in from that guy. I was told his job, where he made a lot of money, was as head of security for the Sultan of Brunei, an incredibly wealthy man. Apparently he paid well. This Gurkha took at least some of his savings and built a really remarkable house. I was not the one who rented this house! The embassy did before I ever got there. It was on the outskirts of Katmandu, four stories, the exterior was nice. Off to the side of the exterior was an artificial waterfall. When you came up to the very large carved wooden front doors and opened them you came into a foyer with two semi-circular staircases sweeping up to the second floor, and in between was the indoor waterfall. The house continued on from there. I never saw it in its original state because the embassy apparently asked to have a whole lot of the extravagance removed before we ever arrived. But it was still *covered* with decorative moldings, the walls, the ceilings. The floors were all marble, which was a problem in the wintertime because Katmandu gets down to around freezing, and marble at freezing temperatures is nothing you want to walk on.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: *(laughs)* We didn't have central heating. So we would have space heaters for the bathrooms and then we'd just bundle up for the rest of the house. But it was a beautiful place to entertain. We did a lot of representational work and people always enjoyed coming there. Before the embassy had taken the house it had never been lived in, but it apparently had been the set for some Nepali Bollywood movies. It was grand

enough for that kind of thing. So yes, some Gurkhas are circulating around the world and some of them bring their money back.

Q: Were there sort of Gurkha areas and --

DINGER: Well, there's a Gurkha region west of Katmandu a ways. I don't think I ever actually got to the particular spot, but my travels were relatively limited because I was the DCM. It was the ambassador who did most of the traveling for the first year that I was there. But I did a trek from Pokhara, a good distance west of Kathmandu, up to what they call the Annapurna Sanctuary. The trail began at about a thousand feet and climbed up to about 15,500 feet. And at that level I was completely surrounded by 25,000-foot Himalayan Mountains. It was spectacular. My family and I flew with relatives once to Jomsom, a mountain town northwest of Pokhara and some of us did another trek, less rigorous, for a couple of days to Muktinath, one of Hinduisms most holy sites. My family and I, again with relatives, also visited a "tiger tops" resort in the lowlands called the Terai, rode elephants, heard tigers at night but didn't see any. I did some shorter, official trips to see a run-of-river power plant, things like that. But for the first year I was the DCM and I was expected to be in town. Then Ambassador Frank left and I was chargé from the summer of 2001 until about December.

As described, my family and I really enjoyed Kathmandu and would have happily stayed for three years; but in May of 2001, when I had been there about nine months, the principal deputy assistant secretary in the East Asia Bureau, Tom Hubbard, phoned me one day and asked if I'd like to be ambassador in Micronesia. I was still an FS-1, too junior to be thinking of ambassadorships. From my perspective, it came up completely out of the blue, and we were so content in Nepal.... One ought to leap at the chance to be an ambassador, but I had to stop and think about it a little bit and talk to my family. We did talk, and concluded that I couldn't miss that opportunity. So I said yes and began the Washington systems process of getting to an ambassadorship. That took about six months, by today's standards fast, but still a long, convoluted, paper-filled process. By October or November I had a hearing, then-Senator Kerry chaired, and the Senate confirmed pretty fast. I left Katmandu in early December and was sworn in to go to Micronesia in early January.

Q: Well, you want to talk a little bit about the history of Micronesia?

DINGER: Sure. Micronesia is scattered just north of the Equator between Hawaii and Guam, but a little farther south. It has many islands, I've forgotten just how many. The ocean area that surrounds those islands, is about the size of the continental United States. It's a vast region. But the total population is just over 100,000 people. The islands became toys in the colonization game. The Spanish began it. They worked from the Philippines, and moved north and to the east. They brought the Catholic religion with them. I'll stop and say that the Federated States of Micronesia these days consists of four states. From west to east it's Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, and Kosrae. The Micronesian region also includes the nation of Palau, which is a little farther west and south, and depending on how you define it, the U.S. territories of Guam and the northern Marianas. But the

Federated States of Micronesia, the four states where I represented the United States, were the ones I mentioned. So the Spanish colonizers came through from the southwest and made it as far as about Pohnpei. From the east, American missionaries, affiliated with the Congregational Church in particular, also arrived and made inroads in Kosrae and also in Pohnpei, so there's a bit of a religious overlap there. After the Spanish lost the Philippines during the Spanish American War, the Germans who had other Pacific colonies arrived. The Spanish had been pretty rough colonizers; the Germans also were not subtle. The Germans were there until after World War I, and then the Japanese became the also-harsh colonizers until World War II. There were no land battles in the Federated States of Micronesia during World War II, but a famous U.S. aviation strike on the Chuuk (Truk) Lagoon sank a bunch of Japanese ships. Scuba divers still go down to look at those ships in the lagoon, as I did. They're within range of scuba.

So the U.S. drove the Japanese out in World War II and took over Micronesia. It was the U.S. Navy initially that had charge of our colonization effort there. Then in the 1950s the Department of the Interior became the chief U.S. agent. And U.S. colonization continued until independence movements gained strength. In the early 1980s, we came to an agreement on a compact of free association which gave independence to the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) within some limits. The United States retained the right to both defend Micronesia militarily if need be, and to utilize Micronesian lands, seas, and ports for military purposes if need be. We've never taken up that use for military purposes, although during World War II American navy forces had used anchorages in some atolls, Ulithi in Yap state and perhaps in other places as well. Since the compact, that sort of use has been a possibility but not a reality. Once the compact of free association was agreed to, Micronesia began to run its own affairs. But the United States continued to provide a very hefty amount of assistance. By the time I got there in the beginning of 2002, the U.S. assistance per year was well over 100 million dollars, and as I say, the population was just over 100,000. So it was a huge per capita investment of U.S. funds. The American ambassador in Micronesia was really a big fish in a small pond. There were three other embassies: the Japanese, the Australians, and China, but the United States had by far the biggest stake.

While I was there the process was under way for negotiating the second compact to replace the initial one. I think there was pretty universal agreement that the first compact had not succeeded in bringing Micronesia to fulfillment as a truly independent country. An awful lot of dependency had continued, in part because of the huge amounts of money the United States was providing. Also, supervision of the expenditure of the funds had been difficult, with a very small U.S. Embassy in the FSM which had only one full-time, on the ground Department of Interior overseer, a guy who was knowledgeable and hard working but could not possibly be everywhere all the time. Also non-monetary assistance from the Department of Agriculture, Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services and others in Washington had often not been very effective. Programs designed for U.S. states often didn't fit well with the needs and capabilities of much less developed Micronesia. I think I probably shocked some folks when I used a Department of Education invitation to address the annual DOE regional gathering of teachers and administrators from Pacific Island jurisdictions, an audience of several hundred people

flown in that year to Pohnpei and housed at USG expense, to note the high cost of such events to the U.S. taxpayer; to suggest the funds probably should have been used instead, at least in the FSM, to repair incredibly decrepit schools, buy text books, provide basic training to teachers, etc; and urged the conference attendees, when they returned home, to spread widely whatever valuable knowledge they gained. My visits to health centers in the four states, like my visits to schools, made abundantly clear that huge amounts of U.S. funding over several decades had not brought state of the art, not even adequate, systems.

Such realities were among the reasons a significant migration of FSM citizens to the U.S. had taken place. Under the compact, FSM citizens are allowed passport-free entry to the U.S. and can stay as long as they like as non-immigrants. Many have done so. In Chuuk, in particular, many if not most families had bread winners living in Guam, or Honolulu, or somewhere on the mainland. Tyson Foods in Arkansas had a big contingent of Micronesian workers. I remember the Governor of Hawaii, Linda Lingle, asked me to stop by her office to discuss her concerns about the significant population of Micronesians living there, usually under-educated, sometimes dependent on Hawaii services.

So results from compact one had been disappointing, and there was a desire to create a better system for compact two. I was involved in the process of the negotiations, but I was not the chief negotiator. One of my highest priorities was to bring more direct Department of Interior oversight to its FSM programs. DOI, too, wanted to increase oversight and had plans to establish four positions in the region to do so. However, I found out that the plan was to create an office in Honolulu, rather than in Pohnpei and/or Majuro or both. That was maybe marginally better than trying to supervise programs from Washington or San Francisco, but Honolulu was still far away. I lobbied as best I could, including by sending a telegram pointing out that supervising an FSM program from Honolulu would, geographically, be the equivalent of supervising a Kazakhstan program from London or an Argentina program from Washington. Just too far away. However, Interior staff, some of whom would be taking up the new jobs, insisted on Honolulu, and senior levels at State declined to battle Interior about that fund-management detail. I lost, the office eventually opened in Honolulu, oversight visits took place somewhat more frequently than before; but, in my view, a real opportunity was missed.

In some other respects, compact two did bring improvements, including creation of a trust fund, with annual U.S. contributions intended to, by the end of compact two, have in place a permanent nest egg, which would allow annual U.S. contributions to end. Of course, what U.S. negotiators saw as improvements sometimes appeared to FSM negotiators to be worrisome. Negotiations were lengthy and sometimes a bit heated; but in the end compact two came into force.

Q: Well, it's been a -- American lawyers have done very well by this because basically they're involved in all the, all the negotiations, aren't they? On both sides.

DINGER: Well, the chief U.S. negotiator was a retired U.S. official who had been contracted for the job. He had lots of experience and led well. The chief lawyer was from the State Department's legal office. She had spent a lot of time working on those issues and was very capable of handling them. But yes, the government of Micronesia had its own lawyers, often from the United States. Also a lot of American lawyers were on the ground in Micronesia assisting governance in one way or another. The clerks for the Supreme Court were American lawyers, and assistants for the Micronesian congress tended to be American lawyers. So while it was a very small place it wasn't completely isolated, and, as a lawyer by background myself, I enjoyed my interactions with all those lawyers.

Q: Well, do we have any particular interest in those islands, or, or as I talked before about the doctrine of strategic denial, that is keep -- at the beginning it was keep the Soviet fleet from mucking around there. And I guess now it would be the Chinese communists or --

DINGER: The continuation of the deal, where we give them a lot of assistance and they give us the right to have bases there and to not allow others to have bases there, still exists and it's still of use to us in potentially a strategic part of the world. Still, the world has changed in many ways since World War II, and I hope it's very unlikely that there'll ever be another set of sea battles such as took place in the Pacific Ocean back then. But nonetheless, Micronesia is a big piece of geography in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and so it has strategic value. However, I think a lot of our interest there and much of the explanation for the huge volumes of money that we continue to provide one way or another, is as an attempt to patch up the mess we made of the colonial period where we didn't do a very good job of helping them get beyond the previous colonial periods that they'd endured. I think we're still working on perfecting ways of helping in that regard.

Q: Well, did we have Peace Corps there or anything?

DINGER: Yes, it was one of the first Peace Corps places. I know some people who ended up being State Department officers, Kent Wiedemann being one of them, were PCVs there many years ago. In the 1960s hundreds of Peace Corps volunteers arrived there. It was then one of the biggest operations in the world. And people who were there loved it. By the time I arrived in the FSM the Peace Corps program was still vibrant, but it was much smaller than in the early days and a little bit more limited in the locations where people would be put. But my recollection is that the volunteers in general had a really good time. One, there was plenty of need, and so there were lots of useful things they could do in the villages. It's also a pretty, tropical environment. I practiced my scuba diving while I was there and some Peace Corps volunteers did as well. Pohnpei also has Nan Madol, one of the true mysteries of the world. It was built hundreds of years ago with huge basalt columns from a volcano plug on the west side of the island somehow moved around to the east side and then stacked up log-cabin style into fifteen or twenty foot tall buildings, presumably a capital right on the coast, with canals intersecting throughout. Just an amazing construction feat, and with absolutely no "human" explanation for how it came about.

Q: Yeah. Well, how about fish?

DINGER: A lot of fishing, both commercial and recreational, takes place there. Some of the best tuna eating in the world *(laughs),* absolutely fresh right out of the ocean. And I like sashimi, so I was more than happy to have it raw with wasabi sauce. But cooked it's also delicious. A lot of commercial fishing, particularly for tuna, takes place. Very often in the lagoon around Kolonia, the town on Pohnpei where the embassy is located and where I was spending most of my time, one or two mother ships from Taiwan or Japan or Korea would be anchored to process catches off of the smaller ships that went out to fish. So certainly fish are a very valuable resource. The FSM had made some efforts to downstream the fishing, to have processing plants, but they couldn't seem to make a profit that far from the markets. Or maybe they just weren't as efficient at processing as other fishing countries like the Japanese and Taiwanese.

Q: Well then, was Congress interested in these islands, or?

DINGER: Depends on the congressman. We had some congressional visitors. The FSM is a long ways away from everyone. So it was kind of hard to get to. The most prominent Washington visitor we had in the two and a half years I was there was the Secretary of Interior, which made sense because Interior was still the primary management body for the assistance programs taking place there. We took her to Palikir, the new capital on Pohnpei, to meet the President and others, and out to the Nan Madol ruins. Also Congressman Dave Dreier, a senior Republican in the House who was Chairman of the Rules Committee at the time, came out and visited. He was very interested and he had a good visit. Some staffers came occasionally. The GAO would come. They maintain a strong interest because we do provide so much money and they want to know how it's being spent. I came to know some of the GAO people very well. They did a very reputable job. As I mentioned, one person from the Department of Interior was resident at my embassy. It was a *very* small embassy with the one Interior person, myself, my DCM, an OMS, and one additional Foreign Service Officer type who did a combination of consular and some management duties, plus some excellent local hires.

Q: How come you got the job -- I'm not asking this, I'm asking knowing the political elements in Washington -- this is, I think they had the Chairman of the Democratic Party of California, or the treasurer or California come out there as ambassador or something.

DINGER: Well, the person I replaced as ambassador was Diane Watson who had been a California politician and who afterward went back to become a congresswoman. That was during the Clinton administration. With the end of the Clinton administration she left the FSM just as one of the most senior democratic congress people from southern California died in office. She went back, ran, won, and moved almost directly from being an ambassador in Micronesia to being a congresswoman from California. Diane Watson retained an interest. Each time I came to Washington I would stop by and brief her on what was going on. The Clinton administration had put several political types in the islands as ambassadors, though historically career people received those assignments. I

don't know why the Clinton administration decided to do that. I don't think it was a good fit in some respects. People think it's going to be sun and sand and a pretty easy existence, but it's not. It's a complicated life.

Q: Yeah. You know, my going there, I was ready for, you know, some Dorothy Lamour and palm trees and it ain't that. It reminded me of West Virginia without the hills.

DINGER: Kolonia was certainly the hardest post for my family of any. When we left Nepal my oldest child, my daughter, was halfway through her senior year of high school, my second child was halfway through his junior year, and my youngest was moving toward junior high. We told all three that we would arrange for them to go to boarding school somewhere if they wanted to. There were schools in Micronesia, but they weren't reputed to be all that strong. But all three of the kids decided they wanted to come with us. I don't think they quite realized how difficult the schools would be, but they wanted to come and so they did. The school we ended up putting them in was a Seventh Day Adventist school, which was the best on the island. But it was not a superior school by any means. I think it challenged my kids to think in different ways, so that supposedly was good. But it didn't have much to offer for activities, and some of the teachers were very narrow in their perspectives and they had very limited teaching-education backgrounds. That was tough. And Pohnpei did not have a lot of beaches. If you were a scuba diver, opportunities abounded. If you're a fisherman, that was great. No golf courses, nothing like that. Pohnpei had a lot of very nice people and a small town environment -- I grew up in a very small town, if you recall -- and in that kind of environment you do make friends. And so we made lots of friends in Micronesia. But it was not simple and we had to struggle some.

Q: Say the Japanese and the Chinese, Taiwanese, were they messing around there at all, or?

DINGER: The Japanese had an embassy. In fact, that came into play. One of the things that the U.S. did to help out was, if unexploded ordnance from World War II appeared, we would bring in some military personnel to take care of it. At one point while I was in Kolonia, an effort was under way to refurbish the sporting facilities in preparation for a regional sporting event. When they started to redo the baseball park and dug just a few inches below ground they came upon ordnance, almost certainly Japanese ordnance from World War II. And the more they dug the more they realized they were coming into *lots* of ordnance. They ended up as carefully as they could picking it all up and moving it into a cave very nearby, a cave which happened to be almost directly underneath the Pohnpei state legislature building. The legislature then could not meet, fearful of going up in an explosion, until somebody could come to take care of it. We arranged for U.S. Navy EOD experts come out to resolve the problem. They were going to do controlled explosions in a remote part of the harbor on a weekend. I was sitting up at my place, which was quite a ways away from downtown Kolonia, on a Sunday morning when suddenly I heard a ka-*boom* and the windows rattled on my house. The folks who were doing the detonation had moved the rounds out along the causeway toward the airport and then off into the ocean on the side. But they either had not realized how potent the

explosives were, or they had miscalculated how far away they needed to be. The explosion shattered windows and knocked down furniture in the buildings back in town that were nearest, and the nearest building was the Japanese embassy. *(laughs)* So, in effect, we had a repercussion from World War II at that point *(laughs).*

Q: Hoisted by their own petard.

DINGER: So the Japanese were there. They were mostly interested in the fishing industry and their JICA people provided some assistance. The Chinese were there, mostly to show their flag, to make clear they -- not the Taiwanese -- were there. But they also did a few of their typical construction projects. There's a community college not far south from Kolonia on the way toward the capital Palikir. The Chinese built a large gymnasium for the community college, the sort of Chinese gymnasium you see almost everywhere they have relations, at least in the islands. It was very large, but not particularly well done. When I arrived the gym was still pretty new but it was already starting to have pieces falling off. They did some construction projects, they did visible things, and I'm sure they provided some monetary assistance. And Australians were there. They have a patrol boat program for the Pacific, which is a pretty handy device to provide aid. They provide the boats and fuel, and they train FSM sailors to do surveillance activities, particularly for fishing concerns but also for narcotics, smuggling, things like that. The patrol boats are a good hook for Australia. They have a reason to have a defense presence and they utilize it.

Q: Well, how long were you there?

DINGER: I was there two and a half years. The ambassadorship was a summer 2001 position for a three-year job, but my nomination process didn't start until May and concluded in December. So I arrived at the very end of 2001 or beginning of 2002 and finished in July of 2004.

Q: Well, were there any political trends that -- attempted coups or anything like that going on?

DINGER: No coups, but the politics is very complicated in Micronesia. The four states each have their own equities. Chuuk doesn't see things the same way that Pohnpei sees things, and Kosrae doesn't see things the same way that Yap does. The senior politicians are all looking for opportunities to be president and to be speaker of the congress and to channel more of the resources, including more of the U.S. government resources, in the direction of one state or another. There's a lot of competition among states and between individuals for that matter. But nothing like a coup. There's no military. The FSM relies on us for their military. They have police forces which are busy enough. Chuuk is the largest state by population, or would be if most Chuukese stayed home rather than emigrating, and is also the most troubled. It was horridly governed, maybe ungovernable. It was just very, very difficult to get anything really productive done in Chuuk state.

Yap has the most tourists probably because they have a very interesting culture with huge stone money pieces that many people know about from museums. They maintain that culture well, often performing dances and cultural events. My wife and I went to Yap Day on one of the outer islands of Yap state at one point and spent several days just immersed in Yapese culture, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

Pohnpei has a new capital at Palikir, offices only, a few miles outside of Kolonia which has a population of a few thousand. The entire island had a population of around 35 or 40,000. The U.S. Embassy in Kolonia at the time was really just a modest sized house remodeled into office spaces. It was perched on a bank twenty feet or so above a curve in a small stream which, when rain came, was eroding the bank away. I sent periodic cables to Washington pleading for plans to accelerate for a new embassy building. Each time I would note how much space still remained between my office and the drop-off. It was only a few feet. Within a few years, but after my time, a new embassy building was constructed. By the way, I put a rain gauge in the lawn of my house and kept careful daily records for two years. Interestingly, the totals were identical for the two years: 221 inches per year. A lot of rain.

Kosrae, the farthest east of the states, is one island with just a few thousand people. The Kosraeans were the most influenced by the congregational church. I think nearly everybody goes to that church. Kosraeans had some people interested in business, sometimes oddly so. I remember going into one of the small grocery stores at one time and buying a food item that I hadn't seen it in Pohnpei. The next time I came back to Kosrae I went into the same store and looked for the same item and it wasn't there. When I asked if the store had any in stock, the response was: "Oh no. That sold way too fast. We don't want to have empty shelves around here," *(laughs)*. Interesting.

Q: Well, I remember reading articles about how the culture was such that people who tried to set up stores were continually going broke because the people would say basically, "Charge it," and rely on sort of family connections and never would pay. And so they'd denude a store and --

DINGER: Perhaps, though I came to know some families that had very long and successful histories of being in business there. They did all right. Some American products sold very well. Spam is a huge seller. In fact, when I was on R&R from the FSM, I visited the Spam museum in Austin, Minnesota, the Hormel Company, not far from my hometown. One of the displays reported that the FSM and Guam, on a per capita basis, are the biggest consumers of Spam in the world. That gave me an idea for the next year's Christmas presents. I asked if I could buy some of their insulated coffee mugs, blue mugs with yellow spam labels, to take back and give out as gifts. The manager offered: "We'll *give* them to you. That's great advertising for a place where we sell a lot of Spam." I said, "Well, I'll have to check with the ethics folks first." So I went back to L and checked. And they said, "Since Spam has no American competition in that market, it's not a problem." So I spread the gift mugs around. There weren't a whole lot of other distinctly American products in the FSM, but many American products got there one way or another. Most automobiles were used Japanese vehicles with right-hand drive. So the

FSM was a left-hand drive country with right-hand drive vehicles. That seldom made any difference at all though because the traffic pace in Pohnpei was snail like. Mostly because so many people were either mellowed out on sakau, the Micronesian version of kava, same root but squeezed through the slimy bark of a type of hybiscus bush, or they were chewing betel nut and needing to open the door frequently to spit.

Q: Was there any aspect of the cargo culture, you know, in the Solomon Islands and all they have this thing, it's sort of the -- our troops went and left a lot of stuff and it's sort of a -- they kept hoping that would come back again, and --

DINGER: Well, to some extent I suppose the compact process has been a bit of a cargo culture. The Micronesians didn't have to look very hard. The American largess was flowing in, well over a hundred million dollars a year for a very small place.

Q: Well, I've heard that it's not much of a part of the local people and fishing, because they don't have to fish anymore. They can --

DINGER: It depends on the local person I think. Many do still go out and fish. But many of them unfortunately have converted over to western dietary habits. At the Spam museum I learned that Hormel produced a fattier Spam recipe to meet the particular demand of the islands. So Spam and other fatty, starchy foods lead to a lot of obesity, a lot of diabetes, a lot of heart disease, a lot of people dying in their forties and fifties. Which is really sad.

I should note that an aspect of Micronesia which my wife and I really appreciated was the presence of a Jesuit community. They had been present in the Catholic portions of the FSM for many years, well before the U.S. period. The Jesuits have a well respected boarding school on Chuuk. In the FSM, the Jesuit priests often stayed until death or retirement. Father Fran Hezel was prominent in the Jesuit community, and he had founded the Micronesia Seminar, which among other activities, was creating a vast archive of historical papers, photos, etc. of Micronesia. Father Hezel also was a prolific author, and his several books on the region were essential reading. My wife and I spent many wonderful hours with the Jesuits, including sipping gin and tonics on the balcony of their residence.

While I was in Micronesia, my brother was already ambassador in Mongolia. We were the first two career Foreign Service Officer sibling ambassadors ever. My brother checked that out with the State Department historian *(laughs).* State Magazine, the State Department's magazine, wanted to do an article on us, so they asked us each to provide pictures from our environs. John ended up sending pictures of standing in a winter wasteland in Mongolia holding up a block of frozen milk. And I wanted to show tropical Micronesia. I mentioned the article to the guy who was the speaker of the congress at the time, Pete Christian. Pete was rather a controversial person, and I didn't always get along great with him. But he was interested in helping me out and maybe in getting some free publicity for the hotel he owned in downtown Kolonia which had a great view right over the harbor to a massive outcropping called Sokehs Rock. Pete suggested that we get

together in the evening at his hotel just before sunset and drink sakau. A photographer could take pictures of us with the view in the background. Sounded like a good idea to me. So we sat, got photographed, and had a good talk.

When we finished, the next thing I had was a meeting of the veterans' group at the same hotel. Micronesians not only receive aid from the United States, but they also have the opportunity to serve in our armed forces, and many do. Some have died. I went to several funerals of Micronesians who lost their lives in the Iraq War. And I came to know one young man who came back missing both legs and an arm. So Micronesians have made sacrifices. Kolonia had a very active veterans' group, and, as a veteran myself, I frequently joined their gatherings. I walked over to the hotel's outdoor bar to join them and I suddenly realized that Pete Christian must have given me some of his very best sakau because for the first time in my life I was sakaued out. Previously I had never really felt more than a tingle of my lips, but this evening I was thirsty, saw a glass of water in front of me, and I tried to move my hand to the water, but it was the slowest process. I could barely get my hand over there and I was not at all sure I could pick the glass up and bring it to my lips. The veterans around me, both American and locals, all realized what was going on. They were very understanding *(laughs)*. I mean they'd been to that point many times before. They said if you want to lie down, you can. If you want to sit here, you can. If you want us to give you a ride home, we'll do that. I said, "Well, I'm fine except I just can't really do much. How long does this last?" They estimated it would be an hour, hour and a half, something like that. So we continued with the session at the bar and eventually the sakau wore off well enough that I was confident I could drive myself. But I had yet another event that night at a place called the Village Hotel, managed by two Americans from California, the Arthurs, very nice people. They had been there a long time and had a good establishment. So I drove there, met with contacts, and then eventually got home safely at probably about 10:00 at which point I was finished. I had discovered what "sakau out" meant.

The American community was not huge in the FSM, but it was congenial. Each July 4, the embassy would host an event, which I made sure was very casual. One year I managed to convince the U.S. Marine Corps Pacific Band to come play. We did the event on a beach. Aside from the terrific music, two things remain in my memory. Our housekeeper had baked a big U.S. flag sheet cake, but the night before the party our dog, Tango, had found his way onto the dining room table and had nibbled frosting from one corner. I was about to scrap the cake until local staff assured me that if we just cut off that corner nobody at all would mind. Sure enough, everyone still enjoyed the cake. The other memory concerns the Peace Corps Volunteers. We furnished beer and soft drinks for the guests. Several PCVs had rented one of the rooms at the resort and began to stock it with rather a large supply of our beer so their party could continue well into the night.

Thinking of my brother's Mongolia assignment, my family and I made plans to visit Ulaanbaatar in the spring of 2003 if I recall dates correctly. But the SARS epidemic burst on the scene. I don't think either Mongolia or the FSM had any known cases, but China was very much affected. And to get from the FSM to Mongolia, one had to transit Beijing. The President of the FSM initiated strict measures to keep the disease away.

Every airport had checkpoints. And the word went out: if someone traversed a SARS country, that person couldn't then enter or re-enter the FSM. That, of course, meant I couldn't risk the trip to Mongolia. So we went instead to Bali, where I was pleased that my bahasa Indonesia was still somewhat serviceable.

Travel in general wasn't easy from Kolonia. Continental Air Micronesia had one flight a day, the island hopper, one day hopping from Honolulu to Guam via the various islands, and the next day hopping the reverse route back to Honolulu. One time the scarcity of flights was nearly tragic. My middle child got food poisoning, needed to be evacuated immediately, preferably to Honolulu, but the next flight wouldn't be for 12 hours or so to Guam. We had to wait, but he got to the Guam doctors in time, and the U.S. military commander there put up my wife and son in his guest house for several days during the recovery phase.

In 2004, Washington allowed me to be part of the official U.S. delegation to the 60th anniversary of the battle of Saipan, located north just a bit from Guam. Since my dad had been part of that battle, I was very excited at the honor. My dad, and surely most participants in that battle had already passed away, but some elderly veterans were present. Among them were the surviving crew members of the Enola Gay, the bomber that took off from Tinian, next door to Saipan, to drop the first atomic bomb on Japan.

Q: Was this your last, or?

DINGER: No, no, I had several more. We can keep going *(laughs).* But that was my first ambassadorial assignment and I wasn't sure what was going to happen next. I told the East Asia Bureau that if they wanted me to do another ambassadorship I would be happy to, because I'd enjoyed it, but I realized most people don't get a second chance. They didn't have anything immediate for me but they mentioned an interest in proposing me for Fiji, a year away, so I looked for an interim assignment, biding time. The position of State Department Senior Representative at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island was open. They wanted someone with the "ambassador title," so I fit the bill. I'd been in Newport for officer training when I went into the navy back in 1968. Before I actually reached Newport, the East Asia Bureau let me know that the system had agreed to Fiji for me beginning the following summer, for 2005, so Newport would only be one year. But it was a good year. Four State Department midlevel officers were going through a one-year training there and I was their mentor. I was also the Naval War College's liaison with the State Department. If faculty members or others around the base needed to contact someone in the department I could help. Also, I taught a grand- strategy seminar, which was both challenging and fun. My family and I had another good experience. We enjoyed Newport, even the winter, which felt really frigid after all our years in the tropics.

Q: Well, why don't we talk about that and then we'll -- next time we'll pick up Fiji and all. What was your impression of the training at the War College? I'm told this is in a way one of the most, of the war colleges, almost rigorous? But very job oriented.

DINGER: Well, it was different from the National War College where I'd been a student. The Naval War College obviously took more of an interest in naval issues. But it did have quite a few students from all the other services and from some of the various civilian agencies, including the State Department. They had several levels of courses. They offered the 50,000-foot level, the grand strategy course, which is what I taught. And those topics would be very relevant to anybody going into a political-military kind of assignment afterwards from whatever service or for a civilian. And they had an intermediate-altitude course. And they had more hands-on, navy oriented courses. I didn't get involved in the more hands on stuff at all. Among the students were O-6 level officers from many other nations' navies, and I interacted with them quite a bit, teaching bits and pieces, and also getting together socially from time to time. Many of them were fascinating people. It was a good bonding experience; they got along well together. I remember the Indian and the Pakistani found they had a whole lot in common and became good buddies. And I expect that carried over once they got back to their home navies for the benefit of the world. The war college faculty had scholars who taught some, but researched and wrote a lot as well. The faculty also had main-line, practical naval and Marine Corps officers who had taken the job of being a teacher as a tour and who then would go back to their regular careers. I thought it was a very stimulating environment, I liked it.

Q: How about, did we have any contact with the Mainland Chinese or the Russians or anything there?

DINGER: I don't remember any.

Q: Yeah. I suppose that we have pretty close ties with the British, didn't we?

DINGER: We certainly do. I really don't remember all of the navies that had students there, but I'd be amazed if there wasn't at least one British officer.

Q: Did you get out on cruises, or did they, or?

DINGER: Not from there. The one trip I remember offhand was by train to New York City, to the Council on Foreign Relations and the U.S. Mission to the UN. We met with the State Department senior advisors there, the job I just had last fall. It was a useful, short excursion. But I didn't get out on ships while I was in Newport.

Q: Well, you know, they say there's the right way, the wrong way, and the navy way. Did you find any truth to the fact that the navy did things differently, or?

DINGER: I don't remember it particularly being true in the Naval War College. Back when I was in the navy myself, I thought there was a navy way sometimes. I think I've already talked about how the personnel system made its choices and made me realize I didn't want to trust that system for the rest of my life. Each of our services is very proud and each has a lot of tradition to it.

Q: OK. Today is the 26th of March, 2014 with Larry Dinger. And Larry, you want to go back a bit.

DINGER: I should have mentioned that the first time when I was in Fiji, which was '96 to '99, at one point we started to get a sense that something was awry in the Consular Section. There were rumors on the street that visas were being sold. At that point small embassies didn't have their own RSOs, regional security officers. So I thought the prudent thing to do was to call in the regional security officer who had responsibility for us, he was in Canberra. So I asked him to come and take a thorough look and just to see if indeed the rumors were valid or were not valid. He came and spent several days. We had heard the possibility that one person kind of loosely affiliated with the embassy was rumored to perhaps be part of such a visa-sale process. The RSO checked that out, he also checked out anything else that seemed possible but came up with nothing. He said just keep an eye out, and he departed. Maybe just because he came we didn't hear anything more from that point on until the end of my tour. But several years later when I was in Micronesia, the media reported that a management officer in Sri Lanka and her local hire husband had been arrested for selling visas, mostly to Vietnamese. They had a strong connection to Vietnam, one of them was ethnic Vietnamese and they had served a tour in Vietnam. Those two people were also in my embassy in Fiji back in the '90s. So I've wondered ever since if the visit I requested from the RSO had stopped something in Suva that then bloomed again later. I have no idea. I don't think it was ever shown that anything did happen in Fiji, the news of the Sri Lanka arrests shocked me, and others who had known them in Fiji. They had appeared capable, spectacularly nice, and helpful people to everybody that we knew.

Q: So you were in Fiji as ambassador from when to when?

DINGER: So I went back to Fiji as ambassador and arrived there in the summer of 2005 and left in the summer of 2008.

Q: Why wasn't Fiji one of these places that you can hand off to a used car dealer from Florida or something like -- contributed heavily to the campaign of one president or another?

DINGER: Well, it's been done occasionally. When I went there the first time I went as the DCM to a political ambassador. And he worked at it hard for a year and a half and then wanted to be back in California, part of the economic boom of the '90s. I think part of the problem of the islands for the political appointees is that sometimes they don't have the stamina that it takes to last three years. The issues are relatively small scale, but they matter. Sometimes the political appointees who have gone to those jobs haven't been as satisfied as if they had gone to bigger, flashier places. Also, island capitals are not just sun and sand. In fact, in Suva it rains a lot with mangroves rather than beaches.

Q: How about did we have anything in Tahiti?

DINGER: It's French, and so it's handled out of Paris.

Q: Well, I was wondering why we didn't have probably more tourists than anything else.

DINGER: Well, out of Suva we did help oversee a consular agent in Tahiti to help American citizens who ended up having needs. And that agent might have facilitated visas to some extent too, I don't really remember anymore. But basically any big issue regarding Tahiti or French Polynesia, just as was the case for New Caledonia in the other direction, was handled out of Paris.

Q: But there's no drive to -- that you knew of in -- you were sort of dealing in ocean area Pacific things that you heard about, they were talking about opening up a consulate in Tahiti?

DINGER: No. Consular agent, yes. And that's worked all right. But it would be an issue for Embassy Paris rather than for us in the East Asia Bureau just because of the political angle. But the matter of which islands relate to which American embassy has shifted over time in the Pacific. When I was in Australia back in the early '90s Nauru was taken care of out of Australia. But that just seemed to be *so* far away that Embassy Canberra gave Nauru up and let it come under Suva. So by the time I got to Fiji, Nauru was under Suva.

Kiribati, another really interesting country that I haven't talked about much yet, was handled out of the Embassy in Majuro, Marshall Islands, for a reasonably long period of time. But then airline routes changed and it became very difficult for anybody from Majuro to make the hop down to Kiribati. So that country also became within the domain of embassy Suva. By the time I went to Embassy Suva as ambassador, I needed agrément from five different countries, and I had the big certificate from President Bush from each of those five countries on the wall of my office. If people visited me from any of the five they could see that yes, indeed, I belonged with them. So I had Fiji and Tonga and Tuvalu and Kiribati and Nauru.

Q: Mm-hmm. Well, I want to talk about each one of these as some point. But let's, let's talk about Suva first. What -- had things changed? What was the situation when you got there the second time?

DINGER: Yes, things had changed dramatically, but I don't think I'd realized quite how dramatically. I knew that the history had happened. We ended our conversation about Fiji the first time with the new government of Mahendra Chaudhry having come in under free and fair elections under new constitution in 1999. And he was an ethnic Indian. It was a surprise to many that his party had won the elections. And it was a particular surprise to the more conservative Fijian elements. Some of them were unhappy from the very first. He contributed to that through some of his own decisions, including roles he gave his son and people he appointed to various jobs, things like that. In 2000, after I'd been away about a year, some Fijians revolted. George Speight, a young businessman whom I'd known kind of marginally back in the '90s, was the face for a group of conservative Fijian elements in a takeover of the new parliament. And they kept hostages for about eight weeks. It was a really nasty event, accompanied by some street violence and other

intimidation. They removed the Chaudhry government, Fiji's third coup. At one point some forces also attacked Queen Elizabeth barracks, the Fiji military headquarters, and reportedly shot at Commodore Bainimarama, the head of the military. He was actually a navy guy in a heavily army-centric force, but he was head of the military. That had repercussions down the line. Bainimarama helped resolve the coup, and he facilitated installation of a new ethnic Fijian dominated government led by Laisenia Qarase. This was all while I was away.

By the time I got back in 2005 I knew that all these things had happened, but it hadn't really occurred to me that people would have changed dramatically. I thought I knew my past contacts and how they would be. But I was wrong. Some of them were absolutely unchanged, and I knew how to relate with them as before. But others who had been beacons of democracy and anxious for a one-person, one-vote kind of democratic environment in Fiji, letting the chips fall where they may, apparently had been so burdened by the events of that third coup that they had changed dramatically. They did not like the post-coup, conservative ethnic-Fijian dominated government, even though that government, led by Qarase and his SDL Party, won election via constitutional processes in the post-coup environment. They were appalled that Qarase and the SDL then won re-election in May 2006, in a process which we at the U.S. Embassy monitored quite thoroughly and found to be acceptably fair, in accord with Fiji's constitutional processes, which still recognized the racial divide between ethnic Fijians and ethnic Indians and attempted to provide both majority and minority a say in parliament. Elections in Fiji extend over about a week, with polling places moving from community to community, from island to island. I recall personally visiting polling stations in Suva, but also in the west of Viti Levu, the main island, and around Labasa, the biggest city on Vanua Levu, the second biggest island. The election laws created over-lapping communal (ethnic) and open seats and voters would cast ballots both for an "open" candidate and for someone from their ethnic group (Fijian, Indian, "General"), so one polling place might need to have something like six different ballot papers available for voters of various types. The process was complicated, but people understood it, and the whole process was done in an orderly, peaceful manner.

By the way, with the 2000 coup, the exodus of Indians from Fiji had accelerated. Those who could obtain a visa to Australia, New Zealand, Canada, or the U.S. tended to do so and, at the least, they set up a second base outside Fiji. With that demographic evolution, political power in Fiji was becoming more clearly in the hands of ethnic Fijians. They had a clear majority of the population again. That undoubtedly helped explain the SDL's victories. Chaudhry's FLP came in a fairly close second. The constitution required the winner to offer to share cabinet spaces with any minority parties that gained significant seats. I don't think either Qarase or Chaudhry was enthusiastic about that process, though they went through the motions to an extent and some FLP parliamentarians did end up in useful governmental portfolios.

So, back to my past contacts. Some of them were convinced they knew the better course forward after the to-them-disappointing 2006 election result. They decided that a fourth coup would be a good idea, to cleanse the political system and start over yet again. I was

taken aback by all that. I was particularly troubled by Commodore Bainimarama, whom I had known pretty well previously. He had received lots of U.S. military training, including about the proper role of a military in a democracy, and yet he was seemingly very much leaning toward leading that coup. Reportedly he had a plan of action sketched on a board behind a curtain in his office. There were also indications that some in the Ratu Mara family were interested, perhaps in part because the Qarase years had seen that family, which had been the most honored in Fiji during Ratu Mara's post-independence leadership, seemingly lose some clout. Also, a couple of the high-court judges who had been really good friends of mine the first time around seemed to have changed politically. The Australian, New Zealand, and British high commissioners and I were all doing our very best to convince the leadership of the military, particularly Bainimarama, but all those around him as well, that yet a fourth coup would be a disaster for Fiji. We argued that it would take Fiji back rather than forward, that it would add to the precedent of unconstitutional takeovers of power, that the economy would be harmed, that the inter-ethnic relationships would be harmed, that our own governments would strongly object and would impose sanctions on the military, that in so many ways it was just going to be awful and they shouldn't do it.

When I hosted the July 4 party at my residence, I invited all factions, hoping they might use the occasion to share perspectives, something that seemed not to be happening otherwise. Both Qarase and Bainimarama attended, the first time they had both been at the same venue in quite a while. Other guests watched with interest as both moved through the crowd, but the two didn't take the opportunity to chat. In my own remarks, as always, I reflected on U.S. democratic values and expressed hope that Fiji politics would keep similar sentiments at the forefront.

For a while nothing too much happened visibly, but then in early December 2006 -- about a year and a half into my tour the coup did take place. Bainimarama removed the government and installed himself as the leader. It seemed obvious that members of the Mara family and the two members of the judiciary who had been good friends of mine and who I had once thought were absolutely stalwart democrats had backed the coup. It was all quite traumatic, and difficult to deal with. And the fact that some of us in the diplomatic community had attempted to keep the coup from taking place did not go over well with the new leadership. The New Zealand high commissioner, a good friend of mine, was PNGed (declared persona non grata). Eventually the Aussie high commissioner and two more New Zealand diplomats were also PNGed. I remember a cartoon in one of the local newspapers of a Fiji military figure, presumably Bainimarama, booting a Kiwi bird over the fence with the American eagle and the emu next in line.

Q: Were they doing anything or was it just sort of expressing --

DINGER: Well, Bainimarama accused us of fomenting mutiny by telling the Fiji military leadership that they should not undertake a coup, even if Bainimarama wanted them to.

Q: So you're telling them not to commit mutiny --

DINGER: Not to undertake a coup. Since Bainimarama wanted a coup he saw our contrary efforts as fomenting mutiny. The last straw from his perspective I think was when he had traveled to New Zealand for a family event, just as it looked as if the coup was imminent. While he was away, the Brit, Aussie, and I went out to military headquarters to meet with the acting head of the army and other senior leaders. I don't think the New Zealander was on that visit. We sat down and went through all the reasons that they shouldn't have a coup. We went through it all and explained how a coup would really damage Fiji's relationship with the U.S., with the commonwealth, with the rest of the world: please rethink this. Bainimarama was on the phone from New Zealand with the officers while our meeting was taking place, instructing them how to respond. He saw our effort as going behind his back to foment mutiny. But he did not PNG me. I think part of the reason why was maybe that we had been friends back in my previous tour, but I think more it was I was the United States. I'm sure *every single* senior Fiji military officer had been trained many times in the United States, including multiple courses at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies in how militaries behave in democracies. They'd had all these contacts, all these friendships. Bainimarama was a friend of the commander of PACOM (Pacific Command), Admiral Fox Fallon, and he didn't want to lose such connections. But in the end, the coup of course broke most of those connections, it had to because of our laws and also our inclinations.

So that was a pretty traumatic time, and as the coup broke, we weren't sure whether our lives would be at risk. We did our own analysis. We held country team meetings, emergency action meetings. And we decided that by far the most likely outcome was that the coup would take place, but that they would not resort to physical violence. They wouldn't need to because they had all the guns. So we didn't offer or order departures or anything like that. But we did hunker down for a while as the coup was under way. And in the end, Prime Minister Qarase departed, and Bainimarama came in. Nobody at the U.S. Embassy or in the American community was physically harmed; however, military personnel took a number of our good contacts in the community, including some in the NGO human-rights community, up to Queen Elizabeth Barracks and physically abused them. Reportedly very senior officers were active in some of the abuses, including threats and beatings. We at the Embassy attempted to keep up with contacts. I recall phoning Qarase, whom the military had sent into exile on his home island out east in the Lau group. I met with Chief Justice Fatiaki, with Vice President Joni Madraiwiwi, and with other opponents of the coup, explaining the U.S. position. We kept up necessary contacts with the coup government to get daily diplomatic business done; but very clearly it was not business as usual.

One of the ways Bainimarama instituted change directly affected conservative ethnic Fijians. He abolished the Great Council of Chiefs which traditionally had exercised ultimate powers over all Fijian villagers. In the Qarase era, the GCC had flourished. The government even built a grand new building in the heart of Suva for GCC offices and a ceremonial hall. But Bainimarama intended to remove "race" from the Fiji political landscape, a noble cause in theory, difficult to accomplish in practice given the history. The political changes instituted in the '90s had attempted to bring a gradual transformation by encouraging political coalition-building across racial lines.

Bainimarama's approach was not subtle at all: impose his vision on the populace, using dictate to the extent necessary, with military force always a threat. So the GCC disappeared, at least officially, though I have to surmise that, behind the scenes, some significant traditional Fijian sentiments still simmered. A few high chiefs, in particular two of Ratu Mara's son-in-laws, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau and Ratu Epeli Ganilau, did become members of the new government, but most chiefs were left out. Bainimarama brought some ethnic Indians into his post-coup governing council, including Chaudhry who, ever a survivor, became Minister of Finance, and Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum who became Attorney General and Minister of Justice. Sayed-Khaiyum was perceived to be Bainimarama's right hand when it came to suppressing dissent.

The new regime had a tense relationship with ourselves, the Aussies, the New Zealanders, the Brits, and the European Union. At one point it got particularly tense for the U.S. Our embassy at the time was right in downtown Suva, and we had zero setback from a busy street. These days American embassies always want at least 100 feet of setback. We were going to build a new embassy, in fact we began building it while I was there. But at that point in the spring of 2007 we had no setback from the street. What we'd done instead, with Fiji government permission, was set up long-term roadblocks at both ends of the block that we were on. And we had checkpoints so that any car to come through first had to stop and be checked. Bainimarama had become so upset with the United States approach to his coup that in April he ordered the removal of the roadblocks and checkpoints. That move took me aback because, if completed, it would threaten the security of my people. And there had been a bit of rumor, in the post-9/11 environment, that some terrorist types may have been moving through Fiji. So there was a real worry. I went around Suva and talked to everybody I could talk to who might help reverse the decision. Bainimarama wouldn't meet with me himself, but I talked to his chief of staff. I talked to the head of the police, I talked to the mayor, to everybody who could possibly have a role to play and explained the unimaginable consequences if removing the barriers and opening the street to free flow resulted in terrorists attacking my embassy. After a bit more bluster, and after news came of the Virginia Tech shootings which took place just then, Bainimarama saw a way out. He announced that, in remembrance of the shooting victims, he would rescind the order to open the street. He decided he had made a mistake.

We continued in a chilly environment from that point until the end of my tour in the summer of 2008. With the coup, our military assistance stopped. The training didn't happen anymore. Our defense attaché stayed. We had a very good defense attaché who had built close relationships throughout the Fiji military. He kept up his contact work and his reporting. But the assistance side of the equation ended. And politically, Bainimarama's actions caused Fiji eventually to be suspended from the commonwealth. The biggest effects, though, were with Australia and New Zealand because most of Fiji's connections with the world go through those two countries, and Fiji's new leaders were stopped from traveling there. Their families were inconvenienced. It all ended up being ugly. And it remains tense, if not ugly to this day. But, after foot dragging and some postponements, Bainimarama now promises to have an election this coming September, 2014, and he has said it will be free and fair. He has created a new constitution, after rejecting at least one version, with a non-race-based electoral system. Electoral rules

reportedly tilt his way. He's going to be running, so we'll see what's happening. Bainimarama is an interesting "democrat." He is perfectly fine with a democratic system so long as the results in that system are exactly what he wants. So if the election process in 2014 turns out exactly the way he wants it, with him winning, it'll be fine. If the election doesn't turn out exactly the way he wants, then I fear more trauma ahead for Fiji.

Q: Yeah. Well, what happened with Australia/New Zealand? I mean did they -- you know, you declare somebody persona non grata, it sometimes puts things back together again.

DINGER: Well, as I recall they did reciprocate. Australia and New Zealand relations with Fiji froze, and are only lately starting to thaw. I don't think either of those governments has had normal political relations with Fiji since the PNGing incidents.

Q: What was going on with sort of the Indian community on the main island? I mean were they looking for support from India, or was there anything? Indian navy ever bounce around over there or not, or?

DINGER: No, I don't think Fiji's Indian community relies much on the Indian government at all. They rely a fair amount on their family business connections, back to India. But the Indian government has not been a big player in a long time if ever. The Indian government had relations even before Fiji's independence, but the Indian high commissioner departed after the first coups in the late 1980s, and the first time I was there India's relations were handled from elsewhere until they reopened their high commission just before I left in 1999. They never seemed as big a player as they might have been given the ethnic Indian population that lived there. China we've talked about before and China remains an important player. One of Bainimarama's perspectives was that, if the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and the EU were going to chastise him for a coup, he'd "look north," and north meant to China because he was very sure China wouldn't chastise him for the coup, and they didn't. So China has provided some assistance and training, and Bainimarama has valued that. He's also looked toward other members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and the Solomons, to give him international credibility. He has shunned the Pacific Islands Forum, which he alleges has too much influence from its southern members Australia and New Zealand.

Q: OK, well let's look to the other islands. How about Nauru? Still chipping away at it, I mean --

DINGER: Well, Nauru remains a very small place, as we discussed, with a population of maybe 10,000, all living on the little fringe of land and with the interior cratered from phosphate mining. I visited again several times. Actually while I was ambassador there some research into the coral pinnacles that I talked about earlier indicated that maybe down underneath that first level were enough additional supplies of guano, potash, to be viable for exploitation. There might be sufficient resources to help finance governance there for a while longer. I'm not sure how well it's panned out. Politics inevitably remained pretty local. Those who were so profligate in their approaches to spending the

money were mostly out of power in the mid 2000s, and a small group of young, rather dynamic new leaders were playing prominent roles. They convened a donor conference, which I attended, and they offered an encouraging plan for frugal, progressive governance. Nauru has become a player internationally in oceans and environment issues, in part because they have a very dynamic chief of mission in New York, Marlene Moses who attends all the climate change meetings and contributes a very strongly held island perspective. Nauru still had an agreement with Australia to house boat people. I visited that Australian camp once or twice. And Australia provides assistance, in part to pay Nauru for having that camp.

Q: How about Kiribati?

DINGER: Yes. Let's talk Kiribati a little bit. First, the spelling is K-I-R-I-B-A-T-I but it is pronounced "Kiribaas." And the explanation, I'm told, is that that when the first missionaries arrived one of them brought a typewriter to transcribe the bible into the I-Kiribati language. But he discovered that the S key was broken. So his solution for some reason was: every time there was an S sound to put T-I instead. So "Kiribaas" became in print "Kiribati". Christmas Island became Krititmati Island. The T-I enters spelling all the time, and it's *totally* confusing for the rest of the world. Very knowledgeable people starting to talk about the islands will say *Kiribatee*. And then one realizes the speaker is not as knowledgeable as he ought to be. Kiribati is a very large country in area, one of those countries like Micronesia that extends over a huge swath of the Pacific Ocean, from islands south of Hawaii all the way almost to Nauru. It has several different archipelagos, but the most populated place, the one that people are most aware of, is the Tarawa atoll toward the west. One of the first big battles in the Pacific in World War II was when the U.S. Marines undertook the first amphibious landing and, after many casualties, displaced the Japanese

Q: Well did the U.S. have any commercial interests there? Were we thinking of basically taking them over, turn them over into a plantation or something like that?

DINGER: Well, these islands are miniscule in size. Many of them are atolls. Tarawa, by far the most major of the population locations in Kiribati, is just a very narrow atoll stretching around most of a central lagoon. The highest point on Tarawa is a bridge that rises to nine feet above sea level. So if global warming really does happen the way some predict, Kiribati will be among the first countries that have to find a new location. And the leadership is thinking about such possibilities. They're doing some interesting things. They're trying to train their people to be survivalists, to have skills that they can use in other countries if they have to move to those other countries. They've bought some land in Fiji, just in case. They have pretty dynamic leadership and they aspire to play on the world stage on issues that affect them. Of course because of the sea level issues, climate change is a huge item on their agenda. They've played on the China-Taiwan competition more than once, as has Nauru. Both of them currently are affiliated with Taiwan, but at other times in the past it was otherwise. And it could change again in the future.

We had a Peace Corps presence in Kiribati while I was there, but it was ending, not

because the people in Kiribati didn't like the Peace Corps or because the Peace Corps volunteers didn't like Kiribati. The PCVs generally had wonderful experiences there. I went out and visited a number of the volunteers who were thriving while living in pretty basic villages. But there was a concern in Peace Corps Washington, an understandable concern, that Kiribati was so remote that if something serious happened to a volunteer, medically you couldn't deal with it in time. With no reasonable solution to that problem, they closed down the Peace Corps operation. In many ways that was a shame, and it was a disappointment I know to all the volunteers who had been there.

Q: Well, hadn't we, we or somebody tried to establish a medical facility, AID or something or other there?

DINGER: You know who's done it? Cuba. The first time I was in the islands I didn't think much about Cuba at all, but by the second time it was obvious that Cuba was making a real run at building bridges there. Well, more building medical care there. They have recruited islanders to go to medical school in Cuba, and not just in small numbers: a reasonable number of people from Kiribati, from Fiji, from the Solomon Islands, I'm sure from every place else. They go to Cuba and spend a year learning Spanish to begin with. Then they take medical training that is oriented towards little places, kind of outpatient medical training, get people stabilized to the extent they can be taken someplace else if need be. The program has gone over big. Then Cuba provided assistance with building hospitals and gave all kinds of medical aid. In good part because of that medical move, at the UN -- I worked at the UN last fall -- when it comes to the Cuba Embargo Resolution, we don't have a chance *(laughs).* I talked to the representatives from Nauru and Kiribati and Tuvalu and places like that, and they said, "The Cubans are the only ones who are providing these kinds of practical bits of assistance for us. Why would we vote against them on the Cuban Embargo Resolution?"

Q: What about whaling and fishing?

DINGER: Well, back in the day whaling was a big deal. But whaling doesn't happen in those waters anymore. Fishing? They all have fishing rights that they will lease off to others. I didn't get directly involved in that because there are fisheries people at the Washington level who do the negotiating on our tuna treaties. We want to have our boats out there and to have them have reasonable access. We want to make sure that access in general is regulated to produce sustainable fisheries. And I think the islands are in favor of sustainability too. They want to get their money out of it, but they also realize they need to maintain those fisheries for the long term.

Q: when I was in Pohnpei I know they were working on developing sort of an outreach program diplomatically. They had some people who were going to the UN and all. Are they -- do they play the UN game other than on Cuba?

DINGER: All of the more sizable island nations, and that gets you down to a pretty small size, but if an island nation has 10,000 people or more, it will have a mission at the UN. They absolutely realize that in a one country, one vote environment they play. So they

take voting serious. They listen to all offers. While I was there last fall the countries campaigning for UN Security Council seats next fall were busy lobbying. Among those competing are New Zealand, Spain, and Turkey for one Security Council seat. You'd think that New Zealand would have an in with the islands. Spain invited all the island representatives to Madrid for a conference on water issues in November or something like that, when it was getting kind of cold in New York. And a lot of people went. So yes, the islanders listen to the various campaigns, they realize that their votes matter. It is not inexpensive for them to have people in New York: but they see it's worth their while. And the most recent of them to put a mission in New York was Kiribati. They did so last autumn and I think it's already paying off for them.

Q: At one point I know in -- say, my -- I'm in the -- a consular officer by profession, you might say. And I know they're having a lot of trouble with Iranians and others who were picking up passports, citizenship. Did you run across any of this hanky-panky from the --

DINGER: There had been some from time-to-time. But I think whenever it's spotted it's dealt with. Tuvalu, which we haven't gotten to this time around, was accused of having facilitated some passports and/or visas at one point. I think Nauru was accused of it at one point. I mentioned previously that Nauru had some issues with offshore banking and they got slapped with sanctions because of that. But as far as I'm aware currently these countries are doing OK on these issues. They've had their hands slapped if problems have occurred, and I think they've probably learned what they can do and what they can't do.

Q: What -- is there anything else that -- did you sense a change or is there any reason to have a change in attitude towards all these islands, next -- when you went to Suva the second time in -- back in Washington?

DINGER: I think we discussed before the Washington perspective that the Pacific matters to us, but there are lots of other places that are going to get higher priority just because of sheer population and economic and strategic issues. Still, because the islands matter and the Pacific matters, reasonably senior level Washington visits would happen from time to time. I think they became somewhat more frequent the second time I was back, and maybe a bit more attention was being paid at the Washington end. But in reality these are still pretty small places and there are lots of other places that were going to have the most senior attention most of the time.

Q: Yeah. We talk about small places. I have one picture indelibly engrained in my eyes, and that is flying on I guess it was Continental Air to, it was then called Truk. And Truk had always stuck in my mind because I was, as a young teenager I lived in Annapolis. And this was the Gibraltar of the Pacific for the Japanese. And you know, this is -- you hardly would talk about anything in the Pacific without Truk coming up and flying in, you know, my eyes were wet. And as we flew low, there was one little island that you could see the whole thing, and one palm tree sticking up. And, you know, I -- you always see these cartoons showing two shipwrecked people sitting on an island with one palm tree in the middle. That looked like the ideal one for that. I mean it's stand --

DINGER: There's another one just like that off the south coast of the main island of Fiji. It's classic. But yes, Truk -- or now called Chuuk -- was a graveyard for the Japanese fleet. I dove down to some of those treks.

Q: How about, did you -- I don't know if we talked about it, but Yap has always struck me as being sort of a tourist thing, and of course as a male you see these pictures of the Yapanese women who are bare-breasted and all. It's all, you know, sort of very titillating. But did it have anything much going for it outside of big currency?

DINGER: I think it -- tourism was the biggest thing going. The Yapese have a tremendous amount of tourist potential and some reality. There's great diving there. The traditional native cultures are amazing. The stone money and the dancers and their costumes. These people are retaining their traditions and they're living those traditions which mean everything to them. None of those islands are self-sustaining at this point, but Yap has a better chance than most.

Maybe we should talk a little bit about Tuvalu again. That was part of my Fiji routine. I went there several times. They had few natural resources, but they were always on the lookout for opportunities. In the computer age, they had the rights to "dot-TV," like dot.gov and dot.org, they got dot.tv. And some television oriented folks wanted to have it. So Tuvalu made millions of dollars off of renting dot-tv. At times, as I mentioned, they also may have dabbled in some passports and visas and things like that, but I think that all stopped a good while ago.

Tuvalu is another one of the places where, if climate change really takes off, the population will be in big trouble. King tides, the highest tides, happen once a month, and when the king tides happen in Tuvalu parts of the main atoll, Funafuti, are inundated. The main island is just about as flat as the atolls I was talking about in Kiribati. One of the nifty things to observe in Funafuti is that a good chunk of the main atoll is taken up by the airstrip, which is right next door to the parliament house, which is an open air pavilion. The same pavilion serves as the court house. So if parliament's in session or a trial is under way, and the every other day flight comes in, everything stops. First, an airplane is noisy, but also when that flight comes in, *everybody* comes out to see who's arriving, who's taking off, what they're taking off the plane, what they're putting on the plane. It's like the small town environment I grew up in. Everybody knows everybody and they all know what's going on. I liked Tuvalu quite a lot.

Q: Did you see any potential for sort of the world connection of people with computers? I mean a person can be sitting on one of these islands and be doing world-class stuff. I mean was this -- or did it sort of fit the style, the life style or not, or?

DINGER: I think there's significant potential. I mean given the vast geography you're probably talking about bouncing signals off satellites rather than cell phone towers, but modern connections were starting. Tuvalu, I'm sure with Taiwan's help, built a big new government center which had some IT incorporated. Thinking back, though, the place

from my career that I was sure was going to be most transformed by the modern age was Nepal. All those mountains made it really hard to set up a landline phone system. But once you could put towers on some of the peaks, well, suddenly the world was yours.

Tonga. When I think of my second tour with Tonga, I first think of funerals. A well-liked royal, Prince Tu'ipelehake, and his wife died in a car crash in California. I attended their funeral ceremony, and also the one-year anniversary commemoration. On a bigger scale, the King of Tonga died. I'd known him a bit. I'd presented my credentials to him complete in top hat and tails, with the Tonga military band in full regalia playing on the lawn outside the small, wooden, filigreed, quite charming palace. He's the one who had been 400 pounds at one point and became famous for attending Queen Elizabeth's crowning. He's a historic figure in the region, but he did pass away, and his son, the crown prince, who had been a friend of mine when he was foreign minister back in the '90s, became the king. He was an entirely different kind of guy. The current king has a very British accent. He had built an Italianate villa on a hill just south of Nuku'alofa. He had a classic London taxi, among his other vehicles. He collected metal toy soldiers. He had a lot of European tastes, whereas his father had accented Pacific island kinds of things. I didn't see as much of the new king once he took the throne, as I had when he'd been foreign minister. But I did see him occasionally. We had a visit by the commander, Pacific Command at one point, which included a nice lunch with the king on the breezy veranda of a royal house. The inauguration ceremonies for his kingship were elaborate, as was the funeral ceremony for the late king. Congressman Faleomavaega, American Samoa's representative in Washington, joined me for the funeral for the late king. When someone dies in Tonga, the entire family wears black for quite a while afterward. When the king dies, the whole country wears black. Any such major royal event in Tonga includes a series of massive meals, usually outdoors under tents. Honored guests sit along both sides of long V-shaped troughs piled high with food: dalo (taro), fruits, vegetables, but also lobster, pork, chicken, etc. The idea is to eat until you simply can't stuff any more in. After one group eats, the next group sits at the same, replenished trough. It is no wonder many Tongans end up being really obese.

U.S. relations with Tonga are really quite good. In my second tour, Tonga had a new government with a former retailer, Fred Sevele, as prime minister. The royal family and Tonga's nobles, who are the next social class, still played major roles; but to a degree a more democratic system was evolving. I had quite a few discussions with Sevele, who was a bit in the middle, navigating between the king and nobles and those who wanted significant reforms right then. Akilisi Pohiva, who had been an active dissident during the '90s, was still stirring the political pot, as were others, more activists than I recalled from before. The Peace Corps was still very active, a delightful program in Tonga, and I met with them often, usually buying them all pizza. The PCVs always had wonderful stories to tell about village life. I attended a PCV's wedding in a local church. One horrible event happened. In the far north, in Vava'u, a young woman PCV went swimming one evening with friends. A shark attacked her, bit off a large part of her leg, and she bled to death before others could get her to shore. One of the most wrenching moments I had in my career was phoning the parents in the U.S. Just imagine. Both the Tongans and our U.S. communities held memorial services.

We have a good relationship with the Tonga military. They are now contributing to UN peacekeeping operations. Fiji also contributes to peacekeeping quite a lot. Nuku'alofa would get occasional ship visits, both U.S. Navy and Coast Guard, which would always include a performance by the Tonga military band, a very professional assembly. Tonga geographically is right on the edge of what's called the Tonga Trench, the second deepest trench in the world after the Mariana's Trench up by Guam. At one point at four in the morning in Suva, I got a call that a significant earthquake had occurred just off the east coast of Tonga. That was not too long after the horrific tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Embassy Suva had our procedures in place if such a warning came. But four in the morning is not the right moment to try and test those procedures. In a way it's the right moment, in a way it isn't. We managed to get a hold of everybody that we possibly could, and in the end the surge was maybe two feet or three feet. So it ended up being a convenient practice.

Q: well, you must have kept a rather close eye out for typhoons, weren't you?

DINGER: We did, and we had some. The biggest typhoon I was involved with was when I was in Micronesia. I must not have planned very well because I was in Yap, a long ways from home when the typhoon hit. I was in a rather new hotel, seemingly well protected. And the typhoon was not a superstar typhoon, just modest, but it was *more* than big enough for me. I watched paint literally pealing off the pillars of the hotel, and the roof of the kitchen area came off with pink insulation flying in all directions. I saw a couple of houses, stilt houses on the edge of the shore, collapse into the ocean. I don't think anybody died, but it's more than enough typhoon for me in my lifetime. We had several while we were in Fiji. My house was well away from the shoreline, and we had wooden shutters that you could install. Several times we put up the shutters and hunkered down. The electricity would sometimes go out, branches and leaves would scatter across streets and yards, but I never saw in Suva a storm as severe as the one in Yap.

Q: Yeah. Well then, you left the Pacific when?

DINGER: In the summer of 2008. Before that I went back to EAP the way I'd done before and said, "I really do enjoy this kind of work. If you want me to keep doing it I'd be happy to. Let me know." Their reaction was very positive, and in the end what they offered was Burma. I think in part it was because I'd already been an ambassador twice and our chief of mission in Burma wasn't formally called an ambassador because of the political situation that had been going on for nearly 20 years. They figured I wouldn't care if I got the ambassador title because I'd already been that. And they were right, I didn't care. But I was really intrigued by the place and when they offered it to me I said yes immediately. One of the beauties of going off to be chief of mission in a place where you're not formally ambassador is that you do not go through the confirmation process on the Hill. So that part was simpler. I still had to complete a lot of paperwork, but I didn't have to wait for the Senate.

Q: All right, what was the situation in Burma when you went there in 2008.

DINGER: This was late Bush administration. President Bush, his administration, and his wife Laura had all taken a very strong interest in Burma. The basic situation was that a military dictatorship of one sort or another had been running Burma since 1962. First it was Ne Win, and then he transitioned out and Than Shwe transitioned in over time in the early '90s. It had been a pretty harsh environment with no democratic values. Ne Win's Burmese way to socialism had destroyed human and physical infrastructure in the country. It had become really a mess. Independence figure Aung San Suu Kyi had come home, after having lived abroad for many years, just as a window opened for a little while in 1989. She joined others in forming the National League For Democracy (NLD) party and had already been detained by the time Ne Win authorized an election. The election went in favor of the NLD in a big way, so much so that the military immediately scrapped the outcome and took charge again formally. Aung San Suu Kyi had been in and out of house arrest for many years by the time I got there.

In preparing for the assignment, I stopped over at the NSC, seeking guidance on what kind of role I might take. Washington really wasn't speaking to the Burmese leadership at all. I said I hadn't been any place where I'd had Washington constraints on speaking with the local authorities. Would it be all right for me to speak with the authorities in Burma even though they were very much under our sanctions? The response from the NSC thankfully was, "Yes, of course that's what you should do, that's your job. We have our jobs here, but we expect you to be the link who can actually talk to these people and try to find out better what's going on there, what they're after, and how we might proceed." So I took that to heart once I arrived. We had a pretty small embassy. There'd been a lot of turnover that summer. They'd also just experienced Cyclone Nargis, which had just devastated Southern Burma in May 2008.

Q: This was a real, a really major event, wasn't it?

DINGER: It was a horrible event. The cyclone roared in off of the Bay of Bengal with tons of rain and very strong winds. It flooded the southern part of Burma, including Rangoon, and at least 140,000 people died, it could well have been more than that. It was bad. By the time I got there three months after the cyclone had hit, things were still very bad.

Q: And the Burmese reaction to the devastation was not very positive, was it?

DINGER: Well, the generals were paranoid. By happenstance we'd had a major military exercise with the Thai right at about that time. So we happened to have a helicopter carrier and other ships in the vicinity that from our perspective could provide humanitarian assistance instantly. Helicopters, all sorts of items that we could use to help save lives. But from the Burmese leadership perspective, this looked like an invasion about to happen. They just said no, and they never did allow the ships to participate. Eventually within a few weeks, they came to realize that they had an incredibly serious problem and that they needed more help than they could provide on their own. So they started allowing our aircraft to come in. We had C130 flights arriving from Thailand all

the time. Our embassy was instrumental in making that happen. This was all before I got there. Assistance started flowing, and USAID people arrived to help ensure that the assistance went to the places it was needed. By the time I arrived, a robust effort was under way to respond to the cyclone. And I certainly tried to continue that with my team. On a number of occasions I visited the Irrawaddy delta where some of the worst devastation had taken place, traveling by helicopter, boat, and truck. Villagers, nearly all of whom had lost family members to the storm and whose economic lives were shattered, too, seemed remarkably resilient. They were coping as best they could, and it was an honor to represent the United States which was there to help.

Conversations on important issues, Nargis-related and otherwise, were complicated by the fact that Senior General Than Shwe had moved the Burma government to a new capital NayPyiTaw (NPT) in late 2005. When I arrived in 2008, a few government elements still had a presence in Rangoon. The Foreign Ministry had a protocol office there and some of the most significant players in cyclone-recovery were operating there, but the bulk of the Burmese national bureaucracy was in NPT, over 200 miles north. That meant fairly frequent drives of over four hours each way. The road, itself, was an adventure. The new capital was surreal. I'll first describe the road. Reportedly, Than Shwe allocated responsibility for building NPT and the four-lane concrete highway to it from Rangoon to businessmen cronies of the regime. The cronies would build their segments of the road and the new city, and in exchange would receive lucrative preferences for business opportunities. Some of the cronies did high-quality work; some did not. The road was still very much under construction in 2008 when it opened to traffic; but at least two lanes, shifting back and forth across the median, were operable. Bridges were still being constructed, and at least one lane over each river was open. Construction was often really rudimentary. We observed workmen building curbs brick by brick for the whole 200 miles. No facilities existed along the road, no gas, no food, no toilets. We had to figure for five hours, and if you just really needed to use a toilet, the only solution was to stop along the edge. Even after all four lanes were completed, probably sometime in 2009, travel on the road was risky. There was almost no traffic, four lanes looked inviting, and people instinctively drove pretty fast. But the portions that some cronies had built shoddily included curves with little or no banking, had major bumps at bridges, and had no drainage. Accidents started occurring, fatal single-car crashes. I gather such accidents are still occurring with regularity. With rain, flooding was massive and, again, contributed to crashes. Over time, a commercial venue arose at about the half-way point.

Once in NPT, as I noted, impressions were, still are, surreal. Senior General Than Shwe planned the new city in secret. People speculate why he decided to relocate the capital. Possible explanations included that a fortune teller had predicted Rangoon would suffer a natural disaster and turmoil in the streets. (Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and turmoil in 2007 fulfilled that prophesy.) Also, Than Shwe reportedly feared a U.S. invasion and thought locating far from the coast would help resistance. Also, historically, major Burmese kings had created new capitals, evidence of their power. And Rangoon was a British colonial construct, whereas Burma's past capitals had been in the center of the country. Whatever the actual motivation, when Than Shwe announced the move from Rangoon to the new

capital in November 2005, it came as a complete surprise to the Rangoon bureaucracy. On three days notice, officials and their offices were loaded onto trucks and moved north. You can just imagine the disruption to families. In NPT, I'm told most people initially had to sleep in their offices while apartments and houses for the more senior people were still being constructed. In 2008, nearly three years later, when I first saw NPT, it was still very much a work in progress. Many families were, and are, still separated, with the bureaucrats returning home to Rangoon once or twice a month by bus for the weekend. I was told NPT had become a bit of a Peyton Place. Some hope that when democracy flowers in Burma, the new government will move operations back to Rangoon. However, while construction of NPT surely cost billions of dollars that could have been better spent on crying needs of the people, attempting to resurrect the government sector again in Rangoon would surely cost more billions.

NPT is on a grand scale, stretching for tens of miles in all directions. Than Shwe clearly envisioned a city of several million on ground which previously had been marginal rice paddies. In a very military fashion, sectors were laid out for various functions. The large military zone, nestled beneath hills, and rumored to include tunnels, is on one edge. It has a huge parade ground and a central square at the side of which the statues of three ancient kings who consolidated Burmese empires loom large. Ministry buildings, one for each, every one looking pretty much the same, were built in a central zone. By 2008 some of those buildings were already showing signs of decay. A hotel zone, with each initial hotel built by a different crony, had a sector to itself. Only a very few restaurants were open, again clustered. A zone was set aside for embassies, but as of 2014 no missions have moved up from Rangoon. The Burma government offered 30-year leases at a hefty cost. I was told that China was the first to reserve a lease, for what appeared the finest bare ground, but it had not made a payment. Bangladesh reportedly sought the same piece of ground, paid up front, and gained the property. As of 2011, the Bangladesh embassy was planning an early move. They were renting all their properties in Rangoon and had no families with children, no strong arguments to stay put. However, in 2014, Bangladesh still hadn't started construction. The diplomatic zone remained just flat, arid land, and my guess is it will remain empty, at least until good schools, good health care, and a thriving commercial environment blossom. For countries like the U.S. and Singapore, both of which were building new embassies in Rangoon just as NPT happened, the incentives to delay a move are immense.

When I first saw NPT, a large pagoda in the shape of the famous Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon, but reportedly a foot shorter, was under construction. Just across the street from the pagoda, six white elephants, including one calf, were installed in roomy quarters. White elephants are very auspicious. Whenever one was spotted in Burma's jungles, military teams would scour the area, capture the animal, and bring it to the leadership. Much of Rangoon's zoo was moved to a dusty location in NPT. The happiest animals seemed to be a colony of penguins who had an indoor, chilly facility all their own. Parliament buildings were just beginning to appear. Over my three years, the parliament complex arose to be over 30 buildings in a very impressive layout. Grand presidential and vice-presidential palaces were constructed in the same area. Broad avenues appeared, all at least four lanes, several with an incredible 20 lanes. We had to wonder if the 20-lane

roads were intended to be emergency runways for aircraft. Flowering trees and shrubs were planted liberally and seemed constantly to be receiving sprays of water. I had to wonder if the water table beneath NPT can support such profligate use for long. During my time, traffic lights were installed at major intersections, with count-down digital displays, even though almost no traffic was on the streets. Many a time, my car came to a red light and sat for a 45 second countdown with absolutely no other vehicles in sight. The Burma gem museum moved from Rangoon to NPT.

Construction continues. When I visited NPT again in 2014, many more hotels had appeared as well as a new convention hall, even though the Chinese had provided a large convention hall that had opened in 2011. The vast majority of the time, the hotels must stand empty or nearly so; but the government needed sufficient capacity to host Southeast Asian games in 2013 and major Association of Southeast Asia (ASEAN) meetings in 2014.

So, many meetings took place in NPT. I must have traveled there at least once a month on average. Flights were sporadic, so we nearly always drove. Referring back to Nargis, a useful tripartite mechanism was established early on, with the Burma government, ASEAN, and international donors (the U.N., the U.S., and others), seeking with considerable success to coordinate relief and, over time, reconstruction efforts. I think that tripartite process did quite a bit to change mindsets of initially very suspicious Burmese leaders and bureaucrats. Over time, suspicions eased a bit, and much good work was accomplished.

But the political issues were still sitting out there. Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest. We were big fans of her and her party, the NLD. I got to know the group of NLD elders called "The Uncles," got to know them very well. Nearly all were in their eighties and some were in their nineties, and they'd been pacing the floor for a long period waiting for a time when they might have a role to play. But they weren't being allowed any role. The NLD headquarters was located in a ramshackle building, two stories with a reasonably large meeting space on the main floor and a couple of offices and a conference room above. A throng of Burmese intelligence agents were constantly watching and photographing comings and goings from a small shop across the street. Everything in the headquarters looked severely worn, though the upstairs conference room, where we met often with the Uncles, had a nice life-sized bust of ASSK. Downstairs the NLD would host events for various purposes. Often, friendly diplomats were invited. We received special front-row seating at the side, where we could observe both the Uncles and the crowd. With no air conditioning, the heat was sometimes stifling, but the activists never seemed to mind. Nothing too dramatic happened politically through the rest of the Bush administration.

But this takes me to the American Center in Rangoon, a State Department public diplomacy program. It has been a really wonderful institution for a very long time, teaches English language classes, teaches the kind of classes that might be useful for a civil society to blossom. We held an event there for the 2008 U.S. election. We put up polling booths that allowed members of the American Center to try out voting for the first

time in their lives. They received stickers for Republicans and Democrats, and everybody just loved it. We did actually keep track of the votes that had been cast in our mock booths. As with the United States, the Obama votes outweighed the McCain votes. And everyone watched on TVs as the actual returns came in back in the U.S. We had a big red state/blue state map on the wall. As the results were announced there were hushes and cheers. Everyone seemed particularly impressed when Senator McCain graciously conceded defeat, a role we see played out regularly in the U.S. but which was a novel concept in Burma. With the inauguration in January of 2009 we had another big event so people could come in and watch the American turnover process at work, a peaceful transition from one party to another. Who would have thought? People were just rapt. They listened to the Obama inauguration speech, and when he spoke the line to authoritarians: "we will extend our hand if you unclench your fist," you could just hear the whispers: could that be us? That theme was one that I used a lot thereafter, to talk to the leaders of the country and say we'll be of help if you start doing the right thing. Maybe that helped contribute to the eventual process whereby an opening started to occur.

In Washington with the new administration there was also a view that more interaction should happen, not just with me, but that Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell and Deputy Assistant Secretary Scot Marciel from EAP should try to engage as well. And they eventually did. It wasn't easy, some of the meetings I had with Burmese ministers were really pretty tense, and progress wasn't always obvious, but conversation was happening and that was worth doing. It kind of went in fits and starts. Assistance issues were always difficult. I thought, and others in Washington thought, that it would be useful for us to try to encourage opening by providing reasonable amounts of humanitarian assistance, certainly not military assistance, but a reasonable amount of assistance that would follow up on the Nargis relief, to help feed the people and give them a chance to think about something other than just whether they were starving or not. Modest ways of contributing to societal development. Some Burmese officials were suspicious of our efforts to assist the grass roots. Some NGOs in the U.S. were absolutely hell-bent against any assistance at all to Burma so long as the government was as bad as the government was. So it was always difficult. And there were some people on the Hill as well who took an extremely hard line. But we were trying to find ways to encourage opening.

Aside from all that, we had some interesting things take place. In the summer of 2009, an American citizen swam along the edge of Inya Lake to Aung San Suu Kyi's residence, uninvited. It turned out he'd done the same thing a few months before but had not been seen or caught the previous time. This time he got caught on his return, about 30 yards from my residence, which was a very odd route, much longer than the route he used going in. The chief of mission residence in Rangoon is a really beautiful spot, and it's right on the lake but midway up the west side, whereas Aung San Suu Kyi's house is on the Southern side. It's a rather large lake, and Aung San Suu Kyi's house would be a long swim from my place. I have never heard why the guy ended up so near my residence. But he got caught and ended up going to trial. Aung San Suu Kyi was tried as well for harboring him, even though she had not invited him. Reportedly, she had just let him recover sufficiently from the first swim to be sent off again. As I recall, he arrived under

cover of darkness and departed the next night.

The trials ran concurrently in the same courtroom in Insein Prison, the facility in northern Rangoon where political prisoners are often kept. Because we had an American citizen on trial, the U.S. Embassy was allowed to have our consular officer, Colin Furst, there for all the trial sessions, which also was a way for us to start getting to observe Aung San Suu Kyi. I'll refer to her as ASSK. Because I was the American chief of mission I went on some occasions to the trial, and once in a while the authorities invited the whole diplomatic community to attend. It was amazing *(laughs)*. Not a trial as any true democracy would want to have a trial be. And the conclusion of it was kind of startling. We were there for the announcement of the verdicts. The three judges were up front on a dais. The lead judge announced the verdicts of guilty. I think the American citizen was sentenced to seven years, and Aung San Suu Kyi was sentenced to three years. She had been under house arrest off and on since 1989, and constantly since about 2005, so at that point for a total of something like 13 years. Now it seemed she might go to prison. She appeared shocked and we observers were all taken aback. Then, suddenly, everything stopped in the courtroom. Staff drew a big green curtain across the front and put up a stand with a microphone. The home affairs minister, a general in uniform, came marching out and announced that, the day before, senior general Than Shwe had decided to suspend the prison sentence for Aung San Suu Kyi and allow her to go back home into continued house arrest. Obviously, before the court had actually issued its judgment, the senior general had converted that judgment into something a bit less onerous, but still a state of confinement that would keep her away from the public.

A few weeks later, Senator Jim Webb of Virginia came to Burma. He was the first Congressional figure to visit during my time there and he had a very different perspective than many on the Hill. He thought the U.S. was losing out to China in Southeast Asia and especially in Burma by not engaging with the senior leaders. He cared about human-rights issues, but he cared more about what he saw as the big picture. He wanted to give the Burmese leadership an alternative to China. He sought two key meetings: with senior general Than Shwe and with ASSK, but he also met with others, including some of the NLD uncles.

The meeting Webb and I had with senior general Than Shwe took place in the new capital NayPyiTaw and was, to my knowledge, unique. No other American officials had ever, or have ever, met with him. Webb and I sat on one side in an elaborate room, Than Shwe and his interpreter sat at the front, and the next six most senior Burmese generals sat across from us. Than Shwe and Webb did all the talking. I won't go into the details of the conversation, but Webb very sensibly came with a limited agenda and with only a few requests, all of which were do-able. One was to meet with ASSK, which later happened. Another was for the Burmese authorities to release the American swimmer to fly out on Webb's military plane. We at the Embassy had raised that possibility early on with both Webb and the Burmese, noting health concerns and stressing how useful it would be to both sides if the problem could be removed. The Burmese had indicated a likely OK. Than Shwe confirmed it, and at the Rangoon airport for Webb's departure, a prison vehicle pulled up next to the plane, and the American swimmer stepped out. He greeted

Colin Furst and me warmly and then climbed the steps into the plane for a return to freedom.

The ASSK meeting took place in Rangoon at a state guest house not far from the embassy. We all presumed hidden mikes would capture the entire conversation. I remember Webb and his wife stood nervously awaiting ASSK's arrival. Once everyone was in place, Webb dominated the conversation. I recall the one time I interjected a quick question that the State Department really wanted an answer to, and Webb made clear it was his meeting, not mine. ASSK had recognized me when she entered, from my presence at the trial. During good-byes, ASSK greeted me warmly. When I introduced her to our defense attaché, a woman, Col. Brey Sloan, ASSK smiled and said, "You are my kind of colonel!" Despite the years of house arrest, she had retained a sense of humor.

A few months later in the fall of 2009, EAP Assistant Secretary Campbell, who had taken up his job in the summer, and Deputy Assistant Secretary Marciel asked to visit. Campbell had observed the Webb visit and was well aware of the Obama pledge to offer an open hand if oppressive regimes would unclench their fists. He wanted to get out front and explore possibilities with Burma. He sought meetings with Than Shwe, ASSK, and others; and initially we heard positive Burma government reactions. However, just prior to Campbell's visit, while he was already in Bangkok, the Burmese notified us of various restrictions and said a meeting with Than Shwe would not be possible. After some internal USG debate, Campbell, who clearly was anxious to take on the Burma challenge, decided to still make the trip, hoping contentious issues could be resolved while in NPT. Unfortunately, nothing got resolved, and some of the meetings were pretty tense. When Campbell got to Rangoon, he was allowed to meet with ASSK, and we won a victory of sorts by receiving Burma government acceptance that we could host that meeting, not in a state guest house, but in a room at the Inya Lake Hotel. We took over a cavernous room, stripped it of everything and put one small table and eight chairs in the middle. When a government car carrying ASSK pulled up, Campbell, Marciel, and I greeted her in front of media cameras, then we entered the room and had a whispered two-hour conversation, our first real opportunity to get to know "the Lady."

In 2010, Campbell returned to Burma and, again, we sought and thought we had received approval for a meeting with ASSK at a neutral location; but a few hours before the event, the Burma government insisted that the meeting had to take place at the state guest house. Campbell, quick on his feet, agreed to the location but told me to plan for a walk on the lawn outside the guest house, on the shore of Inya Lake. The day was scorching, so we brought along umbrellas. During preliminary conversation, Campbell handed ASSK a note explaining we wanted a more private conversation outside. Campbell, ASSK, and I took a walk beneath the umbrellas. We had a photographer on hand to snap pictures. It was a really useful talk, and later the photo of Campbell and me holding umbrellas with ASSK between us hit the international media. Interestingly, the Burma government's newspaper, the New Light of Myanmar, which was always a lapdog of the regime, printed the photo as well, but ASSK's image in the middle had been photo-shopped out! The photo had become Campbell and me smiling at each other. Amazing.

Media controls were a deep concern the whole time I was in Burma. I made efforts to get the U.S. message out, but the government's censorship board was strict. Nonetheless, I persevered, and on occasion interviews or shorter comments would make the press. I was pleasantly surprised at one point when an interview I did with the relatively independent weekly newspaper the Myanmar Times appeared to have escaped the censors with only modest edits. The Times printed the edition, with my interview taking a full, prominent page. Then the night before it was to hit the streets, the censors killed the piece. The Times still issued that edition, but the entire page with my interview was covered with a silver coating. If you held the page up to a strong light, the article was still readable.

Senator Webb planned a second trip to Burma. We had all plans made, and embassy political counselor Jenny Harhigh and I had gotten to the outskirts of NPT when I got a phone call from Bangkok that the Senator had cancelled, less than two hours before his scheduled arrival. A news story had broken alleging high-level Burmese arms-purchase relationships with North Korea, and Webb reportedly saw too much political danger in the visit. I was left to inform the Burmese hosts who, needless to say, were not happy.

ASSK remained under house arrest for well over another year after the swimmer trial. That said, a bit of political movement was taking place. In the 1990s, Senior General Than Shwe had laid out his vision of Burma's route to a "disciplined, flourishing democracy." A constitutional convention began and then stagnated for years; however, in the mid-2000s, before I arrived in Burma, the convention picked up new momentum. ASSK's NLD refused to participate. All the movers at the convention were either government types or those willing to abide by the government's wishes. The new constitution was promulgated, envisioning a "disciplined democratic" system with a partially elected parliament. The military would fill at least a quarter of the seats in each of two houses. Any amendments to key constitutional provisions would require at least a 75 percent majority, giving the military a veto. The parliament would select the president and two vice presidents. The military would retain the right to step in if necessary to preserve stability, and would name the ministers in key security roles. Nobody could be president if a spouse or child had foreign citizenship, eliminating ASSK whose late husband was British and whose two sons have British citizenship. Etc. Than Shwe announced that a referendum on the new constitution would take place in May 2008. Just prior, Cyclone Nargis clobbered southern Burma including Rangoon. One might have thought the referendum would be postponed; but it wasn't. And miraculously turnout was something like 93 percent with 98 percent of voters approving the constitution. This was before my time in Burma, but no credible observer believed the result. The U.S. gave it no credence at all.

With the new constitution in place, Than Shwe moved ahead with election plans and the government announced the date would be in early November 2010, with preliminary party registration and candidate recruitment processes taking place some months before. That notice caused potential players, including those with democratic leanings who had been waiting for decades to participate in meaningful politics, to consider how to respond: to jump into what would surely be a flawed process with a known outcome but which could be the first step toward eventual political progress; or to stay away, signaling

intense dislike and continuing the wait for a reasonably fair chance. The NLD Uncles found ways to communicate at least a little with ASSK, still under house arrest. They decided not to participate. But some NLD senior leaders broke away, formed a new party, the National Democratic Front (NDF), and leapt into election preparations, believing it better to work at reform from inside the new process. They put forth candidates in around 50 districts out of over 500 nation-wide. The split between the two groups, who had been bosom friends through years of adversity, was really bitter, with the Uncles shunning the NDF leaders. I made an attempt to bring the two sides together, at least to chat, at my residence, in the context of a Washington visit; but the meeting was a failure. Some Uncles were fuming, refusing even to acknowledge their old friends. It was one of the most awkward moments in my career, but I did think it was the right call to at least try to encourage those long-suffering political heroes to find reconciliation. Beyond the NLD types, political parties developed in the ethnic provinces, grouped by ethnicity. I visited some of those regions and met with those parties. The government established its own party, the United Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), led by generals in civilian clothes, and based on its "mass movement" entity the United Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), with candidates running in every district.

When the November election took place, we at the embassy observed the process as best we could. The government arranged for teams of observers to visit polling places in various places around the country. I observed in Rangoon without problem. The day was peaceful everywhere, and many people cast their ballots, no visible issues. But when counting began, reports quickly circulated of precincts where, with votes not going sufficiently the USDP's way, vehicles arrived with bunches of additional, pre-prepare ballots, all for the USDP candidates. When the election commission announced the results, the USDP won a landslide, with the NDF and ethnic parties winning a few seats. The U.S. correctly labeled the process a sham. "Discipline" swept aside "democracy," and the generals remained in charge.

But then came a real surprise. A few days later on a Friday evening in that November of 2010, the word quickly spread that ASSK was about to be let free. Jenny Harhigh and I rushed over to the street in front of her house and we were among the thousands who were standing outside the gates when she appeared and spoke briefly to the throng that had gathered. I'd guess a couple of thousand people were milling there, all of them really excited. ASSK's staff asked me to help get in touch with all the other diplomatic missions because she wanted to meet with the diplomatic corps in NLD headquarters on the Sunday. So my staff and I spread the word, and I made a point of making sure that the Chinese and the Russians got their invitations, that those who had been the best friends of the regime got their invitations. All embassies showed up for that Sunday morning meeting in the NLD upstairs room, though the Chinese and Russians sent mid-level officials. It was a nice opportunity for ASSK to get to know people, some of them for the first time. She'd met me at the trial, and in the Webb and Campbell meetings; but many of them she'd never met.

In between her becoming free that Friday evening and the Sunday session she gave her first public remarks in ages when she on Saturday spoke to a crowd of many thousands in

front of NLD headquarters. The exact size of the crowd was difficult to estimate, certainly several thousand, as many people as there was space to see and hear her. ASSK delivered rather conciliatory remarks. Jenny Harhigh and I were inside the HQ at the time. Inside was a mad house of NLD faithful and media, including foreign media. Outside, I remember observing the solid mass of supporters, some of whom were taking photos of ASSK with their cell phones. She had been so isolated during the house arrest that she hadn't realized cell phones with cameras were happening. But they had arrived, and she couldn't quite comprehend. Maybe that was when it became clear it was going to be a new life for her. From that time on, I met with her quite a number of times before the end of my tour the following August.

Q: So why was she released?

I'll respond more broadly. Why did Than Shwe start the democracy ball rolling, however flawed the process? My guess is that only Than Shwe really knows the answer. But several calculations may have contributed, may have factored in. The senior leadership may have decided that Burma was sufficiently stabilized to permit a modest increase in political participation, all within a disciplined process. So, the 2010 steps were moving toward the culmination of the advertised long-term roadmap to a disciplined democracy. And/or, Than Shwe, realizing he was nearing 80 years old, wanted to find a way to transfer the reins of power to a later generation while managing not to end up facing charges before the International Criminal Court. He may have hoped a modest opening while retaining real power in the military's hands, at least in the short to medium term, could allow him to retire in peace and retain considerable assets to pass to his family. And/or, some argue that the senior generals were getting very concerned about the out-sized role China was coming to play in Burma. Presuming the only viable counterweight to China is the U.S. and figuring the U.S. wouldn't come play until some sort of democratic reform was under way, Than Shwe had elections and then released ASSK. And/or, senior generals in Burma did travel outside from time to time, to New York for the UN, and to other Southeast Asia capitals like Bangkok and Singapore for medical tests and shopping. They had to stop and think occasionally that their governance in Burma had failed miserably at developing the nation's economy and promoting the people's welfare. Maybe it was time for a change. And/or sanctions, particularly visa bans on senior leaders and their families were frustrating enough to encourage a degree of change. I really don't know which answer or combination of answers or other explanation was the motivation.

Q: Well, with Aung San Suu Kyi's release, what happened?

The embassy had a lot going on. We were trying to find ways to facilitate a more democratic, a more humane environment. We were trying to see if there were ways we could urge progress from the government on all fronts, and we did a lot of talking, of persuading. Visitors started to come more regularly. Everybody wanted to meet with ASSK, and she was pretty generous with her time. Aside from business meetings with me, she met with the embassy community several times. She loves kids and asked to meet with embassy youths. She was thinking mostly in terms of the 12 to 18-year-old

group. She wanted to figure out how to appeal to that segment of society, and I think she figured American youths might be the forerunners of what Burmese kids might eventually become. So we got all our young people from the embassy together. In fact, when it became known that those kids were going to meet ASSK, every family with children in the embassy community said they wanted to be there. So we had a big gathering at my place. ASSK kindly met everybody, all the adults, the babies, everyone, and had pictures taken with everybody. But she also sat down with the young people and just asked questions and listened to them and tried to get a sense of what was motivating them and what might motivate them, how she could best appeal to teens in the future. It was fun to watch.

Q: How did she strike you?

DINGER: I like her. She'd been isolated for a very long time, and she realized she had some learning to do, some basic learning about what had gone on in the world in her absence. She's a woman of strong will. She believes very much in noble principles of democracy and humane treatment and all of those things. She also was realizing that she needed to move beyond being an icon to being a politician. So she was finding her way into how best to try to meld those two aspects. The icon element was and is still important for her I'm sure, but she also has to translate that into being a practical politician. With all the issues that go on in Burma its not easy, but she was working on it. We could always talk with her. DCM Tom Vajda, Jenny Harhigh, and I had many good sessions with her. When we got to some point that she didn't necessarily agree with us on, she could be very firm. But we could always talk. And my sense was that we always could understand each other. We might not come out at precisely the same place, but I could see where she was coming from and I think she could see where I was coming from. The conversations were always useful.

Q: Did she come out of -- because I'm thinking to an early background of you might say - Oxford, Fabian Socialism. I mean was that -- or had she gone beyond that?

DINGER: We didn't talk philosophy or economics too much. We were mostly on the practical political and assistance angles. We had Jessica Davie, a USAID contractor who had first arrived in Rangoon after Cyclone Nargis and had stayed on to do a wonderful job managing assistance issues, talk with ASSK about our plans in that arena. And ASSK was very interested in economics. She asked for reading materials and we would try to provide them on how the system is now working and how Burma might best tap the international system.

Q: I would have thought that she would have been very interested in President Obama because he's, you know, showed a sort of earth change in sort of the American political scheme of things.

DINGER: Oh, I think absolutely. She also had fellow Nobel Peace Prize winners besides Obama, Vaclav Havel and Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela and people like that who were models for her. But there's a practical side to her, as there must be. She really

wanted to find ways to help change the system.

Q: I would expect that you would be, probably be inundated by American politicians who wanted to rub some of her aura off on them, you know?

DINGER: Senator Webb was the first on my watch. Some others from the Hill wanted to visit from time to time, but they often had been outspoken in criticism of the regime and couldn't get visas. Later, once ASSK was freed and the Burmese system started to loosen up, more visitors started flowing through.

Q: Well, right from the beginning, how did you and your fellow officers who'd been there longer, but cumulative -- how did you judge the military leaders in Burma?

DINGER: Well, by all accounts the senior general, Than Shwe, was the main player. Obviously no one person does everything, but if he made his mind up about something and if he gave an order, it happened. There were lots of others around him and *many* issues never got as far as him, I'm sure. But the key issues did. He's now formally retired although I'm sure he still retains a role to the extent he wants one. He has been described by cynics as a post office worker. He had very little formal education, but he's smart. And he's crafty. He didn't get to the top in the Burmese military by being dumb and not crafty. He knows how to manipulate systems and he knows how to lead his military. So one should never underestimate him. I think that's true of the other senior leaders there too. Burma has a thin veneer of quality in the system because the education system was so destroyed over time. But the top people should never be underestimated.

Q: Well, I've heard people say that the leadership -- their -- you might say their operating system was to keep this elite group of officers in power and give them golf courses. I mean did you have the feeling that this, they were after the perks of being the leaders, or was there something behind it?

DINGER: I'm sure they like the perks of being leaders. Leaders always like the perks of being leaders. And they certainly had their share of golf courses. NPT had five or six golf courses well before much of the rest of the infrastructure was in place. But, *but*, they also perceived themselves as the saviors of their country. Burma is an interesting place in that -- thank the British I guess, as you can in many parts of the world -- they and the French drew the borders in Southeast Asia, and the British in drawing their borders divided right through the middle of ethnic groups, artificial zones everywhere. Burma as it's mapped today has a central core that is mostly ethnic Burmese, Myanmar. They are mostly Buddhist. That's the lowlands and the rice growing region, the center of the country around the Irrawaddy River, and that's maybe two-thirds of the population. Then all the way around the borders, Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, Thailand, you have other ethnic groups that probably make up around 40% of the population, the Rakhine, the Chin, the Kachin, the Shan, the Karen, the Mon, and others. Under the British, some of those groups did pretty well, and since independence they have been dissatisfied by the dominance of the Burman majority. And Burma's history from independence in 1946 to the military takeover in '62 was raucous, with ethnic insurgencies all over the place,

people wanting their own ethnic freedom. Even after the military takeover insurgencies continued on, some of them backed by the Chinese. It was a threatening environment. The military to this day will claim that they were the only thing that has kept their country together, that they are the glue and their role is to maintain the integrity and the independence of Burma.

Q: Are there red flags and white flags still going there? These are terms that used to be used by leftover Chinese from the World War II nationalist Chinese groups. Were there still Chinese, armed Chinese sort of independent groups wandering around?

DINGER: I don't think so today. But Burma's relationship with China has been complicated over time. ASSK's father, General Aung San, and 29 others, known as "the 30," left during the colonial period, the British colonial period, went to Japan, and got training to start an insurgency movement in Burma. They came back, began that movement, and helped the Japanese take over Burma at the beginning of World War II. But they quickly realized that the Japanese were not their solution, they were a problem. So they started looking for others to work with, and they eventually collaborated with the British and with ourselves and with the nationalist Chinese in attempting to move the Japanese out. Over time after independence, the Chiang Kai-shek Chinese were present in east and northeast Burma. The Burmese military eventually drove them out. But other Chinese, PRC affiliated groups became prevalent, and further warfare took place against the PRC-types. Until recently a number of the senior generals, they may all be retired now, but many of them still had wounds from those wars. They were out there, they were fighting, they were getting wounded, they were getting killed in repelling a Chinese sponsored set of insurgencies. In more recent years, China became the big player in Burma, in part because we weren't there, but in part because they are next door neighbors. China is huge, it has interests. China in recent years has cut a deal with Burma to pump natural gas from fields just off of Burma in the Bay of Bengal, and to pump oil brought by tanker from the Middle East in two big pipelines that are being built across Burma to Yunnan province. China sees Burma as a key neighbor to their southwest, and so they cultivated the Burmese leaders a lot. They gave a lot of assistance, they helped build infrastructure, they had a very close political relationship. And they had a good military relationship as well.

Q: Did we play any part -- I mean did we have any dealings with the Chinese on Burma or?

DINGER: I met with their embassy, got to know their ambassadors. They actually ended up having three different ambassadors during the three years I was there, just happenstance as far as I can tell. One was not engaging at all. But a couple of them were people you could talk to. The Chinese tend to send experts. When I stepped into Burma in 2008 it was the first time I'd ever been there. I'd worked on Asia Pacific issues, but I'd never been to Burma. The Chinese ambassador may well have had two or three previous tours in Burma and spoke Burmese. That depth of background and past development of contacts helps. The Russians also tend to send ambassadors with past Burma tours under their belts. The Russian embassy in Rangoon is cavernous, and almost empty. Back in the

Ne Win days, the USSR had a big presence. Now the Russians are much smaller players.

Q: Where stood the Buddhist, whatever's their establishment, when you were there?

DINGER: It wasn't a single Buddhist establishment, but the Buddhist religion is the biggest religion. No one knows for sure what the numbers are, because there hasn't been a reliable census in a very long time. They're about to do one now, right now, to see just what the ethnic figures, the religious figures, the total figures are. But many people think maybe 75, 80% of the country is Buddhist. There is a Buddhist establishment that the government has fostered, and they set and enforce rules. There are also monasteries and particular Buddhist monks who have their own communities in which they have big influence. We dealt with various Buddhist entities from the embassy to the extent it made sense to do so. Some of them were involved in social work, some of them were very involved in the villages, some of them were involved in politics.

Q: What about the charges of the -- that the Burmese army is going after tribes and destroying villages, raping the women, doing all sorts of nasty things? During the time you were there how did you see this?

DINGER: Well, we weren't allowed to go to the areas where the biggest problems were reportedly happening, so we couldn't make our own direct observations. We certainly received reports that severe problems were happening in some places from time to time. There were also reports that the regime's ethnic opponents were doing nasty things as well, but a large majority of the complaints were about the Burmese Army. There were complaints about child soldiers, there were complaints about, yes, looting and raping, and there were complaints that villagers were being dragooned into advancing in front of Burmese troops through minefields. You know, really nasty stuff. I'm sure many of the reports were true.

One of the off-limits areas during my time was in northern Rakhine State, near the border with Bangladesh. About a million Rohingya live in that area. They look South Asian rather than Burmese and most all are Muslims. Even though many Rohingya families have lived in Burma for centuries or at least many decades, the Burma government refused to recognize them as citizens and treated them very harshly. It was blatant racism. The U.S., the UN, and others from outside, including many international human rights organizations have attempted to help gain humane treatment for the Rohingya without much success. Their mistreatment has led many to attempt to flee by boat toward Thailand, Malaysia, and elsewhere, creating a refugee crisis onward. We could do little for the Rohingya except raise their issues and try to include them when hosting human-rights or ethnic-rights types of gatherings.

While the Burma government did not permit embassy officials to visit the most tense and troubled regions, I did manage a good bit of travel, sometimes on my own. At one time or another, I visited at least briefly 11 of Burma's 14 provinces. Twice I joined Ministry of Foreign Affairs-arranged ambassador tours, once to Hpakant, the jade-mining center in western Kachin State (Burma's far north), and later to Mogok, the ruby-mining center

northeast from Mandalay. Both those trips were fascinating. Very few westerners had been to Hpakant. Ethnic Kachin rebels are still active in that region. The road there from the provincial capital Myitkyina was a rutted, muddy mess. The buses carrying the diplomatic corps had been rented across the border in China, with Burmese license plates apparently added in an attempt at camouflage. The bus drivers, Chinese, had never experienced such roads, nor had they attempted to cross such bridges, many of which were high, skeletal, shaky, with wooden-planks. Several times our bus slowly forded streams rather than attempt the bridges. The authorities had arranged for entire communities along the route to turn out to greet us. The people of Hpakant reportedly had gathered by the roadside at 3 p.m. When we finally arrived at 9 p.m., way after dark, all those people were still lining the streets. All the bystanders looked exhausted, as were the diplomats. The distance was only around 100 miles, but the trip had taken more than 12 hours. The next day we toured jade mines and initial grading/processing facilities where shiny signs displayed safety instructions in English and all the workers appeared to have on brand-new t-shirts, shoes, and safety helmets. The later trip to Mogok was less adventurous, with most of the road paved. There, too, workers appeared to have been spruced up a bit.

On other occasions when the Burma government granted permits for travel, I visited Kachin several more times, and security personnel always tried to keep a good eye on my movements and meetings. One evening when I had dinner at a restaurant, the minders ate at a nearby table and then attempted to assign their bill to my tab. I said, "no way," which I imagine meant the restaurant had to swallow the other table's bill. Sometimes minders were more subtle, sometimes not. On one of my early visits to Mandalay, where the U.S. still has the property that was a consulate until its closure in 1980, I had arranged to lunch with a few opposition politicians. We had attempted to be careful with arrangements, wanting to protect our sources, but we noticed that the upstairs room where we ate, supposedly by ourselves, was separated only by a curtain from another space and people behind the curtain were smoking. Our contacts took all that in stride. At that time, at least, if one was a dissident in Burma, one accepted that the authorities would always have feelers out. Our property in Mandalay is now the "Jefferson Center," a nice location for a lending library and public-diplomacy events. I hosted a July 4th celebration there each year, in addition to our usual such event in Rangoon.

One time, toward the end of my tour, I took a road trip, just a driver and me, from Bagan, a tourist destination where over two thousand Buddhist stupas sit on a plane next to the Irrawaddy River, all the way to Rangoon, through what is known as "the dry zone." I made stops in cities along the way, meeting with government officials, NLD members, local civic groups, etc. I was traveling on the main highway, at least as shown on maps, but frequently it was barely a one-lane road. Similarly, in Kachin State, I once traveled southwest to visit environmental projects along Kandawgyi Lake, and for the first several hours the route was the main road from Kachin to Mandalay, but the road was barely passable with a four-wheel drive. At some distant point in the past it had been black-topped; but over time the surface had pitted, then crumbled. It had become severely rutted, a muddy disaster. It reminded me, yet again, that Burma, which at the end of the colonial era was perceived to have the most hopeful future of all the newly independent

Southeast Asian nations, with reasonable infrastructure and a thriving educational system, had deteriorated dramatically under fifty years of military rule.

Q: Well, did we get involved, I mean did you sort of have your standard list of don't do this or please release so and so?

DINGER: Well, we always have our lists. I wouldn't describe them as standard, but we had lengthy lists of prisoners whom we were aware were there for all the wrong reasons. Many of them for purely political reasons. A number of NGOs kept those lists, reliable people were making them. We tried to facilitate prison visits whenever we could, but the Burmese were not welcoming towards that sort of thing at my time. Since, things have started to open up. But there wasn't a lot of space when I was there for really digging into those issues.

Beyond the human-rights and democratization themes, which were always on the agenda, the U.S. and many others in the international community had grave concerns about North Korea's relationship with the Burma generals. We were aware of visits back and forth, sometimes with senior leaders like General Thura Shwe Mann involved. The DPRK embassy in Rangoon appeared to have easy access to senior Burmese leaders. There were rumors of possible mil-mil cooperation on developing a Burmese missile program, and maybe even some sort of nuclear program. The DPRK was under clear UN sanctions. When we raised concerns, the Burma government always flatly denied any violations of the sanction regime. But some of those denials didn't pass the smell test. A few times DPRK ships came and went, supposedly delivering things like cement in barter for rice; but other items may well have been on board. So, I sometimes carried stiff messages to NPT on the North Korea issue, too.

For all the U.S. messaging on topics which the Burmese leadership didn't want to hear about, I only recall one time that the Foreign Affairs Ministry called me in to chastise me. The conveyor of the message, a Director General, did a professional job of it; and I responded professionally as well.

Q: Well, by the time you left there did you see solid lines of progress developing with Burma and the United States, and the west as far as --

DINGER: Well, I was seeing the potential for it. We had the Webb visit that I mentioned, and then after ASSK was released, Senator John McCain came. He had met with her once in the 1990s when she was free for a bit, and he clearly sees her as a heroic figure. Her photo hangs on the wall of the Senator's office. McCain had a really useful visit. Beyond a two-hour conversation with ASSK at her home, he talked to all types, from former political prisoners to the new government up in Naypyidaw. He met with new President Thein Sein who had been number four in the old system's grouping of generals. He had very useful conversations, particularly interesting conversations I thought, with the leaders of both houses of the parliament, talking to them about how parliaments ought to work and how they should aspire to have their roles be. Many people thought that the parliament would be purely a figurehead body, rather than a real parliament. It's turned

out to be a real parliament. It's taking an active role, and sometimes a role that Thein Sein might not have preferred. So that kind of thing was going on.

ASSK was finding her way. As noted, she and I met frequently, sometimes at my residence, sometimes at hers. I came to consider her a friend. The last time I met with her during my tour was a farewell lunch that my wife and I gave just three days before we left Rangoon, just for the three of us. We talked about all sorts of things, from our dogs to cooking to a little bit of politics. And during that lunch, which was in mid August, she let me know that I was going to be really happy with some news shortly, something I had been working for. She was bound not to reveal what it was, and I allowed her that, but she said, "You'll know." Two days later she met with President Thein Sein for the first time. None of us would have predicted that was coming six months before. But it did. And that was the moment that kind of solidified a perspective that things were changing. Thein Sein had come into office in March. He'd given a couple of hopeful sounding speeches. But words are easy, acts are harder. So we were watching and we were encouraging, and it started to happen. So yes, before I left you could see that significant changes were taking place. Many, many steps still need to happen, including free and fair general elections.

A while after I left, the government held by-elections to fill around 45 parliamentary seats vacated by members of the new Thein Sein government. The NLD decided this time to participate, with ASSK and other senior NLD officials running. After the fatally flawed general elections in late 2010, I was curious what would happen. Perhaps because the results couldn't affect real power, the government's USDP party plus the military contingent would still retain a huge majority, the by-election process apparently was legitimate. And interestingly, the NLD swept all but about one or two seats, even winning seats in NPT, the government's own stronghold. I figure the by-election results gave a pretty accurate picture of actual voter sentiment. The populace, if allowed a fair chance, would move to a truly new government, and ASSK at that point retained great popularity.

There'll be another set of elections in 2015 and we'll see what happens then. As of today, generals and former generals still have all the power positions. When will elections be allowed to change that reality? I'll be curious to see.

Q: What about our anti-drug program? Is that -- had the proceeded during the entire time?

DINGER: Well, it's been an interesting process. I mentioned earlier that during my very first tour in Mexico I was working on narcotics assistance for a while. And while I was wearing that narcotics assistance hat, two Burmese Army majors came to Sinaloa state to observe our aerial spraying of opium poppies. Back in the early '80s we were having a pretty close relationship with the then-Burmese government in attempting to reduce Burma's role in the heroin trade. Our assistance became much more difficult after the events of 1989 and '90 when the NLD election victory was wiped out, ASSK was put under house arrest, and the sense was that Burma was going backward again. Throughout, the U.S. embassy has had a DEA office. They've had liaison on day-to-day

narcotics issues. But we hadn't been able to train Burmese anti-drug forces, though I gather that perhaps has changed. We collaborated on opium surveys, but that had also been put into abeyance a bit. So we still had a relationship, we still worked on some aspects, particularly on particular cases of opiate shipments, things like that. There was a strong sense that some senior Burmese officials in the regions of most concern for narcotics were part of the problem.

Q: How about other issues while you were in Burma? Anything else?

DINGER: Well, the Wikileaks set of issues arose during my last year there, the leaking of alleged reporting from embassies around the world. In a way those leaks were oddly flattering. When the media, other diplomats, and academics read the texts, they seemed really impressed with both Embassy Rangoon's depth of analysis and quality of the writing. I'm not sure what those folks had presumed, but we did receive many compliments. On the other hand, though, we had major concern for embassy sources, activists, businessmen, host-government officials. In Burma, as in some other places in the world, authorities were known to imprison people for long periods for talking frankly with outsiders. At the embassy we thought through our list of contacts and systematically went about informing people of potential risk if some of our reporting were to end up in news articles. Some people seemed to take such notice in stride. Others, perhaps those most at risk, became very worried, and we were worried for them. Wikileaks harmed U.S. interests and threatened the lives and livelihoods of some very good people.

Q: Well, you left there when?

DINGER: I left Rangoon in late August of 2011 and retired. My three year tour was over just as I turned 65, so it was the right moment. My wife and I were "homeless" at the time. We had sold our house in Herndon, Virginia, in 2000, and we had not bought a replacement. So we needed to settle somewhere, which kept us busy for the first year. We now live in Reston, Virginia, near our grandchildren. In the fall of 2012, I became a When Actually Employed (WAE) annuitant with the Office of the Inspector General (OIG), which assigned me to lead an inspection of three investigative offices in the Diplomatic Security (DS) bureau. That inspection lasted all fall and into the winter. It turned out to be controversial, with my team turning up very disturbing indicators of problems, including allegations of high-level interference in some cases. In the summer of 2013, the Foreign Service Institute asked me to co-chair one of the courses for new ambassadors, the "charm school." I thoroughly enjoyed that experience. Then the EAP Bureau asked me to be its senior advisor at the UN General Assembly in New York for the fall of 2013, another very enjoyable opportunity, which I will take up again in the fall of 2014. And EAP also asked me to help fill a gap between political ambassadors at the U.S. Mission to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Jakarta from April to August 2014.

Q: OK. Well, we can end it here. But remember, if there are things as you go through the text, you realize you've left out something or something including what you've done since, put it in.

DINGER: OK. I'll get to it. I'm good at getting to things, it's just a matter of when we have the time *(laughs).*

Q: OK, the thing is we can always meet again too.

DINGER: OK.

Q: Great. This has been great.

DINGER: It's been fun for me. Hope it's been OK for you.

End of interview