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

JOHN R. DINGER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
Initial interview date: March 4, 2013

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Washington, D.C.—Georgetown University 1983
Semester long-term labor training
Background on the labor attaché role at State
Field work with International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Baltimore
Field work with Hotel Workers Union, Washington D.C.

Yokohama, Japan—FSI Language School 1984–1985
Advanced Japanese Language Study

Tokyo, Japan—American Embassy, Political Section 1985
Assigned as Assistant Labor Attaché
Portfolio: covering opposition political parties

Sapporo, Japan—Consulate General 1985–1989
Assigned as Consul General
Kuril Islands-remnants of the Cold War
Fishing issues
Encouraging agricultural imports from the U.S.
Organizing annual American products fair
Japanese excuses to decline imports
Successful International Visitor Program
Flexible Embassy oversight
Completion of undersea tunnel between Hokkaido and Honshu
Insight into the Japanese economy
Consular cases
Local media
Qualifying as a member of the Chrysanthemum Club?

Johannesburg, South Africa—Consulate General 1989
Assigned as Regional Labor Officer
Willem De Klerk newly elected president
Portfolio: Black trade unionists
Role of International Visitor Grants
Everything was unbanned: Fall of Berlin Wall and end of apartheid
Ethnic tensions
Level of street crime
Nelson Mandela's leadership role

Palo Alto, California—Stanford University Hoover Institution, 1992
National Security Fellow
Academic atmospherics
Fellow student Lt. Col. John Abizaid
Audited classes on Japan

Washington, D.C.—Bureau of Asian and Pacific Affairs, Office of

Japanese Affairs (EAP/J), Deputy Director 1993–1995
Liberal Democratic Party loses an election
Japan Socialist Party came to power
Mutual defense relationship
The Emperor visits
Ranking Japanese visitors often handled by efficient Japanese Embassy

Washington, D.C.—Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Press Relations (PA/PRESS), Director of Press Relations 1995–1997
Oversaw major State Department press events
Daily press briefings
Focus was major American media, i.e., newspapers and television
U.S, media not always interested in foreign visitor
Observation of Richard Holbrooke
Organizing the relevant bureaus responses

Washington, D.C.—Foreign Service Institute, Senior Seminar 1997–1998
Member of the 40th class
Exposure to domestic underpinnings of foreign service
Travelling around the U.S. as part of the seminar
Intra-Government membership

Tokyo, Japan—American Embassy, Consul General 1998–2000
Portfolio included following local politics in the Tokyo plain
Local Japan after the bubble burst
New generation of local employees
Social Security Totalization Agreement
Hague Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons
Disaster preparations, nuclear accident in Tokaimura

Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia—American Embassy, Ambassador 2000–2003
Historical background notes
First Mongolian troops sent overseas as part of coalition to Iraq
Mongolian-Russian-Chinese relations
Internal travel
Revamping U.S. Embassy
Liberalization of visa regime for Americans and Mongolians

Washington, D.C.—Coordinator for Counterterrorism (S/CT), Associate Coordinator for Operations 2003–2005
Countering the prevailing mindset
Bureaucratic perspectives; political and logistic issues
Need to be alert, not alarmed
Policy differences on hostages
Establishment of the Foreign Emergency Support Team (FEST)
Support from the Seventh Floor

Washington, D.C.—Office of Undersecretary for Political Affairs (P), Senior Assistant 2005
- In response to addition of Bureau of International Narcotics and Legal Affairs, INL to P portfolio
- Observation on Nick Burns
- Focus on countering corruption
- New environment with collapse of communism
- Opium situation in Afghanistan
- Lack of high-level appreciation of FSOs in dangerous assignments

Washington, D.C.—Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary 2006–2012
- View of the intelligence community
- Briefing the principals
- INR support for independent analysis
- Rating different elements of the intel community
- Modernizing cost money
- Establishment of the Cyber Policy Group within INR
- Elements: offense, exploitation, defense
- Foreign policy aspects
- Using the internet: it's open source
- The Kendall spy case
- Other espionage cases; INR's role
- Staffing INR

INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 4th of March 2013. This is an interview with John Russell Dinger. Let's start this off by when and where were you born?

DINGER: I was born May 27, 1952, in Charles City, Iowa.

Q: I haven't heard of that.

DINGER: It's a small town 25 miles from my hometown of Riceville, Iowa. Riceville is a farming community in northeast Iowa with a population of around 900.

Q: On the Dinger side, where did the family come from way back? What's the origin?

DINGER: I'm not well-versed in our family's genealogy, but one part of my father's side was German, from which the name Dinger comes. The Dingers immigrated to America before the Revolutionary War. The other part of my father's family was Scottish, with the

name of Lockie. On my mother's side, her maiden name was Miles. Her family immigrated to America from Wales before the Revolutionary War.

Q: On the German side, do you know where they came from?

DINGER: I don't know much about the Dingers. My father became interested in genealogy, but focused more on his Scottish roots. It led my older sister, Jan Dinger Duggan, to have her wedding in Scotland, and her daughter, Whitney Duggan Court, also to have her wedding in Scotland, both in the same little church on the Isle of Mull. I attended both ceremonies.

Q: I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy, so it's not hard to tell my origins -- I have German roots too.

DINGER: We descended from the MacLean clan.

Q: Well, what do you know -- what was your father doing?

DINGER: My father was a self-employed carpenter in Riceville.

Q: What's the background of your mother?

DINGER: My mother was a homemaker and when I was in sixth grade she began teaching English and math in the local high school.

Q: What about this town Riceville? What was it like?

DINGER: The closest approximation I can give to growing up in Riceville, Iowa in the 1950s and 1960s is Opie Taylor in the Andy of Mayberry TV series. In many ways it was idyllic. For example, when summer came we'd shed shoes and run free around town. All eight of my great-grandparents were among the area's earliest settlers. If it takes a village to raise a child, that was what childhood was like in Riceville. There had been some intermarriage between my father's relatives and my mother's. As a result, my father's family reunions and my mother's family reunions included some of the same people.

Q: The town I take it, was a farming center?

DINGER: Right.

Q: Did your father have a carpenter shop, or what?

DINGER: My father was primarily a finish carpenter. He was very handy and could build anything. He most enjoyed remodeling, especially kitchens and bathrooms. At one point he bought a floor sander. I think perhaps there was an era when people were pulling up linoleum and sanding the hardwood floors underneath. For a while he did that a lot. He

painted houses inside and outside. I helped him some in the summers with painting, shingling roofs, and the like.

Q: Did you have brothers, sisters?

DINGER: I have an older brother, Larry, who is also a retired Foreign Service Officer. He's six years older than I, and my sister, Jan, is two years older.

Q: Did you go to school there?

DINGER: I went to kindergarten and all 12 grades in Riceville and graduated from Riceville High School in 1970.

Q: Let's talk about elementary school in Riceville. What was it like?

DINGER: Kindergarten through fifth grade the elementary school was just out down the street from our house. The teachers were neighbors and family friends. I spent all 13 years of school with almost all the same kids. I was born in the middle of the baby boom. The town was thick with kids running, playing, and bicycling around town all the time. For my sixtieth birthday one of my classmates who still lives in the area sent me a photo of little kids lined up waiting for a bus to go on a field trip somewhere. It included me. I graduated from high school with almost every one of those same kids.

Q: My God. Was it big enough to be more than a one or two-room schoolhouse?

DINGER: We had enough students for two rooms of around 20 students in each grade. The elementary school was a classic old building with wide staircases. It had two floors of classrooms. It smelled of cleaning solvent, floor wax, paint, and chalk. The high school was in a very similar building a couple blocks away. Until I was in fourth grade many kids who lived on farms attended one-room country schools. When I was in fourth grade, Iowa consolidated the schools. They closed all the one-room schools and a couple of small schools in nearby towns. They began bussing those students to Riceville. That added a third class for most grades. My graduating class had around 75 students.

Q: What were the teachers like?

DINGER: They were almost all women whom I had always known. They in turn had always known me. It was a small town.

Q: I would assume in a situation like this, discipline was not a problem.

DINGER: If we got into trouble, it probably took only minutes for our parents to find out, especially after my mother became a teacher. I had her for English my sophomore and junior years. So yes, that meant that discipline was not much of a problem, not for me at least.

Q: What'd you do for recreation?

DINGER: Life revolved around school and church. During the school year we attended sporting events. Football games were on Friday nights in the fall. In the winter Tuesday and Friday nights had basketball games or wrestling meets. Wrestling was a very big thing in Iowa. If we weren't attending a school activity, we were probably doing something with a church youth group. Ours was a Pilgrim Fellowship. We played shuffleboard, had pizza parties, went sledding, raised money with carwashes, and the like.

Q: Was church much of a factor?

DINGER: Yes. My parents were serious churchgoers. My mother in particular had a deep faith.

Q: What denomination?

DINGER: Congregational. We sang in the church choir with the same kids from school, and the same relatives. It was all the same people. It was a really small, closely knit community. As I got older, into high school, I chafed a little bit at it. It was such a small town. I felt I had to get out. But certainly looking back on it, and I think probably most of the time while I was growing up, I enjoyed my secure, warm, and comfortable childhood, and benefited tremendously from it. It was pretty idyllic.

Q: Idyllic, yeah. Were your parents coming from Iowa, Republican, or where did they fit, or did they fit anywhere?

DINGER: My father didn't talk very much about such things. But my mother was very clearly a Democrat. I recall that she had a sticker on our car window for the National Education Association (NEA). That was an era when teachers didn't join trade unions, and I believe the NEA was quite progressive. She also had a window sticker for Amnesty International. One of the family jokes is that her father who was a very successful farmer outside of town was a staunch Republican. When suffrage came and my grandmother got the vote, she became a Democrat. Ever after, when they drove to the polls, they canceled each other's vote.

Q: Were you much of a reader as a kid?

DINGER: No. I may use as one excuse that I don't think we had the books that kids have now. I saw the teen literature that my son read. It was fabulous. I enjoyed reading it. When I was growing up it was The Hardy Boys and a little bit later maybe James Bond books. I don't recall a wealth of literature like kids have now to read. I began to read for pleasure only when I was assigned to Rio de Janeiro, had time on my hands, no English language TV, and a colleague who lent me lots of books.

Q: Yeah.

DINGER: I watched a lot of TV as a child, maybe unfortunately. Although, I think it's sometimes called the Golden Age of Television.

Q: At school, what sort of courses did you like?

DINGER: I was a very undistinguished student. I liked to play much more than study. As the third child, my parents may have given me more slack in that area. Because my mother was an English teacher and my older brother sort of leaned towards liberal arts, there was a tendency to lean towards social sciences. Speaking of being an undistinguished student, that was especially true in math and science.

Q: Did you get news from outside? I mean I assume you did, but what paper did you get?

DINGER: We got the nightly news on the three broadcast channels, ABC, NBC, and CBS. The major newspaper in Iowa was The Des Moines Register, a newspaper that is now a shadow of what it used to be, probably for lots of different reasons. Then, it was considered a pretty decent regional paper. My brother, sister, and I were all paperboys. We delivered every afternoon after school the Mason City, Iowa Globe Gazette.

Q: Was there a big town nearby?

DINGER: There was no big town nearby. Depending on how you define big, Mason City, which had about 35,000 people was about 50 miles away to the west.

Q: I always think of "The Music Man" when I think of Mason City.

DINGER: Absolutely. Riceville is very near the Minnesota border. Rochester, Minnesota where the Mayo Clinic is located was about the same size and distance north of Riceville. For anything bigger than Mason City and Rochester, we had to drive two to three hours to Minneapolis or Des Moines, neither of which we did very often. In fact, I don't think I went to Des Moines until I was in college.

Q: Well, in high school I guess it was the same crowd. Did you have a steady girl or did guys have steady girls, or what did they do?

DINGER: Some did. A couple of my classmates married each other. I never had a steady girlfriend. I took a girl to the junior prom. It didn't go especially well. And so that was that. I stay in close touch with several of my classmates, and some of them still live in the Riceville area. I've known many of them literally all my life. I've known them from the first moment that I can recall until today. So that's a very special bond. It persists even if I don't see them for years. I love going to my high school reunions. I try to make most of them. There's an adage "old friends are best friends."

Q: I don't want to jump ahead too much. But how did you and your brother go into the Foreign Service -- were you sort of the oddballs?

DINGER: We were certainly uncommon. I joined first. I would tell people that I worked for the State Department, and they would ask if I was in Des Moines. According to the State Department Office of the Historian, we were the first siblings in history to rise through the career ranks of the U.S. Foreign Service to become ambassadors: my brother to Micronesia and Fiji, and me to Mongolia.

Q: That's pretty surprising, coming from a small town in Iowa and all.

DINGER: On the surface it's hard to understand. I generally never spoke too much about my work. I feared that people wouldn't be interested, wouldn't understand, or might think I was showing off, putting on airs.

Q: That's always a problem. It sounds like you're putting on something.

DINGER: I was never sure that anyone wanted to hear about it. How could I make it interesting? What I was doing was so different from what so many of them were experiencing.

Q: You were in high school from when to when?

DINGER: I was there from '66 'til '70. I graduated in 1970.

Q: How did the Vietnam War play there?

DINGER: With the whole '60s thing there was a time lag, I would say. Of course, the Vietnam War was the first war to play out in real time on TV. The images of the war and the protests were on the nightly news. In general, by 1968, there was a sense of opposition to the war. But we were far from the center of anything like that. I was well aware of the turmoil and inclined toward opposing the war, but it was not central to us. That said, our senior class motto was: "Peace."

Q: When you got ready to graduate from high school, were you pointed towards anything? Did you have any idea what you wanted to do or where you wanted to go to school, or anything like that?

DINGER: I had no idea what I wanted to do. My brother had gone to Macalester College in St. Paul. And I applied to a trio of small, well-regarded liberal arts colleges in the area: Macalester, Grinnell, and Carlton. They all rejected me. As I said, I was an undistinguished student. It was sort of a natural default for me to go to the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) in Cedar Falls, Iowa. My sister was attending there. My mother graduated from there. And my grandfather attended there.

Q: Oh my.

DINGER: I definitely recall being rejected by those three selective schools. I think the path of least resistance was to go to Cedar Falls, UNI, which I did.

Q: What was your impression of the campus life and all there?

DINGER: It was wonderful. I studied hard and did well. It's a tribute to the saying that everything works out in the end. My roommate from Des Moines remains one of my closest friends. There's a group of about four or five of us who are still great friends and see each other pretty often. I thought the world of them when I knew them in college. I'm still proud to call them my friends today. I was a political science major.

Q: In political science did you concentrate on any political field or country, or anything like that?

DINGER: Not at all. It was a pretty small department. It was very general in nature. UNI was primarily a teachers college.

Q: How did the Cold War play out, or was it too far away?

DINGER: The Cold War was part of the fabric of life. I have a very strong memory from when I was in elementary school. I used to walk home for lunch. I was walking back to school after lunch one day and at treetop level a huge bomber screamed down the street right over my head. I recall it so vividly I think it must have happened. I don't recall duck and cover drills and those sorts of things. But I do recall that bomber screaming overhead. I assume it was some sort of low-level flight training exercise. We weren't that far from the Strategic Air Command in Omaha. There was that sort of thing. The Cold War was just a given.

Q: Did you get any feel from your faculty about Vietnam or anything?

DINGER: Northern Iowa was not a hotbed of anti-war sentiment. Anti-war sentiment was there, but I don't recall getting anything from the faculty. Most of the political science faculty had been there a long time. The chair of the political science department was Dr. Robert Ross, with whom I still stay in contact. He's one of the best teachers I ever had. He taught domestic politics, political parties and such. A fabulous teacher and person. I really respect him. I think that a benefit of going to a school like the University of Northern Iowa was there was no publish or perish aspect. It was only and all about teaching students in the classroom. I think I got a pretty good education.

Q: As you're getting ready to graduate in '74 by that time the draft was over, wasn't it?

DINGER: I don't recall whether the draft officially ended but it was for me. I was part of the lottery after they switched to that system. I remember very vividly watching TV as they drew the numbers in 1971 for those born in 1952. I got a high enough number that I was unlikely to be drafted, 166 as I recall. I immediately dropped a student deferment that I had and a year later was out of the draft pool.

Q: What were you thinking about doing?

DINGER: I didn't have the slightest idea what to do. I clearly remember a day when I talked about it with my advisor, Dr. Ross. It was the fall of 1973. I had always taken a few extra courses, so was graduating early, in January 1974, instead of the following June. I recall asking Dr. Ross, "What am I going to do?" I didn't want to go to graduate school or law school. I just wasn't in the mood to continue studying.

He said, "Have you thought of the Foreign Service?"

I asked, "What's that?" I had no idea.

He replied, "That's working in embassies and consulates overseas."

I said, "That sounds like a pretty good job. How do you get a job like that?"

He answered, "Well, there's a test…." Less than a year later I was in the Foreign Service and not much more than a year later I was in London.

Q: Well now, had you gone to Canada or traveled around or anything?

DINGER: I had flown twice in my life. The previous summer I traveled with my college roommate, Jeff Rissman, to Europe. I backpacked around Europe for six weeks or so. I minored in French for some unknown reason. I stayed with a French family for a while in Alsace. It was the family of my sister's pen pal. So I had that experience. My brother that summer was in London working I guess in an internship with a law firm. And I saw him there. But I certainly wasn't thinking of an international career. I had no clue what I would do.

Q: When did you take the Foreign Service written exam?

DINGER: I had the conversation with Dr. Ross in October and the deadline to apply for the written exam was imminent. I had to send off my application, however I got it, by express mail. It made it in time, and I took the written exam I think in December of 1973 in Mason City, Iowa -- maybe in the post office.

Q: How did you find the written exam?

DINGER: It was challenging. My recollection is that I needed a 70 to pass. I don't recall out of how many points. I got a 70 on the button. So I just eked by.

Q: I always say that—I took it back in '53. And I was averaged into the Foreign Service. I got a 69.7 or something.

DINGER: Oh! So they rounded you up and in*?*

Q: They rounded me up! But anyway. Were you doing any reading about this?

DINGER: No. I was totally ignorant about the Foreign Service. I didn't know anything about anything. I just showed up, took the exam on a Saturday morning, and moved on.

Q: Well, when you passed it, I assume then later you took the oral exam. Where'd you take that?

DINGER: I took the oral in Chicago. I graduated from UNI in January of 1974, and had no prospects whatsoever. There was a recession. When the latest recession was kicking off, there were references made to the recession of 1974. I couldn't find a job of any shape or form. I applied everywhere I could think of, from factory work to office jobs. I got nothing. I took the Civil Service written exam, which existed at the time. I scored well enough that I got on some sort of register and the Veteran's Administration Regional Office in Chicago called me. It offered me a job as a "contact representative." Basically the job dealt with veterans who walked into or phoned the regional office for assistance. I accepted the job.

In March of 1974, my parents drove me to the airport in Rochester, MN. I flew to Chicago with one suitcase to start work at the VA, the third time I'd flown. That same week, I took the Foreign Service oral exam.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions asked?

DINGER: I remember vaguely that there was a question about China and China policy and maybe the future of U.S.-China relations. I recall they asked what I would do if a plane with American citizens on board crashed in Brazil. By that time I did know enough that I prepared a little for the oral exam. Several weeks in advance I started reading Time and Newsweek cover to cover every week. I believe that my oral exam was on a Wednesday. In any case, Time or Newsweek came out the previous day. I read it and some of the contents, including China, came up in the exam. Maybe the examiners read the same issue.

Q: Did they put you on hold or offer you a job?

DINGER: The exam took place in mid-March in the federal building in downtown Chicago. After it ended, the three examiners told me to sit on a chair in the hallway. After about 10 minutes one of them came out, invited me back into the room, and told me I passed.

Q: Did you have any idea at that point really what you'd be doing or where you wanted to go?

DINGER: I didn't know. I wasn't confident I was in. I was completely ignorant of the process. There was still the background investigation, medical exam, all that to go through. I stayed in the job in the Veterans Administration. I left the VA after I got a call

in July inviting me to join an A-100 class in September. I went home to Riceville -- just in time to watch President Nixon resign.

Q: What were you doing at the Veterans Administration?

DINGER: It was the tail end of Vietnam. Lots of veterans were receiving benefits. They might come in or phone to ask the status of a service connected disability claim or how to get a VA backed home mortgage. Much more commonly they needed help with educational benefits under the GI Bill. The office was co-located with a large veterans hospital on the near west side of Chicago. It was in a neighborhood so blighted and rough that many veterans were reluctant to visit the office. It was quite an eye-opening experience for me coming out of Riceville, Iowa. All in all, though, I really enjoyed the work, my colleagues, and living in Chicago.

Q: When did you start the A-100 course?

DINGER: September of 1974.

Q: I would have thought that this would have been a little overwhelming. I mean meeting your classmates, having gone to school with the same kids and all, and coming from a place where the Foreign Service was not known. I recall I got very quiet. Because a lot of guys in my Foreign Service A-100 Course you know were talking big and flamboyant. I mean they were very full of themselves or trying to present themselves as being something maybe they really weren't. What sort of an impression did you get from them?

DINGER: I joined the 115th A-100 class. In both A-100 and the State Department in general I felt a combination of intimidation and awe. A guy who ended up being one of my closest A-100 friends, whom I still see, is Cliff Bond. He grew up outside New York City in New Jersey and graduated from Georgetown and the London School of Economics. He worked at the Federal Reserve Bank in New York for a little bit. For some reason Cliff and I clicked. It still sort of astonishes me, because Cliff was so much more worldly and experienced than I. For many years having an academic pedigree of the University of Northern Iowa left me a bit intimidated by all those people who had such an educational and experiential advantage over me, either real or perceived.

Q: You have a bunch of young men, the testosterone is running high and they're trying to, you know, sort of prove themselves and all. It's an interesting experience.

DINGER: It's difficult to exaggerate my ignorance of everything. I literally did not know anything about anything. Maybe not even enough to know that I should be even more intimidated than I was. I'd just turned 22. With the exception of three months living in Chicago, I'd spent my entire life in northeast Iowa.

Q: What was the composition of the class?

DINGER: In terms of numbers, I think it was around 30. I still have the class list somewhere. There was a mix of people. I recall one guy had spent years in the Diplomatic Courier Service. He had worked out of all the regional courier hubs. He told the most amazing stories, for example, about taking the pouch into Beijing, which we had opened in some fashion, and taking the train up from Hong Kong. For me, such stories were just astonishing. Going to the State Department cafeteria and seeing those people, all I could think was, "Oh, man!" Overhearing their conversations about work and assignments while waiting in line at the cashier was beyond anything I could possibly imagine.

Q: The normal Foreign Service class picks up a lot of people with considerable experience.

DINGER: Yes. Of course there had been a draft and people had been in the military. However, a guy that I shared a house with for the few months that we were in Washington in A-100 was from St. Louis and a little more like me. He was about the same age with not much more experience than I. So it was a wide range of people. I remember a cabinetmaker from Arizona. I don't know that this is true, but I always speculated that the Foreign Service was trying to diversify, and maybe that's why they plucked a kid from Iowa with corn coming out of his ears and stuck him in the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you ever think about what sort of answers you must have given or something that might have made you stand out?

DINGER: I've sometimes wondered, because really I was totally unprepared for the exam and the Foreign Service. I don't know what might have put me over the bar. I later talked to people who were examiners. They said that despite the numbers, whatever they were in those days -- let's say annually 25,000 initial applicants and an intake of 300 or something. Despite those numbers, when you actually go into a room and interview people, it's surprising how many are not acceptable. How few are really in the zone. It surprises me, but I've heard more than one examiner say it.

Q: It's true. I did that for a year.

DINGER: I don't how that can be possible.

Q: Looking at yourself, did you find you were a good learner? I mean you were in a situation here and had to learn about what the hell is this all about.

DINGER: I don't know that I was an especially good learner. In general I work hard. It may have helped that I was so ignorant. I didn't know enough to be scared out of my wits.

Q: Did you find that you had to point towards something, or did you just relax and go with the flow as far as future assignments go?

DINGER: I relaxed and went with the flow. I joined the Foreign Service at the tail end of the Vietnam War. In September of 1974, Newsweek ran an article. The title was "The Foreign Service is Back," and I'm interviewed briefly. The article said that during the Vietnam War there was a stigma about the Foreign Service that was receding. People were becoming interested in it again. I guess I was considered to represent that. I was up for adventure. When I hitchhiked around Europe that summer, my brother encouraged me to go as far as Istanbul. I ended up hitchhiking by myself through Yugoslavia and Greece and elsewhere. It's sort of crazy to think about it now. I got to Istanbul, went down to Izmir I think it was, and took a ferry back to Athens. I'd done that. I had a bit of a spirit of adventure. That drove me to ask to be assigned to Bombay. That was my number one choice. I asked to go to Bombay and I didn't get it.

Q: Where did you go?

DINGER: They sent me to London.

Q: Oh.

DINGER: Yeah.

Q: How did that happen?

DINGER: The assignment process was pretty much a black box. They gave us a list of posts. That's where I saw Bombay and said, "That's where I want to go." I wanted an out-of-body experience. I applied for the Peace Corps at some point after graduating from college. I think the Peace Corps accepted me. But by that time the Foreign Service looked like it was going to happen, so that was a pretty easy choice. I was interested in adventure. But for whatever reason, maybe because they thought I needed sophistication like Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady, they sent me to London.

Q: Did you have any languages?

DINGER: I had minored in French.

Q: You were in London from when to when?

DINGER: I was there 1975 and 1976.

Q: What were you doing?

DINGER: Consular officer.

Q: What was the Consular Section in London like in those days?

DINGER: It was a huge visa mill, always competing with Japan as the biggest. The British still needed visas, and a large number of third country nationals applied, particularly from commonwealth countries: Indians, Nigerians, a lot of Iranians for some reason. By the time I finished my work on the NIV (non-immigrant visa) line, I thought I could identify the nationality of a passport from about 30 yards.

Q: What was your supervision like there?

DINGER: Good. There was a guy named David Hobbs who was quite successful. He was a young, bright comer in the consular field. He was ambassador to Guyana later. I split my assignment between non-immigrant visas and immigrant visas. When I was on the immigrant visa side there was an experienced officer named Chloe Wing who was a dyed-in-the-wool Foreign Service person. I think she came up through secretarial ranks. But she'd been a consular officer for many years. She *loved* consular work and the Foreign Service. She very much took me under her wing. It was just the two of us in a very busy Immigrant Visa Section. She mentored me in the office in terms of how to do immigrant visas, and outside the office she loved to go on picnics and to stately homes. Many weekends she'd say, "John, I'm packing a picnic, on Sunday let's drive out to…." I think I joined the National Trust at her encouragement. She loved to entertain and had me over to her house many times. She was wonderful. She was the first of several supervisors I had like that.

Q: Well, I take it that sort of the ambassador and Political Section are pretty far away from your experience.

DINGER: They were. That said, the ambassador for part of my time in London was Elliot Richardson. He was a *big* name. He left London to be secretary of commerce, his fourth Cabinet position. Not long before London he resigned as attorney general rather than fire the Watergate Special Prosecutor in Nixon's Saturday Night Massacre. Richardson was always very friendly and kind to me. I recall being invited to the residence on more than one occasion. Henry Kissinger was secretary of state. He visited London many times. I would often play a minor role in his visits. I recall one occasion at the residence when Richardson took the trouble to introduce me to Henry Kissinger and his wife Nancy.

Q: How did you find working with non-immigrants? Was this the first time you'd been up against a horde of non-Americans?

DINGER: Sure. It goes without saying. And it was life changing, or maybe career changing, but in an unusual sense. I was a kid, not very confident. It led me to be far harder on visa applicants than I should have been. Non-immigrant visa law says that every applicant is presumed to be an immigrant unless he can prove he's not. I took that far too seriously. I look back on it with considerable shame and regret. I was way too tough on people. None of my supervisors could talk sense into me. They tried. They'd say, "John, you're too tough on applicants."

I didn't want to hear it. I'd respond, "Well, I'm supposed to consider them to be intending immigrants." Later on, when I supervised consular sections and consular officers, I could harken back to that and say, "Listen, I know junior officers, what you're thinking. I understand where you're at, but it's not right."

Q: One of the things as a supervising consular officer I had to deal with was staff would arrive who probably in their lives had never really been lied to. And I mean these were people who had good reasons to lie, they wanted to go to the United States and you were between them and the United States, and they were trying to pretend they were going to visit when they weren't. And for somebody who is unused to being lied to, this can be traumatic for a while and taken very personally.

DINGER: I try now whenever I get a chance, to point out to inexperienced consular officers that they really need to have a sense of confidence in themselves. Junior officers sometimes disparage applicants. I later ended up being consul general in Tokyo. I never allowed anybody in my presence to speak ill of a visa applicant. I told them in Tokyo and in other places where I could, "I won't have that in my presence. I don't want to foster or allow that sort of atmosphere. I can't stop you from saying things among yourselves, but any time I'm present it is not acceptable."

Q: Yes. It requires some maturity to handle it well.

DINGER: Exactly right. The other thing I point out to consular officers is that as people become more experienced, they almost inevitably become more lenient in their decisions. That's not because they sell out. It's not because they give up. It's because they mature and become more confident in their decision-making. Mary Ryan, who was the assistant secretary for consular affairs when I was in Tokyo, sent out a message once in which she said the longer she was in that job she became more concerned about people who were incorrectly denied an opportunity to take a tourist trip to the United States than about people who were incorrectly issued a non-immigrant visa. Drawing on my London experience I tell junior officers how much I regret it.

Q: I think one of the things that really hurts in the consular field is there's a tendency for people who've had experience in the law, particularly gone to law school and I'm generalizing but they don't make the best consular officers. I mean they see this as a strict legal thing. And it's playing it by ear.

DINGER: When I was out on the interviewing line and it was an Israeli or Iranian or Nigerian or Jamaican, or anybody who had just been in the UK a few days, maybe weeks, I was very hard on them. In those cases maybe I was correct to deny them visas. But I also could be unpleasant to them. I regret it to this day. If it's possible to set all that aside, I think I did a good job overall in London. I was one of the most productive in terms of the number of visa applications I handled. A lot of them came by mail from the British and were very pro-forma.

Q: Did you have much chance to absorb Great Britain?

DINGER: It was a big thing for me, coming out of Iowa. The exchange rate was great. I really took advantage of the stage and musical performances in London. Even on my modest salary, which I think was maybe $10,000 a year, I would go to the theater or a musical performance three or four nights a week. Every week I would buy the magazine, Time Out. I would circle any of the productions I hadn't seen. I increasingly enjoyed "fringe theater," which is off-off Broadway. I took advantage of all that. I didn't take as much advantage of England as I wish. I didn't have a car to do a lot of traveling. I had to go by train, which was OK, but I probably would have done that differently. Also, there were very cheap flights to Europe. My friend from A-100, Cliff Bond, was in Brussels. There were very cheap fares to Brussels, Amsterdam, and Paris. I frequently would on Friday evening fly to one of those three cities, spend the weekend, and fly back to London Sunday evening. It was absolutely great.

Q: You were only exposed to consular business. Were you getting any feel for the rest of the Foreign Service?

DINGER: Not too much, although I have a very vivid memory that Secretary Kissinger, who often passed through, would usually stay at Claridge's Hotel, which is a few blocks from the embassy. As a junior officer my job was to play courier throughout the night. I'd go up to the Communications Section of the embassy. They'd give me a package of cables or whatever, and I'd run it over to Claridge's and into the suite with the Secretariat. Everything was hard copies, of course. Most of that was incredibly boring and tiring. But I remember one time going in and seeing Jerry Bremer, who later held several senior jobs including presidential envy to Iraq. He was Kissinger's executive assistant at the time. Jerry Bremer was chatting on the phone, talking about UN resolutions or whatever. I thought, "Oh my God, what am I in the middle of here?"

Q: I imagine London had a lot of visitors.

DINGER: I had one of my first and formative experiences as a control officer when Danny Kaye, the singer/dancer/entertainer came to London. Danny Kaye was a gourmet, and they were going to have a "meal of the century" at Ambassador Richardson's residence. They brought in from France three or four of the most famous chefs. Two were Pierre Troisgros and Paul Bocuse. They were all having lunch in a private room at a fancy hotel. I was in the hallway, not at the table or even in the room for lunch. Danny Kaye was running behind schedule. I went in and tried to move him along. Only he didn't want to be moved along. I learned an important lesson that when you're a control officer, you alert the VIP (very important person) to the schedule and then leave it to them. If they don't want to keep to the schedule, that's their decision. Danny Kaye taught me that lesson. He was a fine enough guy, but I rubbed him a little bit the wrong way.

I also recall going into the Administrative Counselor's Office -- that would be Management Minister today -- and watching him deal with Danny Kaye and the wine list for the dinner. Whatever Danny Kaye wanted, he got. I witnessed how things work on such occasions.

Q: Did you get involved in any protection and welfare work?

DINGER: Only a bit as duty officer.

Q: What'd you have to do?

DINGER: A sort of amusing case involved a gentleman who'd flown in with a group tour from the U.S. They took him to his hotel somewhere in London. He put his bags in the room and headed out for a walk. When he was ready to go back to the hotel, he realized he hadn't paid attention to where it was. The call I got was from the police, because he had eventually gotten to a bobby. The police were driving him back and forth through the streets of London hoping he'd recognize his hotel. It wasn't like it was the Hilton. It was one of many brownstone hotels in London. Eventually, the police contacted Heathrow Immigration and found his entry card. It showed the name of his hotel. After several hours and many phone calls, they got him safely there.

Q: Was after hours duty generally busy?

DINGER: What happened most often was replacing lost or stolen passports over the weekend. I'd have to open a big vault. Inside there was a typewriter with everything necessary to issue a passport neatly arranged. The British passport assistant prepared a cheat sheet of instructions. She knew all the mistakes that somebody like me would make. The spine of the passport had to be lined up with a special slot in the typewriter platen. I spoiled lots of passports with typos or smudges. The first thing I learned to ask was, "When are you traveling?" They might say "Sunday evening" and it's now Friday night. I'd say, "Give me your phone number and I'll call to let you know when to come to the embassy." There might be two or three other passports I needed to issue during one weekend. It was not an uncommon duty. I learned to cluster them, so I didn't go back and forth to the embassy two or three times in one weekend.

Q: Were you making up your mind about what am I going to do in this business?

DINGER: One thing I knew was that I didn't want to work in another huge visa mill. There were fun and fascinating aspects to working in London. It was a golden time for British rock and roll. We issued visas to the Beatles and to others like the Rolling Stones and Elton John. I remember when Mia Farrow came to get an immigrant visa for her daughter, Lark, whom she adopted from Vietnam. It's a kick to provide consular services to celebrities. But I didn't want to go to another visa mill. When it came time to leave London it was suggested that I go to Port-au-Prince. I don't know whether I would have left the Foreign Service, but I knew that I didn't want to do that. The consul general was a very senior consular officer and was going back to Washington. He graciously asked anybody who was transferring if we wanted his help with assignments. I did. Instead of being assigned to Port-au-Prince, I got assigned to Rio de Janeiro. He taught me an important lesson about the influence a senior officer can wield in the assignment process

and how much a subordinate appreciates it. That's a lesson I tried to follow later in my career.

Q: Ah. So you were in Rio from when to when?

DINGER: '77 to '79.

Q: You took Portuguese?

DINGER: Yes, for five months.

Q: What was Rio like, what were relations like with Brazil at that particular time?

DINGER: I was consular officer in a constituent post, so I didn't have much to do with bilateral relations. As I recall, relations were fine. President Carter came while I was there. That was the first time I experienced supporting a presidential visit. That's an eye-opener. I think I was a control officer for Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's wife.

Q: Rio was a consulate general at that point, was it?

DINGER: Right. Brasilia had opened some years before.

Q: What was your job?

DINGER: I was consular officer.

Q: Did you specialize in any particular area?

DINGER: There were three of us and we generally shared the work. As the low man, I spent a lot of time issuing visas. The boss was Peggy Barnhart. She was like Chloe Wing. She came up through the secretarial or administrative ranks and took the time to mentor me. I was an undisciplined, ignorant kid. Peggy tolerated that *and* insisted that I learn the trade. For example, she demanded that I learn how to format a telegram and organize and maintain files. She very, very diligently taught me that stuff. I really liked Peggy. I saw her for years afterwards, even after she retired.

Q: Did you have a lot of arrests?

DINGER: Quite a few, and it was a time when American citizen prisoners became a much bigger issue for the State Department. My other colleague was Danny Root. Danny handled American prisoners in Mexico when Mexican mistreatment of American prisoners and alleged inaction by the embassy became a controversial issue in the 1970s. It led eventually to transferring American prisoners to U.S. prisons. Danny almost went under in Mexico City. Congress went after him personally. He survived, deservedly. He was a really great guy, and a terrific consular officer. He taught me a lot. I owe him a lot, including getting me to start running for exercise, which 35 years later I still do today.

Q: Where is he now?

DINGER: Danny retired. The three of us really enjoyed each other. The visa workload wasn't too bad. There was a requirement that Brazilians put down a pretty hefty deposit in order to get a passport. It wasn't practical for poor people to get one. The refusal rate wasn't too high. Meanwhile, American Citizen Services were fascinating. People had this image of Rio as a paradise. Some very whacky people showed up and got in trouble. There were a lot of American tourists, and I think an average of one died a week. I still recall my visits to Rio's morgue. Drug arrests were just beginning to pick up, particularly related to cocaine being smuggled through Rio from Bolivia. I remember a young woman who was a mule and was arrested at the airport carrying cocaine. On another occasion a private plane stopped to refuel from Bolivia on its way to Florida with kilos of cocaine on board. I had two very experienced consular officers to show me the ropes.

Q: How did you find life in Rio?

DINGER: Fabulous. I was a single guy in my mid-twenties.

Q: How did you survive without getting married there?

DINGER: I managed it. While I was there, every Marine Security Guard without exception found a fiancé before he departed Brazil, every single one. I had a great social life. Brazilians in general and people from Rio in particular were wonderful. They were very kind and generous toward me. I had great American colleagues in the consulate, too. Some of them became my closest friends. It was a very good two years.

Q: Were there any problems with street kids and all that? I understand this has become quite a problem. You know, these are almost feral kids coming out of whatever they call… the favelas?

DINGER: There was a juice bar across the street from the consulate general where I would often go. Brazilians stood at the counter and ate their lunch. You'd see a little kid, maybe four or five-years-old with a tin plate walk up and tug on some guy's pant leg. He'd turn and scrape some of his food onto the kid's plate so he could eat. Lots of kids stood at traffic lights, selling Chiclets gum for some reason, begging basically. I suppose they would steal stuff if they saw a chance. But there was much more serious crime than that, particularly in Copacabana. A steady stream of Americans who were victims of crime of one sort or another came to us for assistance.

Q: Did you get to go get people out of jail and all that stuff?

DINGER: We rarely could get them out of jail. But certainly there were lots of arrests and lots of visits to police stations and prisons, both before and after conviction. The State Department was beginning to routinize visiting prisoners every six weeks or whatever it

was, and making sure prisoners had a list of lawyers, and so on. All that was being regularized following the controversy over our handling of Americans in Mexico.

Peggy Barnhart, the section chief, had done lots of American citizen services work over her long career and wasn't too eager to have those direct experiences again. If someone was arrested in the middle of the night or there was a death or whatever at four a.m., I often got the call. I remember one time puckishly telling Peggy when she called early one morning about a death in a hotel, "Peggy, isn't it time you go on one of these cases?" She replied, "John, I *used* to do that. Now *you* get to do it." Thanks to Peggy and Danny a lot of my most valuable consular experience came out of those two years in Rio, not to mention many of my most interesting consular stories.

Q: You say visas weren't a big problem?

DINGER: Right. First, because of a deposit to get a passport poor people couldn't travel as a practical matter. Second, Brazil had a pretty reliable income tax reporting form. I suppose they may have cheated on their taxes. But they had to have the form. We always asked, "Could you show us your income tax form?" Applicants knew to bring it, and it quickly made it pretty clear whether they had the resources to go to the U.S. and a life in Rio they wanted to return to. Applicants tended to be affluent.

Q: Was Sao Paolo doing much consular work?

DINGER: It was similar to Rio. Early in my assignment in Rio I filled in for six weeks TDY (temporary duty) in the consular section in Sao Paolo. Sao Paolo as a city was quite a bit different from Rio. Much more industry and commerce, lots of Japanese. One of my interesting memories is that Japanese were issued passports when they emigrated from Japan to Brazil in 1920 or so. The passport was valid until they returned to Japan. They were now in their 70s and returning to Japan for the first time. They applied for visas to transit LA. They were traveling on their passport issued in 1920 with a photo of a decades younger person. The passports were valid. We issued visas to them.

Q: Did you get up to Brasilia?

DINGER: I spent a week TDY there once. Peggy Barnhart was the senior consular officer in Brazil, and Brasilia had a first tour consular officer, a guy who I became quite good friends with. I went up for a week when he came down to Rio to get training and experience.

Q*: Peggy Barnhart was one of the ladies who sort of broke the consular barrier. There used to be sort of a glass ceiling, and she had quite a name for herself as being very knowledgeable.*

DINGER: I really learned a lot from Peggy.

Q: Well, you're about due to go back to the States, weren't you?

DINGER: I don't know if I was due, but I decided to go back. In my ignorance, when I applied for the Foreign Service I didn't realize that consular officers were sort of second-class citizens. It doesn't take long to figure that out.

Q: No.

DINGER: I saw my non-consular pals, particularly in Rio, coming in the morning and sitting back and reading a couple newspapers, attending business lunches, et cetera. and it seemed to me like a good life. I decided I would like to try and do something else. I signed up and got admitted to an economics course for non-economic cone officers at FSI (Foreign Service Institute).

Q: You did that from when to when?

DINGER: That was the fall of 1979. My class photo is still on the wall in the economic training section of FSI.

Q: How did you find it?

DINGER: It was wonderful. The guy who headed it was John Herrington. He was one of the best teachers I ever had. He later worked in ARA (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs) in its Economic Office and then at Johns Hopkins SAIS (School of Advanced International Studies). The course was very hard, lots of reading. Supposedly it was the equivalent of an undergraduate degree in economics in four months. I worked very hard, learned a ton. I took the GRE (graduate record exam) afterward and scored quite well.

Q: Did you find that the course prepared you for later work?

DINGER: It gave me a great, basic knowledge of economics. I took macroeconomics and microeconomics in college, but this was a very, very intense learning experience. It was a fire hose of economics, statistics, and all that sort of stuff. It was great. I highly recommend it to anybody.

Q: And when you took that, did this bring you into the economic cone?

DINGER: Oh no. I discovered that it was impossible to change cones. It was always impossible for me to change cones. To the end I remained in the consular cone. But I got a call when I was in the course asking if I was interested in a job as staff assistant in ARA, which is now WHA (Western Hemisphere Affairs).

Q: Who was in charge of the Front Office?

DINGER: The assistant secretary was Bill Bowdler. The PDAS (principal deputy assistant secretary) was John Bushnell. The deputy assistant secretary for Central

American and Caribbean affairs was Jim Cheek. It was a very interesting period in Latin American affairs.

Q: Those were all guys who were sort of pinpointed when the Reagan administration came in.

DINGER: The sense among Republicans when the Reagan administration came in seemed to be that the State Department, particularly Bill Bowdler and Jim Cheek, had pushed out our friends, albeit dictators, in Central America. I left my job in the Front Office after the election in 1980 but before the change to the Reagan administration in January 1981. Lore has it that Bowdler was told to clean out his desk no later than January 20th, inauguration day. He retired. John Bushnell, who is one of the brightest and most able guys I ever encountered was PDAS, but never became ambassador. It became a legendary story about the political price a person can pay in the State Department. Jim Cheek went from being an up and coming deputy assistant secretary in Latin American affairs to spending four years as DCM in Kathmandu. That pretty much sums it up.

Q: I think all of us in the Foreign Service were aghast.

DINGER: Yes, even I, who was still very ignorant about the Foreign Service and ways of Washington, sensed what happened. I was aware that there was a major change of policy, but I don't recall being as stunned by the bloodletting as I would have been later in my career. Now I understand that I witnessed one of the legendary political house cleanings at State.

Q: Did you stay in touch with any of those figures?

DINGER: I little bit. I visited Jim Cheek in Kathmandu. He next was chargé in Addis Ababa (Ed: ambassador to the Sudan 1989 to 1992). He eventually decided to retire, but it was right when Bill Clinton was elected. Jim Cheek grew up in Arkansas. I saw Jim in Little Rock years later. He described what happened. He had turned in his badge. He was headed back to Little Rock. He got a call from the Clinton administration asking him to be assistant secretary for Latin American affairs. He told me that his wife said that was not going to happen. His previous experience was too bruising. She wouldn't tolerate him accepting the job. They offered him whatever job he wanted in Latin America. He chose ambassador to Argentina (Ed: where he served from 1993 to 1996).

Q: I interviewed Jim by phone, and right in the period I was interviewing him, he died.

DINGER: He was a really, really decent man. He died in 2011.

Q: Yeah, I think it was a quiet nastiness. One hears about, you know, Alger Hiss and all that. But here were some very bright people, very knowledgeable, and a great asset to the United States. Just treated like dirt by some crummy political appointees -- political types in the Senate.

DINGER: I don't know if you had time to get to that period in your interview with Jim, but he insisted to me later that he always got along well with Senator Jesse Helms. That's contrary to everyone's impression, which is that Jesse Helms blacklisted Jim and the other guys.

Q: Well, I don't know. So often it turns out when you have some of this nastiness, it's the staff on the committee or something.

DINGER: That's a good point.

Q: These are people who sort of enjoy throwing their weight around using their contact with the senator or representative, and then doing nasty things.

DINGER: John Bushnell, the PDAS, was one of the most competent people I ever worked around. In fact, much later we were both members of the Senior Seminar Alumni Association Board. He's just as competent and impressive now as he was then. Jim Cheek was a wonderful man, incredibly gracious. I feel that in a strange way it's sort of a privilege that I witnessed first-hand a chapter of State Department history that a lot of people know, certainly from my era.

Q: You were on board, weren't you, at the time this happened?

DINGER: I left the office at the end of December 1980. The Reagan administration came in a month later in January of 1981. That's when they cleaned house.

Q: Where did you go?

DINGER: I went to Fukuoka, Japan.

Q: Did you have any contact with Japan before?

DINGER: Zero. I had an adventuresome spirit and wanted the State Department and Foreign Service to let me experience the world. I had lived and worked in Europe and Latin America. I traveled every chance I could in those assignments. I thought maybe East Asia should be next. First and foremost, though, I wanted a non-consular job. But the system was very rigid. Even in Latin America where I was in the ARA Front Office I couldn't get a non-consular job, or at least not one I wanted. I think they mentioned political officer in Georgetown, Guyana, but I wasn't up for that. That put me back on the consular track.

Q: How did you end up in a small post in Japan?

DINGER: There were two jobs mentioned to me. In many ways they were similar. One was consular officer in Alexandria, Egypt via six months of Arabic. The other was consular officer in Fukuoka, Japan via six months of Japanese. As far as I was concerned it was almost a toss-up. My inclination, though, was East Asia and I chose Fukuoka. I

didn't even know precisely where it was. I thought it was where the winter Olympics had been held, which was Sapporo. Off I went to Fukuoka as head of its small consular section. It led to a total of four assignments in Japan.

Q: Who was in charge?

DINGER: The principal officer was Marilyn Meyers. It was a three-person post. There was an economic officer, I was the consular and administrative officer, and Marilyn was the principal officer.

Q: Fukuoka – that's in Kyushu. So what was the situation in Kyushu? I think of Japan as being pretty stable most of the time.

DINGER: Very stable. Once again, I was completely ignorant. I didn't know anything about Japan. People told me, "You're going to the best post in Japan." I later had several Japan assignments and yes, Fukuoka is probably the best place to serve in Japan. There had been earlier ant-American protests at the consulate. One of my predecessors, a guy I worked with in London, paid a price for them. He died in a house fire when he was consular officer in Fukuoka. He couldn't escape the fire because the house was next to the consulate and the windows had been barred during an earlier period of huge anti-base protests. By the time I was there, there was nothing like that. There were no protests.

Q. How were American military-Japanese relationships?

DINGER: Excellent. There was a little Air Force office at Fukuoka Airport, a couple guys. The consular district included a U.S. Navy base in Sasebo not so far from Nagasaki and a Marine Corps air station in Iwakuni not so far from Hiroshima. Nagasaki was in our consular district. Hiroshima was in Osaka's. The relationship between the community in Nagasaki and the base in Sasebo was good. There was some anti-base sentiment, particularly on the part of the Japan Socialist Party and some trade unions. But in general, the political setting was pro-American. We occasionally would have ship visits around the consular district and there was never any significant problem.

Q: Did you pick up much Japanese before you got there?

DINGER: I had six months of Japanese at FSI in Washington. I worked very hard, and got a 2-2 out of the six months of lessons. It was certainly serviceable for daily living. I was issuing lots of visas as the consular officer. But the refusal rate for Japanese visa applicants was negligible. It was rare to interview somebody.

Q: What'd you do as a consular officer?

DINGER: It was a full service consular section with around a half dozen FSNs (Foreign Service Nationals). We had a large NIV workload, albeit very routine. We issued immigrant visas and provided passport, citizenship, social security, and other American citizen services. We were a little federal building. We'd occasionally have the death or

arrest of an American citizen. The highest profile issue during that period was young American women who were described in some American media as white slaves.

Q: These are girls called to be entertainers or something like that and turn out to be a little bit more or quite a bit more.

DINGER: There was an element of truth to the stories, but I never came across a case as extreme as portrayed. Often they would end up being asked to entertain one level beyond what they anticipated. Most often they thought they were coming to sing in a club in Fukuoka. They might sing. But most of their value to the club was sitting with a Japanese customer and resting their hand on his leg so he would buy more drinks. We had a fair number of American Citizen Services cases involving those women, but never any as were sometimes portrayed as being locked in a room and forced into prostitution. That said, it wasn't the job the young woman thought she was going to have. It wasn't her big break into show business. They seemed nice and well-intentioned. They'd get into a dispute with their employer, particularly when they thought they weren't being provided the platform to entertain that they thought they were going to get. They'd come to the consulate to complain that their employer was holding their passport or was refusing to pay them. We could usually resolve the dispute quickly. Our Japanese staff would call the employer, explain that the American consulate was concerned, and resolve the problem. As I recall in every case we got them paid, got their passport back, got their return ticket, and got them safely off to their home in the U.S.

Q: Did you have much contact with the Japanese authorities, the police and that sort of thing?

DINGER: A fair amount. The consulate had been in Fukuoka for a long time. It was deeply embedded in the community. Fukuoka was a small city—well, not so small, probably a million and a half people—but relatively small. It had a small diplomatic community. The FSN's had been there forever with their contacts and institutional memories. Once in a while an American would be arrested and there were one or two in prison that I visited regularly. The Japanese knew inside out an agreement governing how Americans would be treated. I had to know it just as well to make sure that I understood the Japanese authorities' obligations, the American prisoners' rights, my authority, and things like that.

Q: Did you have much contact with the Japanese outside of work?

DINGER: Fukuoka was still a very provincial city and foreigners were a rarity. My commute illustrates what it was like. I initially lived in my predecessor's rented house in the suburbs. The bus began in my far-flung suburb, so I would always get a seat. By the time we got to the consulate, the bus was packed, absolutely jammed. The seat next to me would be empty. No Japanese would sit next to me. I think the passengers feared that I would turn and say something to them in English. The prospect horrified them. Japanese would stop me in the street to ask to take their photo with a foreigner. Little kids always yelled out to me the only words they thought to say in English. For some reason it was,

"This is a pen." That sort of thing seems cute, but after a while it grated and pushed some foreigners in Fukuoka over the edge.

Q: What did you do for fun?

DINGER: I was 29 and single when I went to Fukuoka. I was a little nervous about what social life I would have. In the end, I socialized with several American and British English teachers. We hung out together with Japanese friends. It was great, it was a lot of fun. Japanese cities have large, busy entertainment districts. In Fukuoka it's Nakasu, an island in the middle of a river downtown. There was one English teacher, a British guy who was about my age, Paul Shimuzu. We hit it off very well. We often went to a country-western bar and a Beatle's tribute bar that had live house bands. Fukuoka is a very traditional city and there's a whole thing of eating noodles in little stands along the river. We'd meet up with friends and maybe go to a bar. We'd follow that by eating noodles in one of the stands. It was an awful lot of fun. Once again I had no idea what I was getting myself into, parachuted into a place like that. It turned out to be wonderful. Marilyn Meyers, the principal officer, was terrific. I still stay in contact with her.

Q: Did you have any contact with our embassy in Tokyo?

DINGER: Occasionally on consular issues. Once in a while if Marilyn was gone, I was the next most senior person in charge and that might put me in contact with the embassy on other issues

Q: Were there any foreign policy things that were happening that caused demonstrations or anything like that?

DINGER: No demonstrations that I recall. It was the usual trade issues, for example the inability to sell American cars in Japan. It was a little before smashing Toshiba radios on Capitol Hill. All of that friction was present, but nothing exceptional in our relationship with Japan.

Q: Was the electronic digital revolution beginning to hit?

DINGER: It was beginning. There was a big multi-story electronics shop in downtown Fukuoka. If I had nothing to do on a Saturday, I'd go there. I remember riding up the escalator one day and hearing what I thought must be live music. It was a CD player. The first time I heard one. Things were going *so* quickly in terms of electronic advances that if I thought about buying a new stereo at the Post Exchange in Sasebo I hesitated because six months later there was going to be the next big thing.

Q: Is this the time of the Japanese challenge, you might say, the Japanese were considered to have the proper formula for success?

DINGER: The "Japan is Number One" era was ramping up about that time. We had an econ commercial officer but trying to help American firms sell their products in Japan

was a tough challenge. The principal officer focused on economic issues and maintaining ties. She spent a lot of time with communities that hosted bases, particularly Sasebo. She accompanied local leaders on visits to aircraft carriers, that sort of work.

Q: Did you get much of a chance to talk to Japanese who spoke English or in Japanese about issues?

DINGER: I didn't very much. It wasn't my job and it was unlikely that in a bar that I'd say, "Well, what do you think about trade friction?" Later, when I went to Yokohama for advanced language study, it focused on all the vocabulary for those issues and I got much more steeped in them. But not when I was in Fukuoka.

Q: Did you get involved with troops there? Particularly in Okinawa you sometimes get some American soldiers there getting in trouble. Was this a problem?

DINGER: We have a Status of Forces Agreement with Japan. On occasions when we'd get a call from the local police saying some serviceman had gotten in trouble we called the base. It had very strong contacts with the local communities. There were no big incidents. I don't recall a single incident involving the Marines in Iwakuni. Sasebo most of the time I was there didn't have any ship home ported. It was really sort of a family community. It was a very pleasant place to visit. Fukuoka was deeply Japanese, and so it was fun to drive over to the base once in a while and get a little taste of America.

Q: You left there when?

DINGER: I left there in 1983.

Q: Where'd you go?

DINGER: I kept having this yearning to try my hand out of the consular cone, at least for a while. There was an opportunity to do long term labor training. Labor was a stepchild of the political cone. A "real" political officer often wouldn't want to do a labor job. So they allowed a consular officer to take a labor assignment. I identified a job. I think it was labor officer in Dakar. I was going to do long-term labor training and then take that job.

One day I got a message from my career development officer. It said, "John, congratulations. You're accepted into long-term labor training. However, they abolished the job in Dakar." A familiar Foreign Service experience. "Do you still want long term-labor training?" I did, without knowing what it would lead to.

Q: You know, I've been doing this interviewing now for about 25 years. And early on I was interviewing people who'd been labor officers. And this was a very big deal in the Foreign Service. I mean they carried a lot of clout, particularly in Latin America, but also in Europe. And now labor plays a very minor role.

DINGER: It used to be a bigger deal. I had two labor assignments. I was assistant labor attaché in Tokyo, and then I was regional labor officer in South Africa some years later. In Tokyo, the assistant labor attaché covered opposition political parties, because they were all aligned with unions. So we were interested in labor in terms of domestic Japanese politics. In South Africa, labor was huge. When I was there, the labor unions were the only legal organization that blacks could join. A lot of the people who came into the political world once apartheid ended were former trade unionists. It surprised me that during the Clinton administration, when you had a Democrat in power, the State Department began to downgrade labor. So for example, there used to be S/IL, special assistant to the secretary for international labor affairs. It was a Seventh Floor job. State moved it into DRL (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor), eventually not even as a deputy assistant secretary. I have no explanation for why that happened.

Q: Well, of course labor has also lost much of its clout in the States. I guess one reflects the other.

DINGER: That's probably true. When I got into it, organized labor still had some international clout, very much driven by anti-communism. It was the Cold War. There was concern about the influence of communism in trade union movements around the world. It was part and parcel of our competition with the Soviet Union. That was a large focus of American trade unions overseas and labor at State. So there was a fair amount going on. It was a surprisingly swift decay of labor within the State Department. I was surprised that the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) as far as I could tell didn't protest or complain when the State Department downgraded the labor function.

Q: Did you see any other role for labor after the Cold War ended?

DINGER: I always looked at labor as a political actor. Certainly it was in the two labor assignments I had. Whenever I had a chance, I encouraged labor officers not to focus on negotiations over wages. I mean that might be of interest as an economic issue, but I always saw labor as a political actor, maybe even more so after the collapse of communism. The labor movement took great pride in its assistance to the Solidarity movement in Poland. It claimed, I think with some right, that it was a big factor in ending communism. I thought that was the way the labor function should go, that it was part of democratic pluralism. That should be the State Department's big interest.

During the Arab Spring I was in INR (Bureau of Intelligence and Research). As we watched things in Egypt, I asked, "Are there trade unions? You know, is this a way to get political parties set up and counterbalance the Muslim Brotherhood?" Labor had long been seen as a place where you foster democratic activists and parties. It's a useful focus that I think we lost. Labor can still be important, but the function at State is really a shadow of what it used to be.

Q: How did you find the training?

DINGER: It was good. It was a semester at Georgetown University. I was a student there. I think all the faculty were from Georgetown. I was once again ignorant. I knew nothing about organized labor so I learned a lot.

Q: Did they move you out to the field to deal with labor on the shop floor or something like that?

DINGER: I spent a couple days in Baltimore with the IBEW, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. I shadowed a shop steward, a guy who actually worked the shop floor. I spent another day with the Hotel Workers Union in DC. I remember spending it in the basement of the Mayflower Hotel and seeing what the workers and union representatives did. It gave me a real appreciation for labor that I didn't have before.

Q: Did you find that the people you met in the labor movement were interested in what we were doing internationally?

DINGER: So, so. There was a lot of international activity regarding labor. Every trade union had an international guy. They were experienced trade unionists and often had encyclopedic knowledge of their counterparts around the world. They were polite, but I sometimes got the impression they didn't feel they needed or wanted any help from a State Department labor officer like me who learned trade unionism from a book.

Q: Well then did you stay in Washington for a while?

DINGER: Only for a few months. As the assignment process worked its way through that fall semester at Georgetown, three options emerged: Oslo, Madrid, and Tokyo. I told the Department that my preference was Madrid or Oslo; I didn't want to go to Tokyo. I was in the Foreign Service to travel. The last thing I wanted was to go back to Japan, as much as I enjoyed my assignment in Fukuoka.

Guess what? I was assigned to Tokyo via a year of advanced Japanese language study in Yokohama, so four more years in Japan.

Q: You were in Yokohama from when to when?

DINGER: I was in Yokohama from 1984 to '85.

Q: OK, let's pick it up from there in our next session.

Q: Today is the 11th of March, 2013. This is an interview with John Dinger. And it's our second go-round. Where did we leave off?

DINGER: I was finishing long-term labor training and assigned to language training in Yokohama.

Q: What sort of a career did you see? Or what were you being told or did you prognosticate for yourself?

DINGER: I had a desire to do non-consular work, and an assignment as assistant labor attaché in Tokyo was my effort to get my nose under the tent as a political officer. As it turned out, my strategy was only partially successful. I never was able to change cones.

Q: I've often wondered about the cone system. It seems sometimes to be very rigid and other times to be pretty flexible.

DINGER: It was rigid where I was concerned. There was a process to change cones. There had to be a deficit of officers at grade and in the cone I wanted to enter. There was never a deficit of mid-level political officers. So it really wasn't going to happen.

Q: How was your Japanese by the time you went to Tokyo?

DINGER: I'd gotten a two-two out of my initial training before going to Fukuoka. I arrived in Yokohama with that two-two and finished I think with a three-plus-three. I was disappointed because I'd studied hard and usually succeeded in language training. I don't want to scapegoat, but I'm a skeptic about FSI Yokohama. The classroom training is great, very intensive. Another guy and I were in class together most of the year. We studied very hard. But the weakness is that I inevitably spent most of my time outside of class with the other students. The breaks were spent chatting in English, social life was often with other Americans -- we also had Canadian, New Zealand and Australian students. You need a lot of classroom training for sure, but I think it would be more effective to send people out into the countryside, maybe to provincial capitals where they would have to get conversation practice.

Q: How'd you do on characters?

DINGER: It took me an embarrassingly long time to discover that characters are key to grasping Japanese. Once you get that and a critical mass of characters, then your comprehension zooms up where you can hear a word and say oh, it must be those two characters and mean…. Also, you can start producing words. It's a lot like a romance language. Something clicks and you realize how to understand and produce words in conversation.

Q: What was the situation in Japan at that time? Was there any change-- not that I think there was a hell of a lot of change any time.

DINGER: I marvel at how little U.S.-Japanese relations change over decades. So it was the usual. The Liberal Democratic Party was in power. The opposition parties were closely aligned with the trade unions. My job was assistant labor attaché plus covering opposition political parties.

Q: Where did the labor part fit in the embassy?

DINGER: There was a labor consular, and I was the assistant. We were right down the corridor from the ambassador, who was Mike Mansfield. The Political Section was on the same floor but at the other end of the hallway. There was a little bit of tension between the labor consular and the political section. He was a very senior labor officer, John Warnock. He'd been S/IL, special assistant to the secretary for international labor affairs. He definitely did not want to be subordinate to the political consular, whom he outranked.

Q: What was the status of the labor movement in Japan? McArthur worked hard to set it up.

DINGER: The labor movement was large, wealthy, and influential. The trade unions supported the opposition political parties. Japan was plugged into the international labor movement, with close ties to the AFL-CIO. As the assistant labor attaché, I basically followed the opposition parties and tried to report on the implications their thinking had for U.S. interests in Japan.

Q: You were doing this from when to when?

DINGER: It was supposed to be a three-year assignment, beginning in 1985. However, within four months of taking over the job I was in the U.S. on home leave over the holidays and got a call from the DCM (deputy chief of mission). He asked me if I was interested in curtailing from Tokyo and moving to Sapporo to be consul general. In the end that's what I did. I spent only a year in Tokyo.

Q: Why Sapporo?

DINGER: Apparently they were not happy with candidates they had to fill the job. I'm forever grateful to the DCM, Desaix Anderson, who plucked me out of an FSO-03 job in Tokyo for a double stretch into an FSO-01 job in Sapporo. He didn't have much reason. I didn't have much of a track record in Tokyo. In fact, I was initially suspicious. I thought, "Are they trying to get rid of me from Tokyo?" I took the job and it was a great three years in Sapporo.

Q: Where is Sapporo?

DINGER: It's the capital of the northern island of Hokkaido. It's a city of about a million and a half people. The Sapporo consular district includes Hokkaido and the four northernmost prefectures of the main island of Honshu.

Q: Was the government there at odds at all with the central government?

DINGER: The governor, Yokomichi, was a member of the Japan Socialist Party, in contrast to the central government which the Liberal Democratic Party controlled. In Japan, if you're a local government official, all largesse comes from the central government. The governor and other politicians spend a lot of time in Tokyo or talking to

Tokyo, because that's where they get their funding. Taxes and other revenues are sent to Tokyo, and they go hat in hand to get it back.

Q: Was there a particularly strong labor movement up in Hokkaido? I wouldn't think there would be.

DINGER: No, there's not a lot of industry up there. I certainly didn't spend a lot of time on it.

Q: What were you up to?

DINGER: It was classic Foreign Service work representing the United States. It was the Cold War and the northern territories, which Japan and the Soviet Union disputed, are off the east coast of Hokkaido. There were any number of opportunities to report on attitudes toward the Soviets and the northern territories. Agriculture is always a big issue in U.S.-Japan trade relations. Hokkaido is a major agricultural producer. There were various incendiary agricultural issues. I remember one of the big ones was nonfat dried milk, of all things. Hokkaido has a big dairy industry. It was very concerned that U.S. exports of powdered milk to Japan would hurt it.

Q: The northern territories are code name for the Kuril Islands, right? It's always struck me that the greatest thing the Soviets ever did was to hang on to those barren islands. It saved us all sorts of trouble with Japan, didn't it?

DINGER: It undercut the relationship between Japan and the Soviet Union. You can argue it's only four islands or groups of islands that are not of much economic importance. An analogy might be if the Soviet Union occupied some of the Aleutian Islands. How would we feel? It becomes a matter of principle. It helps one think about Japan and the northern territories. There's also some aquaculture, for example, seaweed that Japanese like to harvest. Also, some fishing.

Q: I mean whenever Japan had any argument with the Soviets it could point to the Soviet occupation of the islands.

DINGER: And their refusal to return them. There was a population of Japanese who left the islands after the Soviets occupied them. They were still living mostly in Hokkaido. There were living beings who could recall their lives on the islands. You could go to the eastern part of Hokkaido where they had binoculars set up and see the islands, Soviet watchtowers, patrol boats, and such.

Q: Back in my military days I was with a radio listening outfit. And we had an outpost. They were always threatening to send us to Wakkanai.

DINGER: I've been there.

Q: Wakkanai did not sound like much fun.

DINGER: Part of a consul general's job is to travel the district. Twice a year I would take a trip around Hokkaido, including to Wakkanai, the northernmost city. It didn't seem like a bad place. By the time I was there, I'm not sure there was any American who permanently worked there. They would visit sometimes. But you're probably talking about Misawa, which was also in the consular district.

Q: I was in Misawa. There wasn't much there either except an airfield.

DINGER: There were some F-16s and a huge structure they called the elephant cage, a huge antenna.

Q: Was the Soviet menace considered much of a menace, or was that really just a political issue?

DINGER: I don't recall that there was any fear that the Soviets were going to invade Hokkaido. Nonetheless it was the Cold War. It was part and parcel of the general competition between the U.S. and Soviet Union around the world. We always tried to gauge whether there was any public sentiment favorable toward the Soviet Union in northern Japan.

Q: Were there any anti-American movements in that area at all?

DINGER: Only over some trade issues, particularly agricultural and fishing issues. We'd have once in a while a small protest. The fishing fleet in Hokkaido went to the coast of Alaska to catch Alaska pollock, which is used in surimi, fish paste. Fake lobster and other seafood that you see in the freezer section in the U.S. is produced from surimi made from Alaska Pollock. When I was consul general, the U.S. began to limit, and then severely limit the amount of Alaska pollock that Japanese fishing boats could catch and bring back to Japan. The fishermen were understandably upset about it.

Q: Was there any Russian or Soviet exchange with Japanese people, tours or anything like that?

DINGER: There may have been some. For example, some Japanese who lived on Sakhalin Island before World War II would travel back to visit where they grew up, but it was not a significant thing. A few Soviet cargo or fishing boats would come into Hokkaido ports.

Q: Was there harassment of Japanese fishing vessels?

DINGER: When anything like that occurred, it was usually Japanese vessels that were caught fishing off the northern territories. The Soviets would fine them and send them back. I don't recall any major incident.

Q: I don't imagine you got much American tourism up there, did you?

DINGER: Some. Sapporo is a major winter sports center. It hosted the 1972 Winter Olympics. It has wonderful skiing that I took full advantage of. Sapporo also hosts a pretty well-known snow festival. Americans who were resident in Japan sometimes were interested in seeing Hokkaido because it was considered to be different from the rest of Japan. The relationship between America and Hokkaido also goes back a long way. Advisors from the U.S. went to Hokkaido to help when the Japanese Government began encouraging its settlement and development around the 1870's. American advisors helped set up Hokkaido's agricultural industry and the mining industry, for example.

Q: What about the sale of American foodstuffs, rice, beef, and all that sort of thing? Is this a longstanding issue?

DINGER: We were always trying to encourage imports from the U.S. But it was virtually impossible. We made a real effort. For example, we organized an annual American products fair during the snow festival. A good crowd would show up. Our very active Foreign Service National would beat the bushes trying to play matchmaker between Japanese businesses that wanted to import an American product and an American producer. We tried to host a sector-specific trade show once a month. Getting access to Japan's construction market was a huge problem. We tried very, very hard to help get an American company involved in the design and engineering of a new airport outside Sapporo in Chitose. We just couldn't manage it. I think in a lot of those areas, either there was no growth in American exports to Japan or they actually went down.

Q: Was this part of the Japanese strategy of going slow on clearances and over-inspect things and that sort of thing?

DINGER: It included the "Japan is different" era. Japanese officials said things like, "We can't import American beef because Japanese intestines are different from American intestines." Or "We can't import American skis because Japanese snow is different." We had some fun with it during Sapporo's snow festival. That's when the big bulk of tourists came to see one-third scale sculptures of famous buildings like the White House made out of snow. We decided to do ice sculptures in front of the consulate general. When nonfat dried milk was a big issue, we froze a box of Carnation powdered milk in a big block of ice with a sign underneath saying, "I wonder if it melts in Japanese water too?" We did something like that every year I was there. It always attracted attention. Some critics said, "Why are you making fun of us during our big festival?" We replied, "Lighten up. We're just having a bit of fun during the snow festival."

Q: Was the exchange program very active and effective?

DINGER: We were proud that Sapporo successfully nominated more International Visitors than any other post in Japan, including Tokyo. We sent Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, who at the time was a member of parliament from Hokkaido. We sent the governor I mentioned, Yokomichi. We put a lot of effort into exchange programs.

Q: Did you find our apparatus taking care of foreign visitors worked well with the Japanese?

DINGER: I was very proud of the International Visitor program. I can't say whether it really changed hearts and minds. I always strongly believed that we should put together a schedule that met the visitor's interests, whether it reflected positively or negatively on the United States. I also looked for opportunities to introduce visitors to the "real" America. I encouraged a homestay on a farm. Those were some of the best stories that came back, how somebody visited a farm in the Midwest and their host family invited the neighbors over for a potluck. That stuff to my mind is money well spent.

Q: Were you too far away from the embassy to get much attention?

DINGER: At first, that was very unsettling for me. I was an FSO-3 sent off to be consul general. It was the first time I was on my own without a boss nearby to turn to. I reported to the DCM who gave me a very long leash. For the first year, I was uncomfortable with it. I was used to continual feedback, guidance, and direction. I hold that DCM, Desaix Anderson, in the highest regard, but it was a growth experience for me. I didn't go to Tokyo a lot. Some of my predecessors went every month or two, to check in with the embassy, do this and that. I went twice a year.

Q: Was there a tunnel between Hokkaido and Honshu?

DINGER: A tunnel was completed while I was there. In fact I got to participate in the opening ceremony and was on the first train through. I like to ride trains, so that was a treat for me. I think you can measure undersea tunnels lots of different ways: the portion undersea, the total length, et cetera. But I believe it's the longest undersea tunnel in the world.

Q: That's something when you go underneath, one thinks about what lies above.

DINGER: Right. The undersea portion is around 15 miles.

Q: What sort of a staff did you have at the consulate general?

DINGER: It was small. There was one other State Department officer, a second tour officer, and one USIA (United States Information Agency) officer. On the State side of the building there were maybe a dozen FSN's and on the USIA side, five or six.

Q: I imagine you had a fairly active USIA program there, didn't you?

DINGER: Yes. Again, it was the Cold War. We were near the Soviet Union. Sapporo had a million and a half people, and in many ways we were big fish in a very small pond. We had great contacts and lots of programs.

Q: Were there any other consuls there?

DINGER: To my recollection, the Soviet Union, South Korea, and People's Republic of China were there. So it was a small group, but high quality.

Q: How'd you all get along, or did you have to get along?

DINGER: It was cordial. We generally only ran into each other at events. This is before the bubble burst in Japan. There were lots of receptions. Often I'd be there with my counterparts from the other consulates.

Q: You said before the bubble burst. This is when there were books written in the United States about how we should follow the Japanese example and all. And it was overinvestment in property. Was anybody on our side that you were involved with pointing out this can't last?

DINGER: I don't remember any doubts about it.

Q: I don't either.

DINGER: I'd look at some of the public works projects and say, "You've got to be kidding me." I mean fabulous projects. "Let's build a huge tourist village theme park or host some sort of world's fair!" You'd look at the proposal and think, "This does not strike me as realistic." But they did it and they had the money -- well, they seemed to have the money. It was very fun and exciting to be around it.

Q: I heard it said that one of the things for somebody looking at Japan as being a beautiful place to visit, the construction wasn't the most edifying. An awful lot of what we would consider cultural monuments or attractive old style wooden houses were being wiped out and stuff. I mean you didn't see much regard for aesthetic effect or something.

DINGER: There are a lot of attractive scenes in Japan. However, when you look at the photographs on calendars, you wonder how narrowly the camera focused because there's no power line going through it, a side of the mountain isn't covered in concrete, or the seashore isn't covered in huge concrete barriers to limit erosion. The Japanese have used public works for economic stimulus for a long time and it shows. The United States uses defense spending. And both have similar weaknesses. We have to wonder whether the money is well spent. In the case of Japanese public works, they may not always be pretty, but at least the public directly benefits. The people get a bridge, a dam, a rail line, a subway, or whatever.

Q: Were there any consular cases that absorbed your attention?

DINGER: There always are. Some of the most heartbreaking cases to me always involved schizophrenics. It's extremely difficult to reason with them. I remember a schizophrenic kid who the police arrested because he was in the middle of a Sapporo intersection causing havoc. The consular officer called the parents and learned it wasn't

the first time the kid did that sort of thing. One memorable case came when an American died in Sendai, which was in the Honshu portion of the consular district. The consular officer called the spouse in the U.S. She asked that the body be cremated, which made it much easier for us since the Japanese don't embalm. She then requested that we send clippings of his hair and fingernails and a pint of blood to use in a memorial service in the U.S. The hospital was happy to provide everything, but said it might have trouble getting the blood, because it stopped circulating when he died. As we were turning over in our minds how we could meet the wife's request, the hospital called to say it got the blood. It wrung out his heart.

Q: My God.

DINGER: Nearly 30 years later it remains a memorable consular story. It's a little gruesome, but we met the family's request.

Q: Were young people from your area, Japanese, going to schools in the United States?

DINGER: I recall that we did a cable pointing out that the next generation of Japanese leaders might be "princelings," the children of the current generation of leaders, and they were all being educated in the United States. Although I'm sure it was more true of girls than boys.

Q: How did you find the media there?

DINGER: Good. There was a major newspaper called The Hokkaido Newspaper, (Hokkaido Shimbun). We had a fabulous relationship with it. Knew the editors and owners extremely well. I'm a little biased because I met my wife when she was working for the Hokkaido Shimbun.

Q: It strikes me from what I've seen that the Japanese media will sort of overwhelm any other group anywhere. Is this a Japanese thirst for knowledge, or is it entertainment, or what?

DINGER: You certainly don't want to underestimate the thirst for knowledge among Japanese. When I first went to Japan I thought newspapers had more than two editions a day. They certainly had morning and evening editions. But I definitely saw what you describe when I directed the State Department Press Office.

Q: You left Sapporo when?

DINGER: I left there in 1989.

Q: And the Japanese bubble was still expanding, I take it?

DINGER: As I recall, it was still intact.

Q: And then where'd you go?

DINGER: I had now spent basically eight years straight in Japan. I had a little hiatus when I went back for labor training. It had not been my plan in the Foreign Service to spend eight years in one country. Japan was fine, I enjoyed the work, enjoyed the people. But I wanted a change, so I got myself assigned almost as far away as possible, to Johannesburg, South Africa as the regional labor officer.

Q: Did you feel while you were there that you were either willingly or unwillingly becoming a member of the Chrysanthemum Club? In other words, the Japanese oriented Foreign Service Officers.

DINGER: It wasn't necessarily that I knocked on the door to join that club, but by the time I left I had all the attributes of a member of the Japan club. I had a 4-4 in Japanese. I had three assignments in Japan. I was married to a Japanese person. Principal officer Sapporo was traditionally a training ground for leaders of the Japan club. Looking at the photos of my predecessors on the consulate general wall in Sapporo, they were people who rose to the top of Japan affairs in the State Department.

Q: Was there a sense of competition with the China hands?

DINGER: I don't think we felt the need to compete. The Japan club was accused of being exclusive and a little arrogant. Plus, China had not yet really taken off.

Q: What was the situation in South Africa when you got there?

DINGER: It was exciting. I arrived at almost the same time that Willem De Klerk was elected president. He together with Nelson Mandela dismantled apartheid and brought democracy to South Africa. At the same time, the U.S. government was reluctant to change its policy, for example to impose economic sanctions. The attitude toward the U.S. among the people I dealt with in South Africa was suspicion.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you got there?

DINGER: William Swing.

Q: He was a Foreign Service Officer who served about everywhere.

DINGER: It was his third ambassadorship. His first two had been in very small African countries. He used to quip that Soweto had a larger population than the two previous countries he'd been ambassador to.

Q: What was the atmosphere in the embassy? Was it one of oh my God, if the African National Congress takes over it will be the Night of Long Knives or was there optimism?

DINGER: I don't recall any strong concern. There was an awful lot of sympathy for black South Africans, for non-whites, and a belief that change had to come. I was in Johannesburg. It's only a 40-minute drive from Pretoria. The focus of the Johannesburg consulate general's portfolio was on non-whites. We spent almost no time with Afrikaners or the government.

Q: What was your job?

DINGER: I was regional labor officer.

Q: Was there a black African labor movement?

DINGER: There was. Typical of me I was totally ignorant of that or about South Africa before I went. I had heard of Nelson Mandela, I had heard of the ANC (African National Congress), but that was about the extent of my knowledge. However, black trade unions were the catalyst that ended apartheid. South African industry, whether mining or manufacturing, had increasingly come to rely on black workers. The workers would become disgruntled and go out on wildcat strikes. One day the white managers at a manufacturing plant or a mine would show up and there would be no workers. The managers had no idea why. They didn't know what the grievances were, they didn't know to whom to talk to get them back to work. As this persisted there was a realization that they needed to let black workers organize to get things under control. A commission was set up, and South Africa decided to legalize black trade unions. It was the first and at the time only organized group that black South Africans could join. It was the beginning of the end of apartheid. That's what I covered.

Q: Was there a comparable white labor group?

DINGER: There were white and colored labor unions. But nothing on the scale of the black trade unions. They had been around some ten years and were well established by the time I got there.

Q: Had there been a hidden hand behind these work stoppages and all that? I mean was there a plan?

DINGER: Certainly the leadership of the biggest unions leaned towards the ANC, which was banned, and there were connections behind the scenes. But as I recall, most often the strikes were for workplace grievances, and the leadership took its trade union responsibilities seriously.

Q: It strikes me that your job would be kind of a difficult one, I mean because of the white antipathy toward anything dealing with the blacks and all.

DINGER: My big difficulty was overcoming the suspicion of the black trade unionists. Many of the leaders didn't want to meet with me. I would phone union offices to make an appointment to visit. I called over and over, and they didn't return my calls. I had a dial

telephone. My fingertip got a blister from dialing. Some people advised "Just show up at the door." I never felt comfortable doing that.

When I managed to see black trade unionists, it got more interesting. It was common for it to be me, a white guy from Iowa in a coat and tie sitting on one side of a table, and on the other side sat four or five black guys in T-shirts picturing a clenched fist or a hammer and sickle talking about the anti-apartheid struggle. They couldn't meet with me one-on-one. They told me they were afraid that their colleagues in the union might see them and think they had sold out. Those were days of "necklacing" in South Africa. If they weren't careful, they might end up with a car tire around their neck filled with flaming gasoline.

Q: Were you under instructions, or was this self-initiated?

DINGER: I did what Foreign Service Officers do, or should do: I made contact with and took the pulse of the people and organizations I covered. My goal was to try and figure out what black trade unionists were thinking about democracy. It was before the Berlin Wall fell. The Soviet Union and communism still existed. I wanted to figure out what the trade unionists were thinking and report it to Washington. The white government banned the AFL-CIO from South Africa. U.S. trade unionists couldn't get visas. The closest that an AFL-CIO representative could get was Lesotho where it had a representative. I would go there once in a while and compare notes about what he was hearing. For me personally, it was something so different from anything I'd ever experienced in my life. It was great, life changing.

Q: Well, these guys, the union representatives, could you establish a dialogue with them?

DINGER: It depended on the guys. None were big fans of the U.S. Government. Some of the bigger unions like the Mineworkers and Metalworkers and a central federation called COSATU, the Council of South African Trade Unions, were fairly sophisticated and confident. They would meet me. Two unionists from the Metalworkers agreed to be the first black South African trade unionists to travel on an International Visitors Program. Some of the smaller unions were harder. There was a smaller competing trade union federation called the National Council of Trade Unions, NACTU. The head of that federation when I met with him would always launch a tirade against America, the capitalist manipulator that was supporting the oppressor, and so on.

Q: Did we have a plan? I mean were we pushing them to join an international labor organization, or just sort of keep an eye on them, or hope they sort of behaved themselves in the international arena?

DINGER: It was all of the above. I can't recall whether they were members of the ICFTU, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. But we encouraged them to have international contact. I helped when I could facilitate contact between them and their American counterparts. I remember the Bricklayers Union in the United States was particularly active and eager to provide assistance. And then everything changed. The

Wall fell, communism was discredited, and apartheid ended. Everything was unbanned. It was a complete change.

Q: You were there when that happened?

DINGER: Yes.

Q: How did it unravel before your eyes?

DINGER: Mandela's colleagues were released first, shortly after I arrived. I attended a big rally welcoming their release in a stadium in Soweto. When Mandela was released in February of 1990, I was in Japan getting married. I watched it on TV. After I got back things were loosening up. About a year later the government suddenly unbanned the ANC and other organizations. I remember the day it happened very vividly. I commuted on a little 50cc motor scooter. That day as I passed through downtown Johannesburg on my way home someone had draped a communist flag from a window. It was illegal before. It was remarkable.

Q: How were the various white groups dealing with this?

DINGER: It depended. Among English-speaking whites there seemed to be a fair amount of support for the changes. Because they opposed apartheid from their homes with swimming pools in wealthy suburbs, some called them "swimming pool liberals." Afrikaners saw that their world was at serious risk. They disproportionately benefited from apartheid. The atmosphere during my three years in South Africa was highly charged politically. I never experienced the like before or after. There never seemed to be an occasion or event that wasn't about politics and apartheid; not a play, a concert, or social event. It was all political, all the time.

After the restrictions were lifted, I'd go to rallies in a big soccer stadium in Soweto. There would be only a handful of non-blacks, two of which were my wife and I. Tens of thousands of black South Africans sang songs that were riveting. Often men sang one part, women sang another, back and forth around the stadium. It was an amazing experience.

Q: The Zulus, Buthelezi and all? Were they different from the ANC?

DINGER: There was an incredible amount of black-on-black violence, particularly between the Zulu connected to Inkatha and the Xhosa connected to the ANC. My understanding is that there was longstanding rivalry between the two tribes. As apartheid ended, it became about power. I visited the aftermath of some of the violence. Inkatha supporters often lived in hostels, huge dormitories for single laborers. They would flood out of the hostels in the middle of the night into non-Inkatha neighborhoods and slaughter people. It was horrific. I went to, I think it was Phola Park outside Johannesburg, after one attack. I talked to the people who were attacked. South African Police vehicles called Caspers were patrolling up and down the streets.

Q: Doesn't sound like much fun.

DINGER: Not fun, a little scary, but also fascinating. I recall that when we left Johannesburg after three years and the plane lifted off, I gave a sigh thinking, "Whew, I made it."

Q: But you know, I remember I was in INR, Intelligence and Research, back in the late 1950's. And I had the Horn of Africa. And my colleagues who were dealing with South Africa were talking about a Night of Long Knives. You know, when the blacks take over. I mean they figured it would happen. Was there still concern that there would be groups going around?

DINGER: The ANC, led by Mandela, said the right things. In contrast, a less influential group, the Pan-Africanist Congress, had a slogan, "One settler, one bullet," which is what you're talking about. It was painted on walls. I remember a couple of occasions when my wife and I went to a rally or visited Soweto. As we walked by a group of black South Africans, they muttered, "One settler, one bullet," aimed at our ears. It was a little unsettling, but not common. The mainstream of the ANC didn't telegraph that attitude. It also had white members.

Q: Later there seemed to be a breakdown in police authority as far as break-ins, rapes, thievery, et cetera. Was there much of this when you were there?

DINGER: Johannesburg had a lot of crime. My wife and I lived in a rooftop apartment in a nice area of Johannesburg called Killarney. We didn't feel too threatened. Many staff lived in single-family houses. They enjoyed having a pool and tennis court. Most of them also wanted a high fence and a big dog for security. They had safe havens, so if somebody invaded their home they could bar themselves in a bedroom. They had panic buttons that called private security firms.

Virtually everybody in the consulate was robbed while we were there. We only lost a car radio, and were never personally robbed. My colleague who was a wonderful Foreign Service Officer, Ron Trigg, lived within walking distance of the consulate general downtown. He was robbed so many times walking to work that he started carrying his stuff in a plastic grocery bag. He got tired of losing briefcases.

At work I parked on the street outside the consulate general. If I stayed late, the first thing I did when I left for home was see if my car was stolen. The second thing was to see if anybody suspicious was in sight. Then I'd dart to the car. If I stopped at a traffic light downtown, I always kept my foot on the clutch to be ready to escape a carjacking. Many white South Africans were armed. I saw guns drawn on the street a couple of times, both involved confrontations between an Afrikaner and a black crowd.

Q: During this time how stood the labor movement? I mean what developed out of this?

DINGER: When I left, the political opening was just beginning to gain steam. Elections were two years off. But I think a lot of the black political leadership came out of the trade union movement. It really was a training ground for the new South Africa.

Q: Did you get many visitors from America?

DINGER: Many prominent Americans, including sports figures and entertainers, wouldn't visit South Africa. Secretary of State James Baker visited while I was there. Assistant Secretary for Africa Hank Cohen came occasionally. As things changed, Paul Simon came and performed. Black American tennis great Arthur Ashe visited. Those were breakthrough moments in U.S.-South Africa relations.

Q: What was your impression of Mandela?

DINGER: He and De Klerk are examples of what two individuals can do as leaders. There was every reason to think that South Africa would descend into chaos and interracial strife, but it didn't. I'd meet trade unionists and activists, and they'd say, "I spent eight years on Robben Island with Mandela," or "Police killed my brother," or tell me other horrific personal stories. And yet, Mandela led black South Africans away from revenge. When I see examples in the world where it looks like things might descend into chaos and violence, I think what a difference the right leadership makes.

Q: Where did you go after that?

DINGER: I was assigned to senior training. I spent an academic year at the Hoover Institution in Stanford, California as a national security fellow. I thought it would be fun to live on the west coast.

Q: The Hoover Institution has a reputation for being a fairly conservative place. Was it then?

DINGER: Absolutely. A strong libertarian bent.

Q: Libertarian. I always think about the tower there, Herbert Hoover's last erection. What was it like when you went there?

DINGER: It was a real eye-opener. Hoover had resident fellows. Many not only had degrees from Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, they had taught at Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. They had no respect whatsoever for my modest academic pedigree of a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Northern Iowa. I felt they were surprisingly divorced from the realities of making and implementing policy. I concluded that their goal often was to stake out a position and then defend it, regardless of any counterarguments -- there was never on the one hand and on the other hand. It boosted my confidence for the rest of my career. I'll paint with a broad brush, but I saw people with sterling academic pedigrees whose work frankly I didn't respect.

Q: Particularly at the Hoover Institution, you have people who were very right wing, so you'd go there to help boost your credentials.

DINGER: It's possible that if I had been at Brookings, which is more akin to my thinking, maybe I would have come away with a different impression. Another national security fellow was Lieutenant Colonel John Abizaid, who later became CENTCOM (United States Central Command) commander. We spent a lot of time together. Since Hoover, if we run into each other we remark on our similar view of our experience. Abizaid, as I recall, only had his degree from West Point. So he was cast into the same lot as me with not much respect for our intellectual prowess.

Q: I read the memoir of somebody who had attended an academic university, I think it was Stanford, but saying that you had these people getting up giving lectures and you couldn't understand them. I mean they were almost speaking a foreign language, you know, on international relations, creating models and all that. I mean did you find it was a different world?

DINGER: That's what I'm alluding to. They create models, and I knew that's not how it really worked. Even though some of them had been in previous administrations. A lot of them had been in the Reagan administration. It surprised me to see work that I felt was overly academic and not related to the real world.

Q: What were you getting out of this?

DINGER: The greatest value I got out of it was an understanding of what think tanks are. Now when I go to Brookings, or the Council on Foreign Relations, or Heritage, I view what I hear through a much more skeptical lens. I don't automatically give credence to what I hear, regardless of the prestige of the academic or think tank. Apart from that, I early on got an onward assignment to be deputy director of Japanese affairs. I audited a lot of classes at Stanford that dealt with Japan, the banking system or political system or whatever.

Q: One of the things I've noted as I've talked to maybe a thousand Foreign Service Officers is how little connection there is between people who write political science articles and serving officers. They don't seem to have much to tell each other, or at least it doesn't get told. We sort of go our own way.

DINGER: You're absolutely right. I should acknowledge that the Hoover Institution was generous. They provided office space and administrative support to me for a year. But as far as I could tell, they had no respect for the practical on-the-job experience that John Abizaid and I brought . And vice versa, I didn't end up with much respect for what I would call their overly theoretical thinking.

Q: So then what'd you do?

DINGER: Then I went to be deputy director of Japanese affairs in the State Department.

Q: You did this for how long?

DINGER: Two years, 1993 to '95.

Q: Had things changed in Japan?

DINGER: The bubble had burst. Also, while I was in that job the LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) lost power for a brief time, which was the first time since the 1950s.

Q: Did it mean anything?

DINGER: We wrote lots of memos claiming it did: There's going to be a vigorous opposition, a democratic rotation of political parties, and all that comes with that. We have to welcome it. In fact, nothing changed.

Q: Japan and company took over and smoothed out all the bumps.

DINGER: The Japan Socialist Party came to power. There was a Socialist prime minister. It lasted around a year and a half before the LDP returned to power. In the end, not much changed.

Q: I would think the economic change would have a profound effect on the Japanese who rely on face and all that. I mean here they had been holding their heads high in the world and all of a sudden, they're the first of a number of countries to really fall on rough times.

DINGER: Even then the thinking didn't seem to particularly change in Japan. There was some sucking of teeth and bemoaning of slow growth. But beyond that, the Japanese were pretty comfortable. Its products were still admired. Its trade surplus was still very positive. There was some dissent, I suppose. But most Japanese were pretty comfortable in their thinking about what their country and society stood for. We may not always have liked or thought the lack of change in policies was in our interest, or even Japan's interest. But that's the way they thought.

Q: Having a Japanese wife, particularly one who'd been involved in the media and all that, was it handy to turn to her and say, "What do you think about this or sort of what's the mindset that I'm having to look at?"

DINGER: We talked over the dinner table. My wife is extremely smart. I learned early on to acknowledge her way of thinking about Japan. She would consider herself to be progressive in many respects, but in other respects she's very traditional in the way she feels about Japan and Japan's place in the world.

Our ambassador was Walter Mondale. I had the impression that he believed "I'm a politician, they're politicians, we know each other and how politicians think. We can fix our differences over trade." I also recall getting the impression that he discovered it didn't

work that way. Japanese think their own way. He felt frustrated that he couldn't change their minds and policies, particularly toward opening up their market.

Q: How did you feel the military to military relationship was with Japan?

DINGER: It was good. We were after them to increase their defense spending. They strictly capped their defense spending at 1% of GDP (gross domestic product). A lot of their spending really benefited us. They spent a lot of money on our base infrastructure, so long as it wasn't directly related to military operations. They wouldn't build a runway, but they would build the apron, the hangers, housing, as I recall. I was always a little bit skeptical whether we really wanted Japan to build further its military capability. Japan's a treaty ally, but it has a huge economy. If it pumped the money into its security forces that we were telling it to spend, I'm not sure we would have been comfortable. The other talking point that was constant was that Japan should play a political role in the world commensurate with its economic role. That was another one that I wasn't sure we wanted.

Q: We talk about whether Germany should really have its place in the world. Well yes, but—

DINGER: Right. I mean that's fine and we're happy so long as they do what we ask. But what if Japan decided to disagree with us on X, Y, or Z issue. What then? So I always felt that those talking points were not necessarily completely thought through.

Q: Were there any high-level Japanese visits? Those visits aren't particularly significant, are they?

DINGER: The big visit was the first state visit by the Japanese emperor in 20 years in 1994. I was the control officer for the Japan Desk. It was interesting and fun to be involved in planning the details of the White House ceremony and state dinner. I think it was one of only a few state visits President Clinton hosted.

Q: How about more routine visits?

DINGER: They were relentless. Whether it was Japanese Diet members, the prime minister, or foreign minister it was continuous. They probably contributed to our relationship in some fashion. We would spin up and do the briefing papers. The Japanese embassy had all the contacts it needed. It would make most of the appointments outside of State and handle the scheduling itself. Often the Japan desk would just play a backup role facilitating if necessary. Generally, the Japanese embassy would go right to the White House and set up the appointment for the prime minister and the president.

Q: In your office, was there any cooperation or joint activity dealing with China, for example? I was wondering whether in an organization covering two particularly major powers in it. And particularly the rise of China and China getting bigger and bigger in

world affairs, whether you would feel on the China thing that you were playing almost a, if not a losing game, a game in which your influence is going to be getting less and less.

DINGER: I was on the Japan Desk ’93 to ’95. My memory is that our principal concern with China was relative to our Taiwan policy and whether there was going to be a conflict. I don’t think China had reached its critical mass yet.

Q: What about South Korea, because you know the Japanese were not very nice to the Koreans when they took over in 1910 or so. They subjected the Korean people to a pretty brutal regime. And then for a long time South Korea was considered kind of a basket case. And all of a sudden it’s coming forth at this point. Did this have any repercussions within Japan?

DINGER: There were hints of change in a very complex relationship. I remember a fabulous cable that came out of the embassy in Seoul when a Japanese self-defense force ship visited South Korea for the first time in memory. The cable said that a short time earlier it would have been unthinkable that a Japanese warship would visit South Korea. You had to go back into the mists of time to understand why.

Q: It is really remarkable. I mean it’s sort of like the British looking at the Americans. You know, the colonial power and all. Those colonialists all of a sudden realize they’ve got a rather large flourishing power on their flank.

DINGER: There’s a lot of historical baggage, but I think the relationship between South Korea and Japan may transform. My wife shows an admiration for South Koreans: the devotion to education, the go-get'em spirit, the success. Whether it’s TV shows or industry, it’s amazing.

Q: How’d you find the Japanese embassy? Pretty effective organization?

DINGER: Very effective. The Japanese were very smart, intense, and persistent, whether it was trade or the minutia of managing the relationship. Whether it was agreeing on a joint press statement or how many people were going to sit in a meeting, they could be relentless. If we were preparing for a visit and the embassy had instructions from Tokyo that a certain meeting needed to take place, I told people, “There’s an easy way to do this, and there’s a hard way to do this. The easy way is just to do what the Japanese are asking. The hard way is to argue about it and eventually do what they want. You may as well give in, because the Japanese aren’t going to.”

Q: Well, this is true with Koreans. You can’t really say no to a Korean. They had the instructions from above and I’ve sometimes seen the sweat pop out from somebody’s face because they have obviously instructions to get something done. And if they don’t get it done, they’re in deep kimchi, you know?

DINGER: I remember a senior person who dealt with Korea telling me that one time he was at home on Thanksgiving Day having dinner with his family, and the phone rang. It

was the South Korean embassy wanting an additional person in some upcoming meeting. The Japanese may be a little more subtle but are similarly dogged.

Q: I'm looking at the time. This is probably a good place to stop now. And we want to pick this up again when you leave the Japanese desk?

DINGER: I went to be director of the State Department Office of Press Relations.

Q: OK good, we'll pick it up then.

***

Q: Today is the 18th of March, 2013 with John Dinger. And John, where did we leave off?

DINGER: I was just finishing an assignment as deputy director in the Office of Japanese Affairs and was moving to be director of the Office of Press Relations in the Bureau of Public Affairs.

Q: How would you say at the time you took it over in 1995 the State Department stood vis-à-vis the media?

DINGER: We believed that we had the most energetic press operation in the U.S. government. You might think it would be the White House or Pentagon, but neither held daily press briefings, which we did. In terms of dealing with the press, we were certainly a major if not the major press operation in the U.S. government. My office had a staff of 25, held a daily briefing, and issued lots of statements, fact sheets, and other information. We had maybe a dozen to 20 journalists who worked in offices in the State Department. Most of the major media was there. It was a stressful job, but I learned a tremendous amount.

Q: It really is remarkable that if you have press briefings you attract papers that otherwise might not pay much attention unless there was some major thing happening.

DINGER: You don't want to forget the foreign press, too. We had quite a few foreign media that would attend our briefing or pour over the transcript. Even if the U.S. media didn't pick up something, the foreign media might.

Q: Did you have a piece of the action?

DINGER: I was primarily behind the scenes, although I sometimes conducted the briefing. I was number three in the pecking order. The spokesperson was Nick Burns, the deputy spokesman was Glyn Davies, and I was next. I was in charge of the troops. We did all the preparations for all the daily briefings, put out all the statements, put out transcripts of the briefings, and hosted the journalists in a room not too far from the briefing room. We owned the briefing room. We organized the press any time the

secretary appeared, photo-ops and such. If a senior State Department official gave a briefing, we organized that as well.

Q: If any world leader came through, did you get the press ready for them?

DINGER: If they met with the Secretary, there would usually be a press event on the Seventh Floor. The first year Warren Christopher was secretary, maybe the first year and a half. After that it was Madeleine Albright. Before a press event, Nick Burns would brief the Secretary about what the press might ask. Very often it had nothing to do with the leader who was visiting. I would go to the press room and ask the journalist if there was anything in particular they planned to ask the Secretary. I argued that it was better for the Secretary to be prepared, so he could give an answer. The staff in the press office would make sure that all the logistics were taken care of so the media was screened, their cameras were set up, the ropes and stanchions were in place, the sound was working, flags looked good, everything to make sure it went smoothly.

Q: Was there an attempt to brief the press corps on say the leader of Bolivia? I would think although these were skilled people, probably a good number didn't know about Bolivia or what to ask.

DINGER: In many cases, the U.S. press corps wasn't interested in the visitor. Apart from the wire services, none were going to report on the visit. There wasn't anything that was going to make the nightly news. If they did want information, often a regional bureau's press staff was very capable and eager to provide it. But for us in the central press operation, our focus was major American media, the major newspapers and television. We might give out fact sheets about the foreign leader's visit and that sort of thing. But as everyone has witnessed, often the American media's questions have nothing to do with the visitor, they're about the issue of the day in the U.S.

Q: Were there any particular issues that stand out when you were there?

DINGER: We dealt with every major foreign policy issue that came up. A lot of those issues are enduring. For example, China, Taiwan, the Middle East including settlements. Arguably one of the biggest issues for the Clinton administration was Bosnia and the Dayton Accords. When I arrived on the job, Bosnia was really picking up steam, a massacre at Srebrenica had just happened. Negotiations took place at Dayton, Ohio. Richard Holbrooke was a major figure and he was certainly not shy about briefing the press.

Q: Did you get Holbrooke in from time to time to talk?

DINGER: Yes, he was always eager to be available for the press.

Q: How good was he in your estimation?

DINGER: He had a very charming way about him and was very at ease in front of the press. Journalists liked him. I would sometimes introduce him in the briefing room. People have lots of different opinions about Richard Holbrooke, but in terms of the press I would say he was quite effective. I contrast his style with Dennis Ross who was in charge of Israel-Palestine negotiations. He had a far different approach and rarely briefed the media.

Q: You mentioned Taiwan. Did Taiwan stir much interest by this time?

DINGER: There was a crisis when China fired missiles around Taiwan. The U.S. sent two carrier battle groups to the region. Whoever was briefing had to make sure that they had memorized in perfect detail our China policy.

Q: One has to not forget a comma.

DINGER: I don't remember the mantra any more, but I certainly knew it then. Other enduring issues included Iran, Cuba, Iraq. We maintained no-fly zones established in northern and southern Iraq. Once in a while Iraqi radar would light up and our planes would attack it. There were a lot of issues that are maybe not identical to today, but are similar.

Q: How about Israel? The settlements were always an issue, weren't they? Was the Israeli press all over this issue, or did they kind of leave it to others?

DINGER: Israeli journalists would attend the briefing if some issue was hot. There was a veteran Associated Press correspondent, Barry Schweid, who was deeply steeped in Israel-Palestinian issues. Barry kept a close watch on what was going on in the Middle East and would frequently ask questions. Settlements were one of the major topics and whether the United States was hinting that we approved new settlements. The question was phrased: did we give the Israelis a green light to expand settlements?

Q: How about Al Jazeera? Was that in existence?

DINGER: I'm not sure Al Jazeera existed. Just to show how things change, Fox News launched while I was in the press office. It approached us, it wanted space in the room that we had for journalists. We were skeptical about whether it merited it.

Q: What was your impression of the savvy or the response of various bureaus in the State Department to news requests? Were some better than others?

DINGER: We totally relied on the expertise of the bureaus and their press offices. The State Press Office's senior Civil Service employee and I would come in early. I usually got in around 6:30 am to look through six or seven daily newspapers. It was pre-Internet, so all hard copies. We tried to anticipate what was going to come up in the briefing. We decided what the questions might be and farmed them out to the bureau press offices.

They would organize answers. If necessary, they would bring down their expert. By and large, they were very good.

Some were a little uneven. The key thing was that we needed something for the spokesman to say. There was a predilection among some to tell us, "That topic's too sensitive, we don't want to say anything." You can't leave the spokesman at the podium with simply nothing to say. He at least needed some standard talking points. If he had nothing, there was a risk that the spokesman was going to make up something the bureau wouldn't like. Most understood that and provided excellent support.

In those days most of the directors of the State Department Press Office were State Foreign Service Officers like me, not USIA. USIA officers often led regional bureau press offices. They tended to have good experience dealing with the press.

Q: Did you get involved with other parts of Public Affairs, the Historians Office, for example?

DINGER: I was the number three person in the Bureau of Public Affairs, so to some extent, I was involved in other parts of the bureau, certainly I attended meetings with the Historian's Office.

Q: How did you find the Historians Office? I served there for a short time and it had personnel problems for a long time.

DINGER: Some of the Historian's Office work is pretty academic. The Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series, for example. I don't recall personnel issues. Later, when I was in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, we picked up several staff who left the Historian's Office and came to INR. Many were very capable.

Q: Where'd you go afterwards?

DINGER: After the Press Office I went to the Senior Seminar.

Q: You were doing that from when to when?

DINGER: I was in the 40th Senior Seminar class from 1997 to 1998.

Q: How'd you find it?

DINGER: Fabulous. It was the best, most useful education that I got in the State Department, setting aside language training.

Q: Where'd you go?

DINGER: The Senior Seminar studied the domestic underpinnings of foreign policy. So it was very much focused on the United States. We traveled all over the U.S. I remember Miami, Chicago, Indiana, San Diego, Alaska, New Orleans, New York….

Q: Did anything sort of stick out in your mind, maybe that you'd been either unaware of or not understood as well as you did before your Senior Seminar focus?

DINGER: Absolutely. I had spent most of the previous 20 years overseas. That was before satellite TV and the Internet, so often there was little direct contact with the United States. Our seminar focused on the environment, for example. That's one reason we went to Alaska. In Chicago we focused on crime and visited Cabrini-Green, a notorious public housing project. We went to the Mississippi Delta, Memphis and Clarksdale, Mississippi. It's difficult to overstate how useful the seminar was later in terms of representing the United States, understanding what America was all about. I still draw on what I learned.

Q: Did the Senior Seminar have the individuals in it focus on any particular things?

DINGER: We were the 40th Senior Seminar. So there was 40 years of experience in terms of the organization.

Q: I was the 17th.

DINGER: Oh yeah? We built on the tried and true method. At the beginning of the year we decided on themes which we wanted to explore. I recall it being crime, education, environment, not sure what else. We split up into committees which organized sessions on those issues either in Washington or during trips. I'm now President of the Senior Seminar Alumni Association, by the way.

Q: The war colleges often left the members, particularly in the State Department, with good contacts within the military. Was there much outreach to the military?

DINGER: Our military members organized visits to military installations, for example, airborne at Fort Bragg, SEAL training in San Diego, armor at Fort Knox, basic training at Fort Jackson near Charleston. I still remain in touch with some of the military colleagues who were with me in Senior Seminar.

Q: You left there it'd be '98?

DINGER: '98.

Q: Wither?

DINGER: I went to Tokyo as consul general.

Q: How did you happen to end up as consul general in Tokyo?

DINGER: It was not a job that I sought. I did not want to be consul general, I didn't want to return to consular work, and I didn't want to return to Japan. The assistant secretary for consular affairs, Mary Ryan, determined that I was a round peg for a round hole and to put it bluntly, forced assigned me to Japan. That said, it was Tokyo. My wife is Japanese. Our bilingual son was able to spend some of his early childhood in Japan. It was hard to complain too much. I sucked it up, I took some deep breaths, I said OK, this is the hand that I was dealt, I'm going to make the most of it.

Q: How stood Japanese-American relations at that time?

DINGER: They were good. They're always good, it seems to me.

Q: Japan's bubble had burst. But was it recovering?

DINGER: I left Sapporo in 1989, so it had been quite some time since I'd been back. It was dramatically different. I had my consular work, which I took seriously. But additionally, the DCM asked me to serve as "consul general of the Kanto" which is Tokyo's consular district. The embassy Political Section focused almost exclusively on national politics and rarely got outside Tokyo. I was very pleased to travel around the Kanto region of Japan, with which I wasn't very familiar. I visited all the provincial capitals, there are quite a few. I was really struck by how little spirit and hopefulness there seemed to be. In a lot of the provincial capitals the downtowns were empty and shuttered. In part as a result of big box stores that opened in the suburbs. It was in incredible contrast to when I was in Sapporo and the provincial people had big dreams and ambitions. Now I was struck that most of the provincial officials were just waiting, hoping that Tokyo was going to make something good happen. Hoping that their ship was going to come in. A huge difference.

Q: It had taken the spirit out of much of the entrepreneurship, hadn't it?

DINGER: There was no ambition out there. It was distressing. I also was asked to cover communities that hosted U.S. military bases in the region. That was primarily Yokosuka and Atsugi for the Navy, Zama for the Army, and Yokota for the Air Force. There were some smaller bases, too. It was interesting to see the U.S.-Japan security relationship at the grassroots level.

Q: Well, were the Japanese looking at what caused the bubble to burst and how not to do it again?

DINGER: I don't remember having a great sense that they were doing a lot of soul-searching. We thought deregulation of the economy could revitalize it, unleash Japan's potential. Japanese tend to rely on public works spending to stimulate the economy. Therefore you see huge highways and tunnels and concrete hillsides. But that wasn't working. The provincial capitals were dead in the water. I visited Nagano, site of the 1998 Winter Olympics. Only a year later local officials worried that the spending had

no lasting impact. For the most part it was very gloomy. A huge difference from when I'd been in Japan before.

Q: Well, was there a falling off of visits to the States by Japanese?

DINGER: We couldn't gauge tourist travel well in the Consular Section because by that time the visa waiver program had kicked in. However the number of student visas, which were still required, was very large. I think Japan in those days sent more students to the United States than any country. A lot of them were for short-term English language study in the summer.

Q: Students going to the United States, how did it work for them coming back? Because I know in Korea, it's terribly important to have university ties. And if you go away to a foreign school, an American school, highly thought of and all, you weren't making the connections with the proper class from Seoul University or something.

DINGER: It's the same in Japan. I'll give you an example of what you're saying from when I was in Sapporo. There was a woman who was teaching at Hokkaido University. She had degrees from Oxford and Harvard, and the only job she could get when she got back to Japan was at Hokkaido University. It's a fine university, but it's not the University of Tokyo. She was disappointed.

Q: Did you see any impact in the embassy?

DINGER: The embassy benefited immensely from it. In my absence between my assignments in Sapporo and Tokyo, there had been a complete turnover in the locally hired staff. When I left Sapporo in 1989 it was still the post World War II generation of Japanese staff. They were legendary in terms of their commitment and their skill and their dependability and all those things notable about Japanese workers.

When I returned to Tokyo in 1998 they had almost all retired. Young women who had studied in the United States replaced them. They came back to Japan and their career opportunities were limited. One, they had studied in the United States, and two, they were women. We hired them and they were fabulous. They'd been to four years of college in the United States. They were smart and their English was superb. As much as I cherished those FSN's that I had known during my previous assignments in Japan, the new generation was terrific.

Q: We had the same situation in Korea. Our embassy had absolutely first rate women. Because particularly women who were married for the most part weren't supposed to work. But they could work for the Americans, because we had decent hours. They could be home in time to cook their husbands meals.

You had been away, although of course you'd been looking at it from the Washington side from time to time, but did you sense that Japanese were looking at their place in the world differently? I mean that China was beginning to rise and all?

DINGER: Japan has often been concerned that the world, and especially the U.S., doesn't pay enough attention to it. It may have been in that era when they began talking about "Japan passing." It encompassed the sense that the world was passing by Japan. It was exemplified when a senior American official would fly to East Asia and go to Beijing or Seoul, flying over Japan without stopping. So there was some of that. It may have been more heightened then. But that's been a lingering issue with Japan for a long time.

Q: What were your main preoccupations?

DINGER: Mary Ryan was very big on providing good customer service to applicants, whether American or foreign. I put a lot of effort into making sure that people got top notch, friendly service, whether they were Americans, Japanese, or third country nationals. If they came to the American embassy they were going to have a good experience. I had FedEx, Disney, and Starbucks come and talk to our staff about their approach to customer service.

Q: Were there any consular issues that were as intractable as economic issues?

DINGER: Apart from customer service, I had three issues that I decided would be my "triple play." One was a Social Security Totalization Agreement. Japanese and U.S. businesses had to pay into both retirement systems. An agreement avoids that. It had been lingering for many years. We accomplished it while I was there. Second was making it possible for U.S. prisoners to serve their sentences in the United States. Another issue that had been lingering for many years. We persuaded the Japanese to accede to the Hague Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons, basically a prisoner transfer treaty. Third, which I didn't accomplish, was persuading the Japanese to accede to the Hague Convention on International Child Abduction. It deals most commonly with parents getting divorced and one of the parents taking the children overseas. The DCM at one point speculated that if I spent another year in the job I would have accomplished that too.

Q: The issue was what?

DINGER: In most marriages between Japanese and Americans the husband is American and the wife is Japanese. Most commonly they were living in the United States and divorced. The mother took the children to Japan without permission and would not allow the husband to visit or have any custody rights. There's an international convention that establishes how that can be dealt with through the judicial process. It's not a perfect solution and doesn't mean that people are going to be happy with the outcome, but at least it provides a process to deal with it.

Q: Did you get any feel for the Japanese community in the United States? Pretty well dispersed, California?

DINGER: I didn't get much of a feel for that. My impression is that many contemporary Japanese don't feel any need to leave Japan. They're pretty happy. I'm not sure they move to the United States unless they have something professional or personal that motivates them to leave Japan. That said, concentrations outside Hawaii probably include New York which has a lot of Japanese businesspeople. Of course, the West Coast has a Japanese-American community descended from those who came before the 1920s.

Q: Did you have a significant number of American troops in your consular district?

DINGER: Definitely. Most U.S. troops were in Okinawa, but we had Yokota Air Base, Camp Zama headquarters of U.S. Army Japan, and Yokosuka Naval Base headquarters of U.S. Navy Japan and the 7th Fleet..

Q: Okinawa always seems to be a thorn in the side. Did you get involved in any of the cases there?

DINGER: Not too much. There's a Status of Forces Agreement, so from a consular perspective, those cases were dealt with by the military or at a political level. When we were working to allow convicted Americans to serve their sentences in the United States, I visited a Japanese prison outside of Yokosuka where all convicted American servicemen were held, including the ones who got in trouble in Okinawa. They would benefit from the agreement. Okinawa was a tough case. Some 20,000 young single men. Most of them were very disciplined. But they were young single men and they sometimes did stupid and even appalling things. It understandably distressed the Okinawans.

Q: Did any aspect of North Korea fall into your province?

DINGER: Only indirectly. One consular issue we were concerned about was if there were a conflict on the Korean Peninsula how would we evacuate tens of thousands of private Americans? It certainly would involve Japan. It becomes *very* complicated and very sensitive, very quickly.

Q: What other consular issues occupied you?

DINGER: Another was disaster preparedness. When I was on the Japan Desk I was visiting Osaka in January 1995 when the Great Hanshin earthquake struck nearby. Some 6,000 people died. I was in a hotel near the consulate and for three days was the only American who could make it in. The experience focused my attention on how we would deal with a major earthquake in Tokyo. I wanted to be certain we were prepared.

Q: Were you thinking of the involvement of nuclear energy?

DINGER: I wasn't, but in September 1999, while I was consul general, there was a nuclear accident in Tokaimura about 100 miles northeast of Tokyo that gave us some practice. At the time it was said to be one of the worst nuclear accidents after Chernobyl and Three Mile Island. A couple of workers were improperly mixing some nuclear

material and caused an accident. Two workers died. We had some Americans in the area, including a group of high school students. There was also concern about a nuclear plume in the path of airliners crossing the northern Pacific from the U.S. and flying through it. We set up a 24/7 call center and sent a volunteer from the embassy to offer assistance to Americans in the area

Q: Did you find a different attitude with you and your wife and hospitality and all? Were Americans still perceived easily in Japanese society?

DINGER: Very much so. I had great advantages. At that point, I had spent more time living in Japan than I had in the United States after becoming an adult. I had a four-four in Japanese. I don't think a foreigner should ever think that he is totally accepted in Japan by any stretch. But I was relatively comfortable living and working there. Some of my staff who didn't have the language and had not served there before told me once, "John, you don't understand, it's different for you. When you walk down the street those signs mean something. When you walk into a shop, you understand what they're saying."

Q: By that time we weren't going through the Japan bashing period. I guess it's moving towards China bashing.

DINGER: Americans have always had mixed feelings toward Japan. On the one hand there's tremendous admiration for many aspects of Japanese society and culture. On the other hand, there's always tension over trade and cultural differences.

Q: How about the Japanese military? How did we feel to the point we're talking about now? Did we feel that they were pulling their weight?

DINGER: Those issues always come up, along with Japanese support for U.S. military activities in third countries. Refueling of U.S. ships involved elsewhere in combat and things. That's often churning in the background of our security relationship and can surface at any time.

Q: Were the Japanese concerned about oil imports?

DINGER: I don't recall any special concern. One thing that had happened since I had last been to Japan was the move offshore of Japanese heavy industry. I lived once before in Tokyo on the upper floors of one of the three apartment blocks in the embassy compound. The amazing thing when I went back is that most days I could see Mount Fuji from my window. I speculated it was because a lot of heavy industry in Kawasaki, which sits between Tokyo and Mt. Fuji, had moved offshore and dramatically cleared the air.

Q: One reads today about Beijing and it's just apparently horrendous.

DINGER: I don't think Tokyo was ever that bad. But it was a big difference. I can't imagine I ever saw Mount Fuji from my window when I lived in Tokyo in 1985. By 1998 it was common.

Q: When I was consul general in Korea, this was '76 to '79, the consul general role in Japan was more a public relations one than most consul generals.

DINGER: For my part, I took to heart that the first impression most foreigners get of the United States is the Consular Section. So, we had FedEx, Disney, and Starbucks come and talk to us about their approach to customer service. If we had visitors to the embassy, like the American Chamber of Commerce, I always volunteered to show them "behind the Consular Section window." There's not much to see elsewhere in an embassy. It's just offices. The Consular Section was different. We could show the volume of our work. I think we handled about 100,000 non-immigrant visas a year, 5,000 immigrant visas, 5,000 reports of birth, 10,000 passports. We would show visitors their government at work. I really felt that we represented the United States very well.

Q: Did you supervise the other consulates in Japan?

DINGER: I was the senior consular officer for Japan. I oversaw the consular work of five constituent posts: Sapporo, Nagoya, Osaka, Fukuoka, and Naha. We kept the other consular sections in the loop. They joined telephonically our weekly staff meetings. I traveled at least once a year to each of the posts. The American and Japanese staff were terrific. I think we were pretty good. You can never lose sight of the fact that job one as a consular officer is to make the trains run on time, you have to make sure you provide visa and American citizen services quickly and correctly. I claimed we were the embassy's most effective public affairs section.

Q: Did you find that the Consular Section was a trading post for Japanese hands?

DINGER: Not so much in the old sense. But one thing became evident to me. The Japanese government runs a program called JET, Japan Exchange and Teaching Program. At that time, they were bringing hundreds of English speaking foreigners to Japan a year. Most of them were teaching English in public schools. A few were working in provincial governments. A first tour Foreign Service Officer, Ben Wohlauer, who was a veteran of the JET program joined the Consular Section. He was terrific. His Japanese was great, he liked Japan. I think the next generation of Japan hands may come out of the JET program.

Q: Well then, when and where did you go next?

DINGER: I went to Mongolia as ambassador.

Q: OK, let's do Mongolia. When did it become independent?

DINGER: It declared independence from Chinese control in 1911 and became an independent Soviet satellite state in 1924.

Q: How did that happen?

DINGER: Mongolia had chafed at being under Chinese rule. China's Qing Dynasty was disintegrating. The Mongolians saw their chance, broke, and ran into the arms of the Soviets. Mongolia was the world's second communist country.

Q: What was its history with the Soviet Union?

DINGER: It was never formally part of the Soviet Union. It was always independent, albeit extremely closely allied with the Soviet Union. A large Soviet military presence in Mongolia served as a buffer between Russia and China. I visited a couple of the abandoned Soviet military bases.

Q: I remember Molotov got sent out there or something, sort of the Siberia of the Soviet Empire? When you got there how long had it been democratic?

DINGER: Peaceful demonstrations began in 1990. Mongolia introduced a new constitution in 1992. I arrived eight years later in 2000.

Q: At what point were we considering opening Mongolian-American relations with an embassy there? I remember Bill Brown was taking Mongolian.

DINGER: I've heard legends of people who studied Mongolian in preparation for the opening, which never happened. The U.S. recognized Mongolia in January 1987. We established an embassy in 1988.

Q: How stood Mongolian relations with other countries?

DINGER: Pretty good. Mongolians have long-standing ties with Russia, and there is a long legacy of warm friendship that remains. Mongolia is suspicious of China, which is its only other neighbor. To some extent Mongolians looked to the United States to counterbalance the influence of Russia and China, sometimes we were called its third neighbor.

Q: Didn't Mongolia contribute troops to the Soviet Army during World War II?

DINGER: There was a conflict between the Soviets and Japanese on Mongolia's border with Manchuria in 1939 in which Soviet forces held off the Japanese.

Q: What sort of government when you got there did Mongolia have?

DINGER: It had a democratic government with a parliament, prime minister, and president.

Q: How stood it? It seems like such a barren country.

DINGER: Everything's relative -- and relative to other central Asian republics, Mongolia was a democratic success story. Power had changed hands between the former

communist party and opposition parties a couple of times. Elections were held on schedule, more or less free and fair. In many respects it was quite a success. Still, a legacy of communism overhung. Its leaders had grown up under communism. A lot of attitudes were baked in towards freedom of the press, opposition parties, and such. But generally it was a very positive story.

Q: Were there any particular issues that we had with them?

DINGER: The biggest thing that happened while I was there was our invasion of Iraq. We had a pretty focused military assistance program with the Mongolian military. One goal was to help them be peacekeepers. It would be small numbers of course, but that was the goal. We invaded Iraq and just before, in the run-up, we developed a coalition for the immediate disarmament of Iraq. We lobbied heavily, and Mongolia joined right out of the box. It then quite quickly sent troops to Iraq as part of our coalition. It was the first time Mongolia's military operated outside its borders since the age of Genghis Khan and his descendants.

Q: How stood Mongolian relations with Russia?

DINGER: Mongolians felt a nostalgic warmth toward Russia. Russia provided Mongolia everything it had. At the time Mongolia became independent from China there really was nothing there, no infrastructure, nothing you could call a city. The Soviets built it all, the physical infrastructure, the buildings, the administrative structure. The Soviets established 21 provincial capitals, each with a bakery, factory, heating plant, cultural palace, et cetera. Through Americans' eyes that was pretty modest stuff that at the end of the day failed and cratered. Nonetheless, the Soviets provided it. Many Mongolians studied in the former Soviet Union, in Moscow and elsewhere. Thousands must have done that. All the elites spoke Russian very well. So Mongolians had sort of mixed feelings toward Russia.

Q: Do Chinese look upon the Mongolians as brothers?

DINGER: I can't speak for the Chinese, but the Mongolians are extremely suspicious of China. They didn't fear too much outright invasion; as much as they were concerned that China would take them over by stealth, through investment and immigration. Mongolia is one of the most sparsely populated nations on earth and yet it has a very restrictive immigration policy. It's not because of population, it's because they fear Chinese will flood in.

Q: I was in Kyrgyzstan back in the 1980's I think, sort of as an authority on consular affairs and talking to them. And they were four million people. And they had this Chinese population over the hills. And they were very worried. They had a very strict immigration policy too. You had this huge population, it could spill over.

DINGER: Mongolians have to be conflicted. On the one hand, it's China and all of the resources, entrepreneurial spirit, potential for investment, potential as an export market,

and all the sort of richness that China could bring to Mongolia. On the other hand, the Mongolians were very fearful of being overwhelmed.

Q: But did Mongolia try to establish closer ties with the Koreans or the Japanese or Vietnamese, or anything?

DINGER: When I got there, my understanding was that when Mongolians spoke of a third neighbor, they meant the United States. However, by the time I left it had broadened into third neighbors, which certainly included Japan and South Korea.

Q: How stood North Korea with Mongolia?

DINGER: Not long before I arrived there had been a North Korean embassy in Ulaanbaatar. There was a scandal of some sort. I think it involved the North Korean embassy smuggling cigarettes or laundering currency or something like that. It packed up and drove off to North Korea in the middle of the night. So there was no North Korean representation when I was there. However, the Mongolians had an embassy in Pyongyang and senior officials traveled back and forth from time to time. Mongolia hoped to play a role bridging North and South Korea, since there weren't many countries that had relations with both. That didn't play out.

Q: Had Mongolia picked up any of the Chinese policies, the Hundred Flowers, the one-channel policy or any of these things?

DINGER: Such policies didn't really apply in Mongolia. Also there was an allergy in Mongolia toward China. China had a fairly large embassy in Ulaanbaatar not too far from ours, but there was no affection for anything to do with China. Except for Chinese goods. When we got there in 2000 there were very few fresh fruits and vegetables. It was mostly very meager markets selling root vegetables and a few consumer goods. By the time we left the Mongolians had gotten very adept at traveling to China and buying stuff. Remember that China produces most of what we see on the shelves of Wal-Mart. Mongolian traders traveled down, picked up everything from dishwashing detergent to clothing, to fruits and vegetables, and brought it back to sell. They were called suitcase traders.

Q: You always think of the horseback culture. How stood that by the time you were there?

DINGER: There were people on horseback in the middle of Ulaanbaatar, albeit not many. But when we traveled in the countryside, we used to say that we didn't leave the city, we left the century. The countryside was still full of round felt tents that they call gers and nomadic herders with their sheep, horses, and other animals.

Q: Did you get out a bunch?

DINGER: I traveled over 10,000 miles while I was in Mongolia in all seasons. As ambassador I was supposed to represent America to Mongolia, and Mongolia to America.

That meant traveling. Before I went I met with Ambassador Tom Pickering. He was the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs. I asked him what the secret to success as an ambassador was. He said two things: try to learn the language and travel. I tried – unsuccessfully -- to learn the language, but I definitely succeeded in traveling. Mongolia is a big country geographically. I visited each of the 21 provincial capitals twice and was in the middle of my third lap when I left. There were only 300 miles of paved road. Most of the time we were driving across the steppe over informal tracks. It was an adventure, especially in the middle of winter.

Q: Where did Mongolian language fit in the scheme of linguistics?

DINGER: It's an Altaic language that originated in the Altai Mountains in central Asia. It's linguistically, grammatically related to Korean, Japanese, and Turkish. The grammar of Mongolian was not difficult for me to grasp. It's very similar to Japanese. But there are no cognates with English. I had 10 weeks of Mongolian at the Foreign Service Institute and then took lessons when I was in UB (Ulaanbaatar). I failed. My comprehension got sort of OK at one point, but I never was able to speak it. It was the first time and only time I was assigned to a country where I didn't speak the language.

Q: You were there during the war with Iraq and mentioned peacekeepers. How did they feel about that?

DINGER: We had built a very good relationship with a peacekeeping battalion we equipped and trained. I was very uncomfortable with the invasion of Iraq. I felt pretty confident that we had Saddam Hussein in a box. Nonetheless, it wasn't clear that the invasion was going to be as troubled as it ended up. In any case my job as ambassador was to advocate U.S. policies. So I convinced the Mongolians to support the invasion, to join our coalition. The defense attaché and I were very active, going to see the president, the prime minister. We argued the merits of the invasion, and added, "Remember all the equipment and training we provided to build a peacekeeping battalion? Well, now's the time to use it." I added, "Understand that the U.S. will appreciate and remember this for a long time." I guess I'll say to their credit, they agreed. I appeared on lots of television shows, radio shows, newspaper interviews, and so forth advocating for it. Meanwhile, the DCM was one of three Foreign Service Officers who left the service in protest over our invasion of Iraq. She retired.

Q: What was our embassy like when you were in Mongolia? I interviewed one of our first people there who talked about trying to run it out of a hotel room in which he had a plywood sheet, which they put on top of the bathtub and put the Xerox machine there where his wife made copies.

DINGER: That's one of the legendary stories. When I got there, we didn't have plywood over bathtubs, but a lot was still jury-rigged. One of my goals was to turn the embassy from start-up mode into a "real" embassy. For example, a lot of the administrative support was being done in Beijing, things like processing vouchers. We weren't getting

the support we needed so we hired Mongolian staff to handle those tasks. They were very good and not expensive. We moved all of the administrative support up to UB.

We did a major overhaul of the embassy building. I had some misgivings about doing that. The Mongolians built it, very poorly. We poured millions of dollars into upgrades, sometimes almost literally papering over cracks. I thought we should instead build or buy a new embassy. I couldn't sell that idea to the State Department. We had a very talented facilities guy, Steve Gavazza, who instead fixed up what we had. He really turned a sow's ear into a silk purse.

We also found new staff housing. They had been living in a Soviet era apartment building, which was a real hardship, and I thought unsafe. Luckily we were able to find a new townhouse complex, which we basically took over.

As I said, I felt the embassy had been in start-up mode for those first dozen years and made it my goal to turn it into a mature embassy. I was pleased when State inspectors who came right after I left said the embassy had been transformed in the five years since the previous inspection.

Q: Sounds like a lot of work. Any other major issues or events during the time you were there?

DINGER: Harkening to my consular roots, we liberalized the visa regime. When I went, Americans needed a visa to enter Mongolia. They could get three month, two entry visas for $25. We eliminated the visa requirement completely for Americans, and Mongolians began getting 10-year multiple entry visas. That made it easier for Americans to travel to Mongolia and was a hugely popular step among Mongolians.

Q: Then where'd you go?

DINGER: I came back to Washington to be a deputy coordinator for counterterrorism.

Q: By this time terrorism was at the top of our agenda.

DINGER: Absolutely. 2003.

Q: Sort of overall, how did you look upon terrorism? Because you know, there are all sorts of -- fight terrorism, do this, and all that. It always struck me that essentially terrorism was an intelligence and police problem.

DINGER: I agree. When I came back it had been a little under two years since 9/11. As far as I could tell, we didn't have a vision, or at least not a thoughtful vision, for how to deal with it. Those were the days of the GWOT, the Global War on Terrorism. Let's kill them all. There was no shortage of people with that mindset. One of my missions was to get people to think past a knee-jerk reaction. I argued two points:. First, terrorism was not an issue that we could deal with directly, the key to dealing with terrorism was working

with local societies and governments and convincing them to tackle their issues. I also felt it was primarily a law enforcement issue. I objected to Guantanamo Bay. I felt they should be put in the U.S. judicial system.

Q: Well, what were we doing? I mean was yours an intelligence gathering organization?

DINGER: I led the operations directorate in the office of the coordinator for counterterrorism (S/CT). Its mandate was to coordinate the State Department's input into planning and operations primarily by the elite "black" U.S. military special operations forces. I had a clear and strongly held vision for how we ought to deal with terrorism. I argued that the key was cooperating with other governments. I didn't rule out direct unilateral U.S. military attacks, but believed they should be exceptional and rare; if we believed somebody had spilled American blood or was likely to spill American blood and local forces couldn't or wouldn't handle it.

Q: What sort of discussions would you have with the Pentagon?

DINGER: The military or at least elements of it seemed really eager to get directly involved in the fight in the Global War on Terrorism outside Iraq and Afghanistan. The popular perception among the public was that there were special operations forces fanned out around the globe who were taking down terrorist cells one after another. That wasn't the case. As reported in the press, the CIA conducted most counterterrorism activities outside the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan. There was a sense that the Pentagon was extremely eager to change that and get in the fight worldwide.

Q: What was the Pentagon proposing to do?

DINGER: I won't describe any specific proposals, but the Pentagon might, for example, believe it identified terrorists in a country and decide it should kill them. That could involve troops on the ground or an airstrike. We'd start by thinking through conducting an attack in a sovereign country with which we're at peace without its agreement or knowledge. That throws up all sorts of yellow or red flags, probably red flags to the State Department. What was the reaction going to be? Not only of the government, but also of the people. Would there be a backlash? What might the impact be on other American interests in the country? Are there Peace Corps volunteers or large numbers of other private Americans, for example? Or significant commercial investments? Does a unilateral U.S. military operation jeopardize really important other interests?

There are also the logistics of an attack. Let's say the military wants either to put forces on the ground or conduct a tactical airstrike and there's no U.S. airbase nearby. It may have to move in an aircraft carrier battle group, or arrange air refueling. It probably needs helicopters for search and rescue. The numbers of people, aircraft, and other assets becomes mind-boggling. We would gauge the threat the target posed -- especially whether the suspects had American blood on their hands or clearly intended to shed American blood -- and judge whether State believed an attack made sense. That would sometimes put us at odds with the military.

Q: What was your impression of the apparatus that was dealing with terrorism in the government?

DINGER: There were two main actors. One was DoD (Department of Defense), and the other was the intelligence community. I hate to paint all of DoD with the same broad brush, but its inclination seemed to be that it should act directly and unilaterally. It used euphemisms like "kinetic action" or "finding, fixing, and finishing high value targets" instead of stating plainly that it was talking about killing people it suspected of being terrorists. The intelligence community was more subtle, nonetheless, those were the days of extraordinary renditions and secret prisons. For example, the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) allegedly was involved in abducting the imam of Milan, Abu Omar, and transferring him to Egypt in 2003.

Q: I must say, looking at this whole thing that has evolved, it has become almost not even a cottage industry, it's much bigger than that. From you know, a nation such as ours to be brought to such a state by a few fanatics is --

DINGER: You can argue that the terrorists won, just for the reason that you're saying. Three thousand people dying on 9/11 was a horrible tragedy. But in the greater scheme of things, compared to the toll traffic accidents and such take, the threat became overblown. Since 9/11 not many more than a dozen people have died in the U.S. in terrorist attacks: 13 in Ft. Hood, TX and three in Boston. I don't think that's because we foiled attacks. It's because there aren't many people willing to kill innocent people because of a cause or grievance. I used to tell people when I spoke about whether we were winning or losing the war terrorism that one of my personal measures was that I lived in Washington D.C. with my family. The more I learned about terrorism, the better I slept at night. I argued that we needed to be alert but not alarmed. But most of the country was going in a different direction. We went on full-scale alarm. We see what happened in terms of our civil liberties and the resources we poured into it. It's astonishing. And I'm very disappointed with the panic that terrorists managed to instill in us.

Q: Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld had practically destroyed any link between the State Department and the Department of Defense on this. Did you feel this?

DINGER: I was on the proverbial front line of a lot of the conflict between State and DoD. I spent a lot of time trying to keep the Defense Department right-minded on the correct approach to fighting terrorism. I encountered some in the Pentagon who clearly thought the State Department was a bunch of wimps. State was trying to tie the hands of the military. If DoD didn't strike at terrorists, there was going to be another attack. It was going to be the fault of anybody who stood in its way.

Q: I've talked to people about the apparatus that maneuvered around Rumsfeld to sort of maintain ties between State and Defense. Did you get involved in this?

DINGER: We didn't have a problem maintaining ties. We had a small staff, but most of them were very experienced. Many of them were former special operations officers. They had excellent contacts, particularly in Special Operations Command in Tampa, FL and in JSOC, Joint Special Operations Command, in Fort Bragg, NC, the elite counterterrorism force. We spoke with them a lot. The problem was that we *absolutely* disagreed on the fundamental approach. A related issue that became central was the role of the chief of mission, were there to be military activity overseas. We pointed to the president's letter of instruction to ambassadors, which said that the chief of mission is in charge. The Pentagon argued that he wasn't. That became an endless disagreement that I think still persists.

Q: Well, did you get involved in the staffing of the American sort of advisory role in Iraq?

DINGER: My office's only real connection to Iraq was hostages. It was the office in the State Department that dealt with hostage policy. There were some horrific hostage takings in Iraq in which they beheaded people. There were also three hostages in Colombia. We would sometimes have difficult conversations with the Pentagon. The military's reaction often would be "An American has been taken hostage. Send us in to rescue him." I had no problem with planning for a rescue attempt, but argued strongly that it was a very dangerous last resort. There were people, including some in the State Department, who seemed to feel that a rescue attempt was the first resort.

If you think of any example of a hostage taking, busting in often gets the hostage killed. What you do is wait. Situations evolve. Anything can happen to lead to the safe return of a hostage. I always asked rhetorically, "Do you want to ask the families whether they want a high-risk rescue attempt with special operation forces in helicopters trying to rescue their family member? Or would they prefer to wait, hoping that someday, maybe even years later, their loved one will come home alive?" I felt the family was probably going to choose to wait. At the same time, I supported planning for a rescue attempt, in case it came to a point where a hostage was in imminent danger and a rescue attempt represented the lesser risk to his life.

By the way it's not true that we don't negotiate with hostage-takers. A crucial distinction that almost always gets lost in any press briefing is that we don't make *concessions* to hostage-takers.

Q: Any other responsibilities?

DINGER: My office led the Foreign Emergency Support Team or FEST, which was an interagency team trained and poised to fly off, should there be a terrorist incident overseas.

Q: So much of the aftermath of 9/11 was criticism of government not putting all its resources sort of in one pot and sharing information.

DINGER: I don't know the extent to which the criticism was accurate. I later spent six years in the intelligence community as principal deputy assistant secretary in INR in the aftermath of all the allegations and reforms. The intelligence community is huge. The amount of information is huge. I just don't know if agencies withheld intelligence from each other. You don't know what you don't know.

Q: What was your evaluation of our ties with say the European police forces and intelligence forces regarding terrorist activity?

DINGER: I think they were excellent. Certainly what I always heard from the CIA was that the relationships they had with what they call liaison services were outstanding. And I think it was true of law enforcement as well.

Q: Yeah, it strikes me as just how many things were picked up and squelched in this period. Didn't get much attention, but you'd hear about these very specific arrests and all.

DINGER: You never know whether reported plots are real, whether people are incorrectly swept up in the fervor. Those are things that should keep us awake at night as well. Cases that did come out were reportedly where officials in countries cooperated extremely closely with the United States law enforcement and intelligence services; for example, Hambali the Bali bomber, who was picked up in Thailand and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed the mastermind of 9/11 who was picked up in Pakistan.

Q: Did you find that your organization played a role in looking at the intelligence and sort of giving it the smell test?

DINGER: My part of S/CT used intelligence, but generally relied on intelligence analysts for their assessment of its accuracy and usefulness.

Q: How did that work?

DINGER: If there was a specific target, we'd look to intelligence analysts to look through the information and judge the threat. Most often for us our work would begin with the Defense Department proposing a concept of operations, outlining what it wanted to do in general to fight terrorism. That would be a broad strategy document that we would review for foreign policy implications and advise whether State thought it was on the right track. The DoD system then works through stages that add details, for example execute orders. I got quite good at pouring through the military jargon, page after page after page of it.

Q: That's really more difficult than Mongolian as a language.

DINGER: Almost, although eventually I gained some fluency in it. I spent many hours pouring through highly classified documents from the Pentagon, trying to decipher what they meant. Thankfully, I had staff proficient in military jargon who tutored me.

Q: I've talked to people who served in Sierra Leone or someplace. When the military moved in and helped get them out, they had to get a military translator because all these messages kept pouring in and no one had any idea what the hell they were talking about.

DINGER: That's where the staff that worked for me in the operations directorate of S/CT was extremely helpful. They'd say, for example, "John, you have to focus on a key paragraph at the top of the plan called the commander's intent." Or, "You don't have to worry about all these sections. They don't involve foreign policy interests."

Q: Did you find that you were acting as a certain break on operations, because there is a tendency in sort of the American ethos or whatever it is that just don't stand there, do something? I mean sometimes some of these things that people in the military will look at, I mean we have to look at it in a different way because we have to think about the consequences beyond the immediate goal, what it's going to do to public opinion and what it's going to do with relations with the country, et cetera, et cetera. Did you find that this was much of your role?

DINGER: On the one hand, absolutely. I think I was a major factor in putting the brakes on things. On the other hand, I once told my deputy, Tom Hastings, a fabulous guy, that I woke up at night worried about some proposed military operation. He said, "John, don't worry, they'll never actually do it." Part of it could be the military's legendary "We're just planning for contingencies. That's what we do." argument. Whether I ever put a break on anything that was really going to happen, or was just spinning around and throwing up bureaucratic hurdles, I'll never know. But in the case of most of the proposals, Tom was right – they never actually happened.

Q: For the person looking at this transcript later on, I'm tiptoeing around -- we're both tiptoeing around. Because obviously many of the things here were possibilities and all, but we really can't talk about them.

DINGER: Right.

Q: How heavy was the hand of the State Department leadership? How was Colin Powell? These were of course very skilled Pentagon hands and all. And so I would imagine that they were wearing both the Defense Department knowledge hat and the State Department responsibility. You must have been blessed with pretty good leadership, weren't you?

DINGER: Colin Powell was secretary and Richard Armitage was deputy secretary. The coordinator for counterterrorism was Cofer Black, who had come from the CIA. Cofer was sort of a legendary figure during the invasion of Afghanistan. I would write a memo for Cofer to send to Armitage describing what was being proposed and the position that S/CT recommended State take. Armitage would write a little note on it, "Absolutely right, Cofer, keep at it." I would have his stamp of approval. It was pretty gratifying. As you suggest, we had in the leadership of the State Department perhaps the two most skilled and experienced defense officials in the U.S. government. I would sometimes

point that out to my Pentagon counterparts saying State's position wasn't my personal opinion, it was coming from Colin Powell and Richard Armitage. Were they really doubting their wisdom?

Q: Did you ever feel the hand of the vice presidential side of things, Cheney and that crew?

DINGER: I don't recall feeling that so much. And, even though I would get the stamp of approval from Armitage and Powell, they didn't seem to engage directly on these issues with the president, vice president, or Secretary Rumsfeld. It tended to be me engaging with my counterparts. On the one hand, I might have felt that the State Department could have benefited from their direct involvement. On the other hand, I had my top cover. I knew when I went into a room with senior military leaders and said I was representing the State Department position, it *was* the State Department position. Armitage and Powell gave me that. We would hear reports that Rumsfeld simply pulled aside the president and got his approval for things. I can only speculate about conversations between Powell, Rumsfeld, Cheney, and the president.

Q: You left that when?

DINGER: I left that in 2005.

Q: And then where?

DINGER: In the fall of 2005, I moved to the Office of Undersecretary for Political Affairs Nick Burns. I had worked for Nick before when he was spokesman and I was director of the State Press Office.

Q: OK, would you explain what that office does?

DINGER: The office is in charge of all political issues in the State Department. It was essentially the third-ranking position in State after the secretary and deputy secretary. It oversaw all regional bureaus and some functional bureaus.

Q: How much was the job policy and how much was sort of herding kittens to be in line?

DINGER: My job was mostly herding cats. I was in an unusual position because most special assistants in that office are FSO-2s or threes. I was an MC. So my title was senior advisor. The reason that Nick recruited me was because the Bureau of International Narcotics and Legal Affairs, INL, had just been moved from the Undersecretary for Global Affairs to the Undersecretary of Political Affairs. It was moved because State inspectors a few months earlier eviscerated INL saying it had lost the confidence of the secretary. It was determined that the Under Secretary for Political Affairs would more effectively oversee it.

Q: Who had been the head of INL?

DINGER: A non-career person, Bobby Charles.

Q: Would you say it was the person, or had this been endemic?

DINGER: It's hard for me to judge. I wasn't that familiar with INL. I think a lot of the blame was laid at the feet of the assistant secretary. Nick was concerned. He already had a huge portfolio and now he was tasked with fixing a broken bureau that had a couple billion dollar budget. All of the narcotics assistance programs. He wasn't confident that he personally could give it the attention it would require or that the typical FSO-2 or O-3 had the experience or bureaucratic oomph to do it. As it turned out, almost the same time that I arrived in the position, a new assistant secretary arrived in INL, Ann Patterson. Ann is extremely capable. A lot of what Nick wanted me to do was overtaken by events.

Q: You were in that office from when to when?

DINGER: '05 to '06. There was some policy. But much of it was just shuffling papers. I think I followed 11 functional bureaus for Nick, consular affairs and counterterrorism, for example, and official development assistance. I ended up being a glorified special assistant. It was still interesting. Any time you work on the Seventh Floor of the State Department and see how things are done at that level it's interesting.

Q: Well, what was your impression of how Nick Burns operated?

DINGER: Nick's a very talented guy. I worked for him once before. He tirelessly coordinated by phone with his international counterparts on the issues of the day.

Q: Well then, what were some of the problems or issues that you were dealing with?

DINGER: I searched for someplace I could make a mark. I determined that I wanted to boost State's emphasis on corruption. I sent a dissent channel cable from Mongolia arguing that the State Department was not doing enough on corruption. I felt in Mongolia it was pernicious and threatened what could be a success story. I never got a reply. I got Nick's agreement that I could try to be the tsar of corruption in the State Department. But I wasn't successful for a number of reasons. One, INL has responsibility for corruption in the State Department. I didn't supervise INL. I had no resources. I didn't have the power to push anything. And second, I don't think there was a lot of appetite for going after corruption. In theory there was interest in State and elsewhere. In practice, not many people wanted to deal with it. It's just too hard.

Q: Well, it's been my experience in doing these oral histories that places like -- I went back to the '60s in the Congo and other places where we had big interests. Most of the world is awash in corruption. If you're trying to carry out a policy, the corruption cables immediately sort of overwhelm everything else and it's very easy for political forces and Congress to say well, we're not going to deal with that country because it's corrupt. We

almost have to steer clear of a certain amount of reporting on corruption because it affects the other processes that are going on.

DINGER: And I don't think there's any question that corruption has gotten even worse since those days and no easier to deal with. The collapse of communism further opened the doors to corruption and a range of illicit activities. Obviously there was corruption in communist countries. But they were authoritarian states and kept the lid on some of it. Once that lid got lifted, corruption went wild. A lot of smuggling and trafficking became much easier. Plus, to what you were saying, other interests are going to compete with fighting corruption. It's very, very hard. And ambassadors don't win any popularity contests with host governments by talking about corruption. I like to think in some sectors of Mongolia I became popular because I spoke about the threat corruption posed, but not in government circles.

Q: Well, did you find that the geographic bureaus, when you tried to raise the corruption thing, were shying away because other interests trump corruption?

DINGER: Maybe the best I can say is I just could not get traction. President George W. Bush signed an executive order that allowed us to deny visas to people who were grossly corrupt. INL handled a whole, unfortunately quite bureaucratic, process to determine that ineligibility. Very few were ever determined. Most of them, from one country, I think it was Honduras, that had an officer and I guess maybe an ambassador who seized the issue. But embassies either couldn't or wouldn't do it. In the case of Africa, the bureau in Washington opposed making determinations. I believe to this day that corruption poses one of the biggest challenges to democracy, market economics, and law and order.

Q: Well, you were at sort of the apex of the power structure within the State Department. You were there from when to when now?

DINGER: 2005 to six.

Q: What would you say was the feeling about our efforts in Afghanistan at the time?

DINGER: The big thing for my portfolio in Afghanistan was the growth in the production of opium and whether there was any effective way to turn that around.

Q: I would think with all the people we'd thrown into the thing that we could, you know, find out where the poppies were and chop them down.

DINGER: That was what INL was trying to do without much impact on production. As I recall there was no end of maps showing the production, maps with circles or dots showing where the opium was. My memory is that it was quite concentrated, particularly in Southwestern Afghanistan. Somehow it's more difficult than it seems on the surface. INL also had programs to encourage Afghans to switch to alternative crops like wheat and fruit, for example.

Q: That's always a problem though.

DINGER: I couldn't see how giving out free wheat seed was a long term solution. We weren't going to give them seeds forever. I had the same doubts about efforts to move them into higher value products, like dried fruits and nuts. Given the value of opium, was that really practical? I find development assistance fascinating. Mostly the fact that it seems to produce so few success stories.

Q: Did you feel the heat of politics on various things you were dealing with in the State Department? I mean from Congress and the media and all that?

DINGER: You know for a long time when you're a Foreign Service Officer that stuff is almost theoretical. You read the newspapers, but the politics of issues are not particularly relevant to your day-to-day work. All that operates at a more senior level. The same is true of changes of administration from Republican to Democrat or to a new secretary of State. At the working level at State it often doesn't affect you. As I got more senior, returned to Washington, and worked on terrorism, cyber issues, intelligence issues, I was much more involved in broader policy and felt the influence and impact of very senior policy figures. It freights the work with more frustration, but is what Foreign Service Officers, I think, dream about. You're personally and directly vested because you're advocating policies that you helped develop. It's much more fun, more challenging, and can be more frustrating.

Q: Were there any particular things in this job with the undersecretary that particularly absorbed your time?

DINGER: I spent a lot of my time on the huge narcotics budget and whether it was being used properly. The biggest program was in Colombia and involved eradication of coca and cooperation with the Colombians. There's an annual report that goes from the State Department to Congress on how the money is spent in Colombia. I had to review it. It was hundreds of pages full of $300,000 for this, 2.3 million dollars for that, 5.6 million dollars for something else. I recall thinking as I poured through it that this is how you spend a billion dollars on a program. There's another annual report on whether countries are cooperating with us to counter narcotics. That could be politically charged. If the State Department determined that a country was not cooperating we had to impose sanctions on foreign assistance, unless there was a national interest waiver. Regional bureaus in particular would argue that our relationship with a country shouldn't hinge on one issue.

Q: Yeah, they wanted to keep a hand in there no matter what, I guess.

DINGER: That back and forth would play out between the Regional Bureaus and INL.

Q: There were charges that the State Department was not supplying enough people to Afghanistan and Iran. You know, the Foreign Service wasn't carrying its weight, which awestruck me.

DINGER: I was always disappointed when the president made a speech lauding the sacrifices being made by our uniformed military and their families and ignoring civilian employees, including the Foreign Service. I bristled a bit. Particularly as increasingly State FSO's were working in places that were very dangerous and working in ways that exposed us to that danger. I recall reading that at a huge airbase north of Baghdad only a small percentage of U.S. military ever went outside the gate. They had a Burger King and probably a bowling ally -- I may be exaggerating for effect on that -- but they're all heroes. We had people in PRT's, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, who were really in danger. And they wouldn't even get mentioned.

Q: What did you do after this?

DINGER: I moved to the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, INR, to be principal deputy assistant secretary.

Q: And you did that from when to when?

DINGER: I did that from 2006 until I retired from the Foreign Service in 2012, almost six years. I think I set a record.

Q: Yeah, you really did. Let's talk about INR. I'm an alumnus of the thing. I had the Horn of Africa during the early '60s.

DINGER: That's a great account. And not because of any success stories.

Q: Well, at that point I was able to say it depends, you know, Somalia is up for sale. Soviets or the Americans, and it went back and forth. It depended who was offering what. But INR had a reputation, and I guess still does, of being sort of preeminent as far as being accurate in assessment of matters within the intelligence community. It's smaller than most and an awful lot of its information does not come from covert sources and all. But when you got there, how would you say it stood vis-à-vis the other intelligence agencies, Defense, the CIA, what have you?

DINGER: I'm looking at it through the prism of an interested party. But I think everything you said is true. We had a total staff of around 300. There are two sides to INR. One side people are familiar with, which is what you talked about, the analytical side is about 180 subject matter experts. They have an average of a dozen years working on their account. Two-thirds have Master's and one-third have PhD's in their portfolio. The other side of INR for me was probably more interesting. That side deals with the intelligence collectors and operators. It tries to make sure their activities serve America's interests, and certainly don't undermine them. It was about evenly divided between the two sides, maybe a little heavier on the analytical side.

The number of CIA analysts is undoubtedly classified, but let's guess several thousand. And the Defense Intelligence Agency analysts again certainly are in the thousands. So the

difference in scale is incredible. Pound for pound, INR definitely held its own. In terms of accuracy, honesty makes me admit that when INR is correct and everybody else incorrect, we bask in the glory. Conversely, when INR is wrong, nobody notices because it's so small. Anyway, we didn't like to dwell too much on always being right, because that could inhibit people from being bold in their analysis.

Q: I've interviewed the lady who was the head of INR, Phyllis Oakley. Phyllis said that she used to brief the Secretary of State who was Madeleine Albright. And at one point she was told by one of Madeleine Albright's staffers, "You don't have to brief her anymore because she gets a brief from the CIA." When you realize that there may be different angles, I mean you certainly don't want to have your department's angle taken out of the equation. Her exclusion may have been sort of the court that forms around some secretaries, and Madeleine Albright apparently had a court of hangers-on who didn't care for Phyllis, I don't know. How stood it at your time?

DINGER: The CIA no longer briefed the secretary. A relatively small number of very senior officials in the executive branch, including the secretary and deputy secretary of state, receive the PDB (President's Daily Briefing). The PDB staff is under the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, ODNI. That staff prepares articles for the PDB and makes sure every intelligence community element has a chance to provide input. In any case, briefing the secretary usually consists of sitting quietly while she reads a binder. There's often not much interaction.

INR's most important mission was to make sure that the secretary had the intelligence and analysis she needed to inform her decisions. We had lots of channels available to reach her and sent her raw intelligence and our analysis every day. Once in a while we would see something either in the PDB or some other form with which we disagreed. If we saw that, we didn't hesitate to send her a memo saying you may have seen X intelligence, we want to let you know that we see that issue differently.

Q: Our movement into Iraq was heavily driven by intelligence estimates, many of which proved to be erroneous or at least slanted. The vice president seemed to have colluded with or pushed the CIA to come up with intelligence estimates which supported the idea of our going into Iraq, weapons of mass destruction and all that. And by the time you got to INR, this was pretty well known by everybody. Is this the sort of horror story of which to measure things against?

DINGER: It's essential that intelligence analysts be as independent as possible. In my six years in INR I never saw anybody successfully tell an INR analyst what to say, think, or write. Whether from within INR, the State Department, or elsewhere. I don't believe that was true of other intelligence agencies. INR analysts would sometimes disagree with a State Department bureau, with a CIA analysis, or with the NSC. We never wanted to be rude. That said, we didn't sign off on something that was incorrect. That deeply impressed me about INR and INR analysts. I did not have the same impression of the CIA and DIA. I had the impression that they were more attuned to conclusions readers wanted to read.

Occasionally our analysts would go to a meeting to coordinate on an intelligence community analysis on X, Y, or Z subject. Our analysts would come back after two or three meetings and say, "We all agree that our conclusion is A." The next meeting, after the draft had moved up the food chain, our analysts would come back from a meeting and say, "You know what? The other agency has decided after a more senior review that its judgment isn't A after all, it's B." I wasn't privy to internal discussions at other intelligence agencies. But I always wondered if somebody with a more, shall we say, refined political sense determined that the judgment should be changed.

Q: What would you do? Would you add a footnote?

DINGER: Our analysts would first go back with more evidence, intelligence, and arguments. So if somebody said, "Wait a second, how can INR insist it's A?" Our analysts could reply, "Look at this intercept, this human report, this academic study, whatever it might be, this is why we're saying it's A." And sometimes, hopefully, that would be powerful enough that the other analysts would have no choice but to agree. Sometimes we'd get compromise language.

When we couldn't agree on something we felt was significant, we were not reluctant to dissent in a footnote. One of INR's most famous footnotes disagreed with the extent of Iraq's nuclear weapons program. Some criticized us as too eager to footnote. I don't think that was true. We never dissented on a whim or because it was somehow part of INR's culture. We backed it up. Our DAS (deputy assistant secretary) for analysis, Jim Buchanan, always made sure that INR's position withstood scrutiny. We were proud of our expertise and independence and willing to defend it.

Q: Well, you know, I'm a field officer essentially dealing with consular affairs and far removed from policy and all. I had a short time in INR. And then looking at it from the point of view of interviewing people like you, and I've been doing this for a long time, I think there's something almost endemic in a system, an intelligence organization that gets too big. When you're in the field, you put together things, junior officers or something, put it together. And then there's a person above who really only looks at the prose that goes into the thing. If you're a big organization, you begin to worry about the prose. Are you being too emphatic? And then you change such and such is the case, to such and such could be the case, and then to such and such might possibly be the case. There is this tendency, and I think all of us feel this, of beginning to qualify to make sure that you're not getting too far out. I think one of the reasons for the basic success for INR is that it doesn't have too many people. Did you consider this, or was this a factor?

DINGER: We thought our small size benefited us tremendously. Our staff was small, but extremely knowledgeable and very empowered. People on the Hill, in the NSC, or the White House, might instinctively turn to the CIA for intelligence analysis. The CIA analytical staff is huge. It has people working on very narrow issues who know them well. It sees the White House as its primary customer. It wasn't unusual for congressional

staff to ask us, "Doesn't INR need more people? Don't you need two more China or North Korea analysts or whatever it may be?" We replied, "No, thank you."

Where does it end? The volume of intelligence is massive; INR got basically everything, which tended to be around 3,000 pieces of raw intelligence a day. So if you want to scrutinize all of that, pretty soon you've got 3,000 analysts, 4,000 analysts.

INR said we covered every issue, every country, all the time. Some of our analysts covered whole regions alone. Most of the time they "flew" at 30,000-feet, but they were *very* capable of dropping down to a treetop level and doing very tactical analysis. That's in part because they stay on the same account for years. Often they have an advanced degree in their portfolio. They are deeply knowledgeable. They combine deep knowledge and familiarity with all sources of information to produce authoritative assessments with considerable confidence.

Q: How much did you influence the analysis?

DINGER: We tried in the Front Office not to influence our analysts. The analyst is king in INR. There were occasions during my years there, especially on issues that I felt I knew something about, terrorism for sure, that I'd see an assessment come up that I personally wished or hoped was wrong. But I *very* rarely pushed an analyst to look at it again. I could probably count on one hand the number of times I did that.

Q: Did you feel any, well, let's say political heat? Because much of the Iraq invasion was based on Vice President Cheney. Intelligence seemed to be an almost political belief, the so-called neo-cons. I'm not a lawyer, but I sort of think that the pressure that was put on CIA and the CIA's cooperation amounts to treason. To my mind at least in a broad legal point of view, and it's probably politically unsound, but getting us into a war, a really nasty war based on deliberately concocted information or selectivity moves into the treasonable field. But that's a personal feeling. But did you feel the heat of something coming out of the Defense Department, you can't say this because we're doing this?

DINGER: I don't recall in INR ever feeling, and certainly not bending to any sort of political pressure. We didn't operate in a vacuum. We knew what the thinking was in the White House, the Pentagon, the regional bureaus, or the secretary's suite about whatever the issue might be. That's part of being a good INR analyst. They know their clients, their readership. So if it was a high profile issue, and we were publishing something that we knew was contrary to what others in the Pentagon, White House, or State Department thought, we might stop a little bit, talk a little bit, and press the analyst, "Are you sure this is your judgment?" "Are you *very confident?* Because this runs contrary to what people want to read." And if the analyst said "Yes, I'm very confident," and could back it up with supporting evidence, we published it.

Q: Did that happen often?

DINGER: Not often. Occasionally I was at a senior staff meeting in which Secretary Clinton related something she heard, and I knew INR saw it differently. She might turn to me and say, "John, I'd like to know what INR thinks," or if not, I would send her a memo later anyway saying, "Madame Secretary, This issue came up and we want to give you INR's assessment of it."

Q: This brings up a subject. Could you talk about what, three secretaries of state, or how many did you work for?

DINGER: While I was in INR? Condoleezza Rice and then Hillary Clinton.

Q: How did they react? Some people use intelligence one way and some the other. You know, in other words, what was your impression of them?

DINGER: Policymakers, like all of us, have lots of input that informs their thinking. I always reminded our analysts, "The secretary visits the countries, attends international conferences, meets with all sorts of people. She reads newspapers, sits next to people at dinners. She has all the information that bureaus send up. Your analysis is just one input. The secretary will make her decision based on all of it."

Q: Would you say there was a difference in their use of intelligence?

DINGER: It's very hard to tell. The State Department's not big on feedback.

Q: No.

DINGER: When I got to INR one of the most common questions I got from analysts was, "Who's our audience? We don't know who we're writing for, and we don't get any feedback. Are we writing for the secretary, are we writing for assistant secretaries, for desk officers?"

I argued, "Your audience is the secretary of state. You need to write on a subject of interest. You have to write in a compelling manner. You have to write well. Is the secretary of state going to read your analysis on Benin? Maybe not. But if you write it with those principles in mind, your readership is going to be a lot broader than any other approach." By the time I left I never heard anybody ask who they were writing for. The hope, the dream, the goal of every piece was to reach the secretary of state's eyes.

Q: You mentioned about the vastness of intelligence. I've been interviewing Tom Graham, who was for years one of our chief arms negotiators. And he said he was at one time talking to his Soviet counterpart, the Soviet said, "You know, we both have the same problem, but from completely different points of view. You have problems getting information from us. We're secretive people, we don't say too much, and you really have to get it out of us. Our problem is just the reverse. There's so damn much out there about you that we have to sort between all this information to figure out what is what."

DINGER: I remember a senior official saying once facetiously, "The way to deal with leaks is to declassify everything. Flood them with so much no one will be able to look through it all." My impression was that about 10% of the volume of raw intelligence was of interest to anybody in the State Department. I have no idea what happened to the other 90%. We had a 24/7 INR watch. I always felt sympathy for the watchstanders, because they sat in front of a computer screen as all that intelligence rolled in. They forwarded to the staff what they thought looked of interest or important. As a percentage, it wasn't that much.

Q: Well, in a way, these oral histories are of the same thing. We have no idea what people use them for. They may be looking for stuff to do a timely article in the next few years, or maybe they'll be trying to figure out what to do 100 years from now. That's why I sometimes ask people to say in interviews, "Could you explain what a Soviet is?"

I'm not sure if it came up in your time, did you ever run across a book called Legacy of Ashes, which was a history of the CIA. At one point, we had a compact disc with I think 800 of our oral histories on it. The gentleman, whose name escapes me right now, apparently got a hold of the CD. And he used 76 of our interviews to prove that most CIA covert operations didn't work too well. And it certainly was not part of our intent as we did this oral history to dump on the CIA. I felt my God, I'll never have lunch in Langley again.

DINGER: I read the book. Your story gives one pause in terms of what you say in an oral history. We looked at 10% of the raw intelligence on a daily basis. But one potential argument justifying that volume of intelligence is that a year from now or five years from now something may come up and you want to go back and try to retrieve something that was of no interest whatsoever five years earlier when it was collected, but bears on an issue today. Of course hoarders have long used that as an excuse. And there's a cost to hoarding.

Q: Well, you know, I mean the classic thing is all of a sudden during the Carter administration somebody discovered that there was possibly a brigade of Soviet troops in Cuba after they supposedly pulled out. These were basically cleanup troops and represented no particular threat. I mean a brigade is not going to exactly invade Florida. But it became a political football, and we didn't know about it. Well, we knew about it but the analysts judged it wasn't important. But anyway, it became a political issue.

DINGER: The organization that keeps storing information in mind more than any other is the National Security Agency, NSA. They suction up an astonishing amount of information. More and more they store it. In terms of storage technology, NSA is probably ahead of anybody else. And one of the reasons is they fear that something is going to happen some day and somebody is going to come back and ask them about it. NSA wants to be able to go back and look for a phone number that connects to another phone number that connects to another phone number and sift through it all and see what we knew.

Q: Well, this brings up another question. Sort of in your sort of seat of the pants, how would you rate the different elements of the intelligence community?

DINGER: To begin with, I was proud that the intelligence community highly values State Department reporting. In many national intelligence estimates a substantial amount of background material is going to be State Department political reporting. One reason is we identify who told us what. It makes it more authoritative. After that, I think most INR analysts would turn to SIGINT (signals intelligence) from NSA. Again, they know who's saying what to whom. Next comes HUMINT (human intelligence) from the CIA. The weakness of CIA reporting is that analysts don't know who the source was. It's described for example as someone who's reported in the past, whose reporting was determined to be reliable. But an analyst has nothing upon with to judge that and doesn't know whether the information is from a deputy minister or somebody's driver. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) reporting comes in next. One criticism of DIA reporting is that it may value quantity over quality. It seems that sometimes marginally useful reports are sent in to meet the expectation of how much they're supposed to report.

Q: How was INR's relationship with State's policy bureaus?

DINGER: INR benefits tremendously by being in the State Department. It can be a tricky relationship. I used to distinguish it as being "embedded in the State Department," but not "in bed" with the State Department. State policy bureaus understand that INR is independent. Most of the time if an INR analyst produced something and the Regional Bureau or the embassy disagreed, the bureau would accept that we simply saw things differently. Once in a while an assistant secretary -- one comes to mind in particular -- or an ambassador would see an INR assessment and send us a blistering email, "What are you thinking? You don't know what you're talking about." I argued against engaging in a back and forth with a policymaker. We needed to reply, "Thank you so much for your message. It's valuable input. I'm going to pass it to our analysts to make sure they understand your thinking." It was not about debating issues with a policy bureau.

Q: Did INR's small size hurt?

DINGER: One thing I can say to that point is that I don't know that I ever saw an entity that provided greater return on investment than INR. Three hundred people compared to the rest of the intelligence agency, which is reportedly 100,000 or something. Our budget wasn't even a rounding error. I recall attending one senior intelligence community meeting and seeing a funding chart that showed INR's line item as zero. I knew that we had some money in that program." They explained, "Oh. We rounded to the nearest million and INR came out zero." That was common. One of the assistant secretaries used to joke that we could go to the parking lot at NSA, pick up the change that fell out of people's pockets getting in and out of their cars, and run INR for a year. One benefit of that was that we were so small that if they were looking to cut budgets they weren't going to get any big savings out of INR. They usually left us alone.

Q: I recall INR as being paper-based. Is it still sort of a quill pen?

DINGER: We finally began distributing intelligence electronically outside INR. Forever INR objected to giving anybody else access to the Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information IT network. It was supposedly for security reasons, but it also let us jealously guard and maintain a monopoly on access to intelligence. Assistant Secretary Randy Fort said that INR was in the horse and buggy era and it was time to join this century. So one of the main things he asked me to do was develop a means of sharing intelligence electronically with policymakers. When I left, it was still a long way from fully operational. But any bureau that was willing to foot the bill -- these systems have to be in special compartment information facilities -- could access that system. It was a sea change for INR. One fear among our staff was that it allows policymakers to go directly to the CIA, potentially cutting out INR. My point was that the goal is for policymakers to get the information they need. If they feel that is best achieved by going directly to the CIA, they have the right to do it. It means that INR has to be at the top of its game.

Q: Any other big initiatives while you were in INR?

DINGER: Randy Fort saw that cyber was going to be a big issue. He began to organize the State Department to deal with it. We got everybody together, figured out what everyone was doing, and eventually established a Cyber Policy Group. We advocated that there be a Seventh Floor level position in charge of cyber. Condoleezza Rice instead said, "INR's doing a good job. Let's keep it there." So we established in INR the first Office of Cyber Affairs in the State Department. It represented impressive foresight and achievement on the part of Randy Fort.

Q: When you talk about cyber, what are you talking about?

DINGER: There are three basic aspects to cyber. One is offense. That's using cyber tools to attack, change, or disrupt IT systems or information. You read stories that the Pentagon and its Cyber Command are developing capabilities to do that to adversaries. Second is exploitation, entering cyber systems and taking information without disrupting the system. That's NSA's field. There are lots of allegations that the Chinese are exploiting corporate and government systems to scoop up huge amounts of information. The final aspect is defense. Trying to keep people from attacking or exploiting your systems. While I was in INR, cyber increasingly became a major issue. To the extent that the State Department was positioned to deal with it is due to Randy's foresight.

Q: What were the trickiest angles to cyber?

I found the most complex issues were related to cyber offense. You have very few chances in a career, in fact, almost none, to plow truly new policy ground. Developing policies guiding cyber offense was one of them. It was really fun. When is it appropriate or necessary to conduct cyber attacks? Let's say we believe that somebody outside our borders is entering a U.S. system, whether commercial or government, and doing bad things. What can or should we do to stop it? Some might say, "We should go and shut down the workstation or server involved." Then you start thinking that through. What if

under similar circumstances a foreign ally believed there was a similar threat emanating from the United States? Are we OK with that foreign ally, for example let's say the UK or Canada, taking down a server in the United States? Is it open season for those sorts of actions in sovereign nations with which we are at peace? It was very interesting and challenging. I think I can say that INR was at the leading edge of determining cyber foreign policy.

Q: What about the impact of the academic community on INR.

DINGER: It depends a bit on the individual analyst, but a huge difference between INR and the CIA is we not only allowed our analysts openly to attend conferences and workshops and exchange thoughts with academics, we encouraged it. The CIA was more conflicted on the issue. It was more reluctant to have its analysts engaged in any sort of activity like that. One of its concerns reportedly was that they might be targeted by a foreign intelligence service for recruitment. I once in a while would have an INR analyst ask, "Is it OK for me to say where I work?" My reply was, "You don't work for a secret agency. Put it on your business card."

Q: The Internet and availability of open source information must be changing INR's work.

DINGER: The Internet has become an incredibly valuable source of information for anybody trying to figure out what's going on in any subject in the world. Our analysts had Internet at their desktop. I heard that the CIA again was more concerned about its analysts engaging on the Internet. Open sources are phenomenal. I went to a white-boarding session once about the intelligence community. I proposed that the intelligence community devote just 10% of what it spends on NSA to exploiting open sources of information. It's that rich. We don't have a handle on it and aren't fully exploiting it. During the Arab Spring the issue of social media came up, claims that it was the "Twitter revolution." I think most of the people who were in Tahrir Square in Cairo didn't have access to the Internet. So the issue requires a lot of exploration, thought, and resources. We also need to understand that because it's openly available information commercial firms are going full out to gather and exploit it. INR tends to be much more open to that. It's one of its great strengths

Q: Yeah. Have there been any overt compromises of people who work for INR that I'm not familiar with?

DINGER: There was a big one in 2009 while I was acting assistant secretary involving Kendall Meyers. Convicted of spying for Cuba, he's serving a life sentence in the Supermax prison in Colorado. He was INR's UK analyst. A couple of interesting things happened with Kendall. First, he was coordinating a panel discussion at SAIS about the UK. He did not establish the ground rules and said some very critical things about then Prime Minister Tony Blair and the U.S.-UK relationship. There were British journalists in the room who reported the comments in the UK press and attributed them to a senior U.S.

official. The State Department had to apologize, and I think the president called Blair to apologize.

Kendall then retired and soon afterwards the FBI arrested him. He and his wife were convicted of spying for Cuba for 30 years. It was an amazing story and all very old school. According to press reports he had a shortwave radio in his DC apartment and transmitted messages in Morse code. Somewhere in the reporting it was said that he was the last Cuban agent in the world to use Morse code. They had dead drops and passed information at supermarkets, all sorts of stuff like that. He and his wife apparently traveled to Cuba surreptitiously a few times. They met their handlers around the world. It was fascinating, but obviously not the sort of thing that INR was happy to have happen.

Q: What information was he passing to the Cubans?

DINGER: I can only speculate. I'm not sure how sensitive or useful it was. I guess that he probably wasn't providing information on the UK, which he analyzed. He had access to a lot of general intelligence, and so he could have been passing information on other issues. I don't know how much damage he caused. However, exceptionally sensitive intelligence is further compartmentalized and access is granted on a need to know basis. I'm not sure that Kendall had access to any of that. There's speculation that the Cubans may not have found his information useful for their purposes, but may have been able to sell or trade it to third countries.

Q: Did you know Kendall well?

DINGER: Kendall organized weekly training seminars in INR, so everybody knew him pretty well, including me. On the one hand, something about him led us to not be completely shocked by his arrest and conviction. On the other, no one wanted INR to be associated with espionage. When the story broke, we invited the secretary's chief of staff, Cheryl Mills, to talk to INR staff and confirm that the secretary still had confidence in us.

Q: Was there money involved?

DINGER: He reportedly did it because he believed in the Cuban revolution. One of his proudest moments, as reported in the press, was when he met Fidel Castro in Havana. Reportedly he got a medal. Because he was a spy, they presented it and took it back. I shouldn't make light of it, but it's an amazing story and something out of the '60s.

Q: These things keep cropping up, and I wonder whether you ever ran into any manifestations of this with Israel. Jonathan Pollard I understand -- I may have this wrong -- is still in jail and it becomes a cause from time-to-time in Jewish groups, just let him go because he was just giving information to Israel. But the thing that I find particularly disturbing is information that he was giving was essentially naval, which involved the location of our nuclear missile submarines. Which obviously had absolutely no value to the Israelis, and the only inference one can make is that the Israelis were getting this information, which they were then essentially giving to the Soviets in order to get more

Jews out of the Soviet Union. I mean it's an inference. But it's one that no matter what the political pressure is to get Pollard out, he doesn't get out and on something like this I think that, you know, there's unwillingness to blow the case, make it really scrutinized.

DINGER: I don't recall ever knowing the details of what Jonathan Pollard was providing and what the Israelis might have done with it. I think it's a little bit like perjury in that if somebody perjures himself, you hammer him very hard because the whole system collapses if people are allowed to lie under oath. Likewise, regardless of whether it seems like a major issue or not, the principle is that you don't give a pass on espionage. Whether spying is as fundamentally important a principle as perjury, I don't know. The big concern usually revolves around revealing the sources and methods of collecting intelligence. The Obama administration is well known for pursuing leakers more aggressively than previous administrations. State had a second case in 2009 while I was acting assistant secretary, Stephen Kim. He was a contractor who didn't work in INR. He was accused of passing intelligence about North Korea to a journalist.

Q: How much did you get involved in such cases?

DINGER: The investigators would update me periodically. They needed INR's cooperation. I mentioned earlier that there's a whole side of INR apart from the analytical side that for me was almost more interesting. The analytical side is the sort of thing that the State Department and political officers in particular do all the time. It includes more and different information, but it's basically standard Foreign Service analysis. The other side -- counterintelligence, CIA activities, how everybody collects information, and such -- is difficult to learn unless you're on the inside. That was a benefit of my job in INR that in many ways will inform my thinking for a long time. My job directing the Press Office was similar. I learned a lot about how journalists do their job and it informs my thinking to this day. If I see a live interview with the secretary of state in her office, I know how that was put together. I can envision running the cables and all that sort of stuff. The Foreign Service provides opportunities for lifelong learning.

Q: What about Civil Service versus Foreign Service analysts? I mean did you get any feel for that, and how did we deal with it?

DINGER: INR increasingly has become Civil Service. Part of the reason was that Foreign Service Officers prefer working in regional bureaus. But another reason was that after State didn't hire Foreign Service Officers for a couple of years, INR shifted quite a few positions to Civil Service because we could fill Civil Service jobs. INR became 80%, maybe 85% Civil Service. That wasn't ideal, but civil service staff in INR had deep knowledge. Some had been working in their portfolio for 20 or 30 years. Nothing distracts them from learning their issue. They literally forgot more than you or I could ever dream of knowing about their subject. There's an INR Russia analyst for example, Bob Otto, whose knowledge of Russia is astonishing. He can speak with a fluency about domestic Russian politics that matches or maybe exceeds what I can say about U.S. politics.

Q: What about the young, up and coming analysts?

DINGER: INR hires more PMF's (Presidential Management Fellows) than any other bureau in the State Department, 10 to 12 a year. I think as a group they may be more talented than their Foreign Service counterparts. We went to a PMF job fair every year in Washington and interviewed candidates. Not only did they pass through the PMF vetting process, but then we cherry picked who we wanted. I was always keen that we not get too obsessed with their qualifications for the portfolio. If we chose correctly, trained, rewarded, and retained them, we'd keep them for 20 or 30 years. INR has a very low attrition rate. They could learn their portfolio. For example, the working level guy doing chemical and biological weapons in INR was a history major. But we chose the right guy. Real smart, reliable, excellent judgment, nice guy. I still recall when he did a briefing on chemical weapons in Syria. It was excellent.

Q: Why do you suppose INR has such a low attrition rate?

DINGER: It attracts people who want to become deeply knowledgeable about their subject. The job is secure. It pays a living wage. It offers a good work/life balance. It offers all the training and tools an analyst needs. It helps that INR analysts are kings. If a senior official in the State Department wanted a briefing on something, we sent the analyst. If it's the secretary, then I would go along. But generally we sent a GS-13 or GS-14 on her own. They know their subject, we trusted them. It's better for the person being briefed, and of course it's a thrill and empowering for the analyst. We sent GS-13's to the White House to brief the president.

Q: Compared to the Defense Department or the CIA, do they tend to push somebody farther up in rank to do these briefings?

DINGER: I think the CIA would probably send an SIS, Senior Intelligence Service, person. INR would send a GS-13. Just the other day I ran into a GS-13 or 14 INR Japan analyst. He told me that in advance of a visit by a new Japanese prime minister to Washington he briefed President Obama in the oval office.

Q: When I was a consul general people would have a visa problem and they'd want to come and see me. Hell, I was the last person, you know? I mean I had my visa person who knew the law for better than I did. Because that's what they dealt with. I had a general idea, but this is one of the problems with going to the top. You're not really getting the real scoop.

DINGER: I was the same in Tokyo. Later, in INR I remember once the secretary's chief of staff had some question about Haiti. She called me and said, "John, I wonder if you could come up? I don't understand what I'm reading, can you explain it to me?" I said, "I can do that. But I think you'll be better served if I send up our Haiti expert." I'm not sure doing that necessarily served me personally, but I know it served her.

Q: We're talking about a normal bureaucratic response. There's a desire to get to the top person in an organization and if you have the right title, using that as opposed to going to the right person for real knowledge. Again, I think this is the smallness of INR and the ability to get the right person to do the briefing. It's all part of the strength of INR.

DINGER: I recall some years ago a conversation I overheard between two senior State Department officials in a car going to a meeting. They were talking about attending meetings at the national security council involving the "deputies," so it was the number two person from each agency, deputy secretary of state, deputy secretary of defense, et cetera. The two senior officials remarked that the smartest people were not in the room. It was people who got a briefing paper maybe an hour before and read it in the car on the way to the meeting. The people in the room are surely smart, but they're often not deeply knowledgeable. Yet they're making the decisions. I attended many meetings as a backbencher where I wondered if the U.S. government's, the American public's interests were being best served by people making decisions who weren't deeply versed in the subject.

Q: Yes. Well, I think this is probably a good place to stop. Thank you. It's been fascinating.

DINGER: It was my pleasure. I loved my Foreign Service career and enjoyed talking about it.

End of interview