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

AMBASSADOR MICHAEL DODMAN

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is May 15, 2023. This is Peter Eicher beginning a new ADST oral history interview with Ambassador Mike Dodman. Mike and I are both in Washington DC, although conducting this interview over Zoom. Good morning, Mike. Well, let's start at the beginning. Can you tell us where and when you were born?

DODMAN: Hi Peter, great to see you again. Sure, I was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1961. Grew up there until I left for college. I've been back at least once every year since.

Q: Okay. What were your parents doing in Buffalo?

DODMAN: Both were Buffalo-born and raised. My mom was a teacher, although that proved to be a short-lived career since she was forced to resign when I came along. My dad ran a wholesale meat company that his father had founded. He sold the business when he retired and happily it is still alive and it still has my grandfather's name on it, which is kind of cool. So yeah, my dad was a small businessman in a field where he regularly had to deal with U.S. government regulators. Suffice it to say, he did not have a high opinion of government inspectors. So, imagine his reaction when his oldest son decides to go off and work for the big bad government. Eventually, of course, both my parents were proud of my career and what I achieved, but at the beginning I think there was a certain sense of "where did we go wrong?"

Q: What was the family background? Are you Daughters of the American Revolution or recent immigrants and from where?

DODMAN: Both my father's parents were born in Hamilton, Ontario, and moved to Buffalo during the Depression, so in a sense relatively recent immigrants. But their families had been in Canada since the 19th century; they were a mix of English, Scottish and Irish. My mother's side is a mix of Irish and German, but they moved quite a bit in the century or so that they were in the States before settling in Buffalo. One of the things I want to do in retirement is get out and explore the places these ancestors lived—Texas, Nebraska, Missouri, Iowa and all over New York State, plus southern Ontario.

Q: Okay. Growing up in Buffalo did you have a house in the suburbs or what?

DODMAN: Oh, yeah. House in the suburbs, two-car garage. I'd call it a traditional middle-class upbringing. I mostly attended public schools. Buffalo, even though it's in New York State, I consider it more of a midwestern city. When I was coming of age in the seventies it was really hitting a rough patch—high unemployment, steel mills closing, stores downtown boarded up. I admit it was a place I had a hard time loving. But just two hours away was Toronto, which seemed to be my ideal of a city—cosmopolitan, international and just booming in comparison to Buffalo. Once I learned to drive, I tried to get to Toronto as much as I could, and generally began making plans for moving away. In hindsight, and particularly once we had kids, I came to realize what a lovely place Buffalo is. And now I can't imagine who wouldn't want to bring their kids up there. The city has had a real renaissance in the last decade, and I love visiting. But at the time—I don't know if I would call myself rebellious, but I was certainly a cranky teenager, and just didn't have any great love affair with Buffalo.

Q: And would you call it a pretty typical all-American upbringing: sports, Cub Scouts, that kind of thing?

DODMAN: Yeah. I think I was in Cub Scouts for a while, but it didn't make an impression on me. I didn't do any serious organized sports. My main sport was downhill skiing. We grew up skiing as a family and that dominated our weekends in the winter. Ski lessons, ski team, the whole thing. I started working from an early age, you know, paper routes and odd jobs and eventually fast food and various other things. Throughout high school and college, best I can recall, I often had two, sometimes three, jobs at a time.

Here's one little story that maybe sets the stage for what came later. Early in my high school years I learned about the Congressional Page program. Teens as I think sophomores or juniors go to work basically running errands for Members of Congress and go to a special school in DC. I pursued that but didn't get picked up. I'm not sure what that demonstrated more: my teenage desire to get away from Buffalo, or early indications of my interest in public policy.

Q: Were you a good student?

DODMAN: I think so, yeah. I enjoyed school. My high school was one of the best in the area. Had a range of AP (advanced placement) classes and such that I took advantage of.

Q: Were you a reader? Do you remember books that you particularly enjoyed as you were growing up?

DODMAN: I was a reader, yes. I'm still a heavy reader. The problem is, I can read a fascinating book and two days later, particularly if I've started another one, I have completely forgotten it. So, I can't point to any particular book I read as a kid that had an impact, certainly nothing that I read that led me to the career I ended up in.

Q: And did you travel while you were growing up?

DODMAN: Well, yes and no. We spent a lot of time in southern Ontario. My grandparents had a cottage near Lake Erie, and the best beaches and amusement parks were on that side of the border. Of course, pre-9/11, the border was nothing. We thought of southern Ontario and even Toronto as just extensions of Buffalo. Today I realize I was doing international travel from basically the day I was born. But there was nothing exotic about it growing up. But you know, getting to the eventual question of how I came into the Foreign Service, I think that early international exposure probably had an impact, going someplace where there was a different currency, different accent, even different candy bars in the grocery store. The fact that I remember that last factoid so well is confirmation that it had an impact on me.

We took a few other family vacations. I recall one visit to Martha's Vineyard. But my parents were not into long road trips. My mother's parents eventually moved to Florida, and as a teenager I traveled there a couple times. But nothing more significant than that. Nothing really off the east coast, I suppose.

Q: And at home did people talk about politics or current affairs over the dinner table?

DODMAN: Not so much. I don't feel that I developed my appreciation for politics, current events, international relations, economics or anything like that from around the dinner table. In fact, my parents and I ended up with very different politics and different views on the world, which probably came about in part because there wasn't a lot of that kind of talk. What I think I most took away from my parents, and my dad in particular, was the importance of hard work, being diligent, and always being conscious of your reputation or brand. Like all my siblings and cousins, I had the chance—or maybe it was an obligation—to work for a while at the meat company, so I also got to see my dad as a manager and problem solver, and I'm sure there are examples from my career managing problems that I can trace back to that small business on Michigan Avenue in Buffalo.

Q: So, they both had white collar jobs. Did your mom go back to work a little later?

DODMAN: Eventually, after the kids were grown. But throughout she was a very active volunteer. There was a thing called the Junior League back in the day, you know, wives of middle-class businessmen who got together and did good works, and she was very involved in that through the '60s and '70s. We have a scrapbook that has lots of pictures from the Buffalo newspapers of Mrs. Dodman with her kids at the tag sale or at the haunted house or whatever. So, yeah, she remained active, but I can't say she ever had a second career.

Q: What had she been a teacher of?

DODMAN: It was elementary school. I can't remember what grade. She probably wasn't able to teach much more than a year before I came along. We never heard much about it growing up. I only really heard about it in recent years as I coaxed her into talking more about her past and recorded some interviews for posterity.

Q: So, were you always college bound? Was that expected of you?

DODMAN: It was. It was always my intention. I wasn't sure what I was going to study, where I was going to go, but yes. I mean, I was on a college track and all with as many AP classes as possible. Same with my peer group in high school: I can't think of a single one of my friends who took as much as a gap year or anything.

Q: Right. Do you remember where you applied, where you wanted to go? Did you get into where you wanted to go?

DODMAN: Yeah, I did get into where I wanted to go, which was Georgetown. And it's a bit of a surprise I ended up there. That was my father's alma mater. As a cranky teen I was not looking to follow in my father's footsteps. I'm lucky and—looking back—really grateful that by the time I was seventeen, eighteen I guess I had mellowed enough that I could consider going to the place my father had graduated from. I think I was mostly attracted to Washington. I knew I wanted to study in a big city. And wanted to do something international. I remember very clearly the day my father said—very gently, not wanting to appear to be pressing me—"You know, Georgetown has this School of Foreign Service—" Pretty much from that moment Georgetown was really the only place that I focused on. My backup school was University of Rochester, which didn't tick many of the boxes of what I wanted, but it was not in Buffalo and it was a good school, still is a good school. So, I applied early decision to Georgetown and I didn't get in, but I did get in regular admission and so that was it. In fact, I assume I got into University of Rochester, but I really don't remember.

Q: Yeah. And then, you said you went to the Foreign Service school. Was that the separate application within the Georgetown application to get into—

DODMAN: Yeah. You applied to a college or school within the university. There is the College of Arts & Sciences and the School of Foreign Service. I think I applied to both of them, I'm not sure, but yes, they were separate applications. There was also a business school and nursing and a couple of others.

Q: So, foreign affairs was obviously already appealing to you at that point?

DODMAN: In high school I really enjoyed history and economics. Social studies I guess we called it at the time. I've obviously had the question many times, how did you end up in the Foreign Service? What motivated you? The only class that I took in high school that would fit the rubric of international affairs or foreign affairs was a Canadian Studies class. It was a study of Canada, their constitution, government, history, things like that. And I enjoyed it. I wouldn't suggest that I chose my career path or I chose Georgetown and the School for Foreign Service because of that one class, but when I look back, aside from frequent trips over the border, that class stands out as my first real exposure to international affairs. So, yes, somehow, I knew by my senior year that I was interested in something international.

Now, the other thing I'd done was take French for many years, starting in middle school. We did a field trip, I guess in my senior year, to Quebec City, which was my first time in any province besides Ontario. Going to Quebec, using French, seeing a part of Canada that felt so different from Ontario, that also made a real impression. Not necessarily that I wanted to spend the next thirty-five years moving around the world and living in a whole bunch of countries, but yeah, that's some of the motivation, I guess.

Q: Yeah. So, how did you like Georgetown? Is that the first time you were really away from home?

DODMAN: Yeah, it was. I had never done summer camp or anything like that. I took to it right away. I loved it, no hesitation. Georgetown itself, both the university and the neighborhood, but also just loved being in DC. I had a great time, made great friends. I met [my wife] Joan there. I majored in economics, international economics. I was able to do internships and other things around town. All in all, just a great experience.

Q: At the Foreign Service school were the courses generally geared to overseas things and even more specifically to a career in the Foreign Service?

DODMAN: I'd say the first two years were basically a pretty standard liberal arts curriculum, you know, history, government, economics and—this being a Jesuit university—theology of some sort. There was also a foreign language requirement, which I guess started to differentiate this school from others. The real international focus came in the major you declared for the second two years.

I'm guessing the Georgetown School of Foreign Service is the largest feeder school into the U.S. Foreign Service. If so, I'd say that's less because they actively groom you for the Foreign Service—because they really don't—but more because, like you said, the courses offered are focused on international affairs. And because of where it is, you know, in Washington. You are naturally exposed to the U.S. government, to the Foreign Service. You learn what it is because it's a part of our international relations. When I was a junior, I took the Foreign Service exam, the written exam, for the first time and it was almost as if it was a rite of passage. In my memory pretty much my entire class took it. Now, relatively few people make it into the Foreign Service right out of college, and that was true of my class. I certainly didn't because I didn't pass the first time. In fact, after taking it once I pretty much forgot about the Foreign Service as I went off and did a whole bunch of other things, and it was only four or five years later that I decided to take the exam again.

So, no, the curriculum and the guidance from the administration and faculty were not necessarily pushing people towards the Foreign Service as a career, but if you are in the School of Foreign Service, you really can't not know that the U.S. Foreign Service exists.

Q: And school life outside of your classes, what were you into?

DODMAN: As I mentioned before, I seemed to always be working. I had several jobs, on-campus jobs, off-campus jobs. I did a couple of internships on the Hill. But I wouldn't say any of those jobs were formative. From high school through graduate school, I worked in all kinds of different settings—retail, restaurants, security, data entry, manual labor, public relations, even a call center. My main take away from that is an appreciation for hard work and flexibility. And confirmation that I always wanted to be financially independent.

Q: So, internships on the Hill sounds interesting. Were these actual times off from school to do an internship?

DODMAN: No, this was during the school year, which is why they were probably not particularly satisfying or memorable because it was just a couple of hours a week, you know, answering constituent mail or something like that. The one I remember best was in the office of a Buffalo congressman, John LaFalce. It was probably my fault not taking these opportunities more seriously. I know a lot of my classmates found internships that really changed their lives. I think I saw these almost as box-checking opportunities. Like taking the Foreign Service written test: just something people did.

Q: How was living in Washington at that time? Was that the bad old days when the city was in decline?

DODMAN: Yeah, it was. I lived on-campus all four years although I had plenty of friends off-campus. But again, off-campus was just right there around Georgetown or Glover Park. So, it was a fairly cloistered existence, but we definitely took advantage of the city. There was a bus that ran from the gates on 37th Street to Dupont Circle and the Metro was open at that point. I loved the city. I had a bike all the time I was in DC and I remember biking quite a bit on the towpath and along the Mall and Rock Creek Park and things like that. All the things that I love about DC to this day were there, although certainly there were large parts of the city that I never went to. And of course, once we were empty nesters, like you, we came back and settled in DC and are very happy for it.

Q: Did you travel during the summertimes or go home or stay in DC?

DODMAN: All of the above. The summer after freshman year I went home. I took a couple of classes at the University of Buffalo and went back to work. I think I was at McDonald's at that point. The summer between sophomore and junior year I went to France and studied. It was an immersion program in Avignon, living with a family and taking classes. This was in part to make sure I would ace my language proficiency exam, which I did that fall. But also because I had made the decision not to do a semester or year abroad, but still wanted some international study. That was a positive and formative experience. It was my first time in Europe, my first time outside of North America.

Q: That was a Georgetown-organized program?

DODMAN: No. Georgetown offered a bunch of programs, but I went and found this on my own because I knew what I wanted. I just wanted a summer program, mostly focused on language, living with a local family. After about two months in Avignon, I bought a Eurail pass and traveled for several weeks in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and France. It was a great introduction to a continent I would spend a lot of time in and continue to love to visit.

And then, the third summer I stayed at Georgetown. I don't recall taking any classes, just working a lot and exploring the city. And then senior year, my roommates and friends who had gone overseas all came back, and I felt kind of like I was there to welcome everybody home and set us all up for a big final year.

So, in terms of travel there was the one big European trip. Beyond that I remember one spring break in Florida, another doing a service project in Appalachia, maybe a few ski breaks. Not too much.

Q: And you'd selected a major in international economics, is that right? Is that because you enjoyed it so much or it looked like a good job prospect or what?

DODMAN: Honestly, I don't recall thinking much about job prospects. Probably should have more. I just, I really enjoyed economics and so, it was kind of a no-brainer. I don't think I ever really wrestled with the decision very much. I've never regretted it. You know, if I'd really focused on career prospects, I would have been in the business school, or taken more classes there. I did take an accounting class somewhere along the line, I remember that. That might have been that first summer back in Buffalo. But no, as I look back now, I feel like I was just very focused on enjoying college, getting everything I could out of it academically and socially, and didn't think too much about the future.

Q: Even so, as you got to be a senior and approached graduation, you must have been giving some thought to what you would do next.

DODMAN: I did. First, I knew I was going to go to grad school. But I also knew I wanted to take a break first. What I ended up doing was going to Alaska for a year as a volunteer. The natural thing for me to do would have been the Peace Corps. It would have fit me in many ways, and I had friends choosing that. But just the same way that spending my junior year abroad would have been a natural path for me to take, I chose not to do Peace Corps. To this day I'm not sure why. I do recall that the two-year commitment in the Peace Corps was an issue for me.

What I did pursue—and maybe it was a path-of-least-resistance sort of thing—and what I ended up doing was through the Jesuit Volunteer Corps; Georgetown being a Jesuit university, this was not uncommon. The JVC had some international placements, mostly in Latin America. I didn't speak Spanish, so I never really considered that. But they had opportunities all over the country, places you could go and work for a year. And my request or my choice—I can't remember whether I picked where I went or it was picked

for me—my desire was to go as far away as possible. So, I ended up in Nome, Alaska, for a year, which was, almost literally, about as far away as I could go and still be domestic.

Q: Okay. Before we move on to Nome, one more Georgetown question. You had mentioned meeting Joan. Were you a thing by the time you graduated?

DODMAN: We were no longer a thing when we graduated. (Eicher laughs) We dated for most of two years in college, but in senior year we decided to break it off. But by that point we had a large common friend group, so we still saw each other all the time. And that's obviously not the end of the story. As we'll talk about, I went off to Alaska, then to graduate school. Three years after graduating I moved back to Washington where Joan was working. She was living with a bunch of people who were also my friends, so we were friendly. Over the course of that year, my first year back in Washington, we got back together. Things moved quickly. But we'll get to that when we start talking about entering State.

Q: Okay. So, I digress. How about back to Nome?

DODMAN: So, Nome is a fascinating place. I haven't been back there since I left almost forty years ago. I would love to go back and see it. Obviously it's, you know, it's in the middle of nowhere, the end of the road, although there is no road. You cannot drive to Nome, you have to fly. I mean, there are roads, but they don't connect to Anchorage or Fairbanks or anything like that, so really quite isolated.

I worked at a radio station that was run by the Diocese of Fairbanks, founded by a Jesuit priest who had developed quite a following. In Nome at the time there were two radio stations, both church-affiliated. We were the progressive radio station. The other one was—I don't know what it was, some evangelical group ran that one. I was the rock and roll DJ. Two hours every night I played top forty hits. I actually played Casey Kasem's Top 40 every weekend, which at the time came on LP records that were mailed to the station and you would just, you know, literally put the stylus on the LP and there was Casey Kasem talking to western Alaska.

I was also a news reporter. The biggest story every year was the Iditarod sled dog race that ends in Nome. I got to cover the Iditarod and spent a lot of time talking about mushing and sled dogs and things like that. Did get to travel a fair bit because our reach was much bigger than Nome. The city had a population of maybe 3,000 but the area we broadcast to was very large, lots of isolated native villages, lots of little bush planes that would go from place to place. So, I was able to get out and visit, I don't know, at least a half dozen small villages. It was fascinating. Totally different part of the world, lots of social problems. The station aired regular public service announcements focused on avoiding alcohol and drugs, positive health messages, things like that. Overall, it was a great learning experience. And I never thought about this before, but some of my success in public diplomacy over the years maybe goes back to those on-air interviews and things.

Q: Yeah, let me plumb this a little bit. You said you joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and somehow that doesn't sound like a very typical public service volunteer job, to go off and be a DJ.

DODMAN: Well, the mission of the radio station was social development, so there were plenty of parallels with people who were, you know, working in soup kitchens or doing drug awareness campaigns or even economic development. The mode of delivery was broadcast as opposed to face-to-face because most of the target population was so dispersed. That was the most efficient way of delivering news, information, public service, even inspiration. Obviously on Sundays there was a mass broadcast, so the religious side was there, although that piece of it was never my priority. I was there to do good, even if it wasn't face-to-face. That's why those trips that I was able to take outside of Nome—which were both for news gathering and outreach—were such an important part of the experience. That said, in hindsight, it probably wasn't the best way for me to scratch that itch of public service and volunteerism. On the other hand, it definitely scratched the itch of getting far away and seeing something exotic and exploring a different part of the United States. And, jumping ahead, I think that overall positive experience in Nome made me more comfortable with the idea of a Foreign Service career.

Q: And so, through this time you were already expecting to move on to graduate school. Had you selected those and applied early on at that time you were in Alaska?

DODMAN: I applied from Alaska. As I said, I knew I wanted to continue studying, and I was set on international economics, but with the benefit of experience and hindsight I see that I took a pretty half-assed approach to this important life decision. I had no real clue at this point what sort of career I wanted. Which would have been a good decision to make first and then find an academic program that set me up for success. Instead, my decision making went like this: I want to study more economics, I want to do it in Boston—which seemed to me to be the perfect place to live as a graduate student—and I don't want to go all-in and get a PhD. Since Harvard didn't offer a terminal master's degree in economics, by process of elimination I ended up with Boston University.

Q: A good place to be a student.

DODMAN: It was. BU was the only place I applied to, and they accepted me. So, at the end of my year in Nome I said goodbye to Alaska with an awesome farewell trip: a few days in Anchorage, visit to Denali, then to Juneau where a friend and I took the Alaska state ferry to Seattle. A spectacular trip seeing the same scenery you would pay a fortune for on a cruise line. It was a good year.

Q: Okay. And then, what year would this have been? I guess I should have been asking years earlier on. Tell me what year you graduated from Georgetown.

DODMAN: Yeah. Georgetown class of '83, so I was '83–'84 in Nome, and then 1984–'86 in Boston.

Q: Okay, let's get back to Boston. You enrolled in BU. We'll start with academics. How was that? How did you find it?

DODMAN: I found it fine. It wasn't as rewarding as Georgetown had been. Maybe that was the undergrad experience versus graduate. I mean, it was a good program, it was a good group of friends, and good teachers. I loved living in Boston—that worked out as well as I had hoped. I'm glad I did the BU program. I just can't get too excited about the academic side of it. As we'll talk about later, I did another master's program as a mid-career professional, which was better—I grew more as a result of the other master's than I grew as a result of this one.

Q: The BU program also focused on international economics?

DODMAN: Yep, international development specifically. Again, a fine program, but the academics didn't really make too much of an impression on me. What did was some of the jobs I had in Boston. My second year I was picked to teach intro economics. I had two classes of mostly freshmen. And this was not being a TA (teaching assistant)—I designed and taught the full class, wrote the tests, assigned the grades. Kind of crazy that kids paying pricey tuition had someone like me as their professor. But they liked me: the second semester, the department asked me to take on a third class. The experience did get me thinking that maybe I should rethink the PhD and consider academia as a career, but by that point I was getting tired of being a student and thinking of moving on.

Q: That's great. What were you thinking about next?

DODMAN: Well, yeah. I guess I had finally reached the point where it was time to make some long-term decisions about life. I remember doing some interviews while in Boston with a couple companies. One stands out vividly: through the career center at BU—I assume—I had landed an interview with a bank in Providence, Rhode Island. Don't recall the name of the bank, and there's a very good chance it no longer exists. I took the train down and sat through the interview. I don't recall why, but I walked into that interview completely unprepared. Knew nothing about the bank nor the position, and had no questions prepared to ask them. Of course, I bombed the interview and didn't get the job. I recall feeling embarrassed and foolish, and I don't think I've ever done something so stupid since or wasted someone's time as I did that day.

I think I may have applied for a few finance jobs in New York, but I don't recall any interviews. Either because none of these panned out, or more likely because my heart wasn't really in it. I shifted my focus. I decided to move back to Washington after graduation and focus on government jobs. To get me started I got an internship with the Economics Bureau at the Federal Trade Commission. I rented a room that summer in a crappy apartment in Georgetown, and since the internship was unpaid, I made money working as a waiter at the Bayou—the old music club on K Street in Georgetown under the freeway. None of that—the internship, the Bayou, or the apartment—was very satisfying. But things improved that fall when I landed my first full-time job as a

Research Assistant at a think tank called Resources for the Future. And moved into my first real apartment, living on my own for the first time. This was on N Street near Logan Circle—a neighborhood that's very hip today, but in the mid-80s was still more than a little dicey.

Q: Okay. Let's step back just a little bit. You loved Boston but you decided to move to Washington. Was it that you remembered you liked Washington better, or had you kind of gravitated more towards government kind of stuff?

DODMAN: I think it was a couple things. I liked Washington, I knew it well. And I must have made up my mind that I would be happier working in public service than in the private sector. Another pull factor was that I still had many—probably most—of my college friends here. I had visited often from Boston. It was comfortable, I guess that is the best word, a comfortable place to come back to.

Q: Tell me a little bit about the job at the think tank. Were you there for a year and what did you do?

DODMAN: Yeah, it was a year. The job was doing research on energy policy. The subject that I remember working on the most was electric power co-generation. If I'm remembering correctly this involved industries that generated their own power and then sold their excess production back to utilities. This is standard today and it's what we do with the solar panels on our roof. But forty years ago, this was, I guess, something the utilities were resisting. So, this think tank was researching and documenting the positive impact co-generation could have on the power sector. I ended up writing a paper about it that was published in the think tank's quarterly newsletter. My first time in print.

Another memory from Resources for the Future was using a personal computer for the first time. I loved it. I ended up going into the office regularly on the weekend just to have access to the PC, the printer, the Xerox machine. A friend of mine from Georgetown ended up living in the apartment building next door to me that year. He was really focused on becoming a navy pilot. He bought one of those early flight simulator programs on a big floppy disk. Neither of us yet had a PC, so we would spend hours on weekends in my office taking off and landing from some highly pixelated airports. I didn't get my own home PC until maybe five years later, but seeing the capabilities of this one machine—plus the power of some of the mainframe computers I had used at the FTC—made me really frustrated with the State Department's dated technology that we had through the 1990s.

So, anyway, the think tank gig was fine and helped get me settled in DC. But I never saw it as more than an entry-level job while I figured out what I was really going to do. Soon after I started there in the fall of '86, I took the Foreign Service written exam again. I can't say exactly what led me to sign up for that. I definitely had not been dwelling on the Foreign Service as a career since I first took the test in 1981 or '82. I guess it was because it was free, and I had nothing to lose.

But before we get too far into the Foreign Service process, let me mention one other fun fact from that year. I started taking German classes at the USDA Graduate School. I don't recall why German, except that it was maybe a natural progression since I'd studied French for years and had taken a few Spanish classes at Georgetown. I guess I really missed the classroom and couldn't pass up the many opportunities here for free education. I remember taking these classes because—and sorry, this is skipping ahead a bit—I remember finding out I had passed the oral exams either before or after a German class and sitting on a bench on the Mall thinking, Wow, I guess now I really need to make some decisions. In my mind I received a call on my cell phone while walking to or from class, but of course, there were no cellphones in those days. So, maybe I got the news in the mail that morning and was just coming to terms with it as I went to class. Regardless, like the day my dad told me Georgetown had a School of Foreign Service, I remember that time sitting on that park bench on the Mall outside of German class as one of those pivotal life moments.

Oh, and I got back together with Joan that year—

Q: I think we should definitely explore that. But let's go back to taking the Foreign Service exam in fall of '86. What do you remember about it? How was it? What was it like at the time?

DODMAN: Okay. So, what I remember most about it is probably not the answer you were expecting. It was offered at the Sheraton Hotel on Columbia Pike near the Pentagon, the one that's kind of a little bit up a hill behind the Pentagon that you can see from across the Potomac. I guess this was a Saturday morning, and for whatever reason when I got to my Metro stop to catch the train to the Pentagon, the station either wasn't yet open or the system had shut down or something. So being cheap and still a little foolish, I decided the best thing to do was to run from Franklin Square down 14th Street, over the Fourteenth Street Bridge, through the Pentagon parking lots, and up Columbia Pike to the hotel. Let me tell you: those Pentagon parking lots are bigger than they look. I'm not much of a runner so it's not like I actually ran the whole way—more very fast walking with sprints on and off. I made it with just minutes to spare. I remember it felt like one of those dreams where you're going to miss your plane or something. But this was real life. And not an auspicious start to my Foreign Service career.

Once my heart stopped pounding, I was able to focus on the test. It was an old-school test, like an SAT, you know, use a pencil to fill in the little oval. I can't say I remember the actual exam much—certainly not as well as the excitement of getting there. I know I was happy I'd taken it before because I knew what to expect. The first time I had passed everything except the English, so I do remember focusing very much on the English expression and, you know, trying to parse through those different sentences and comma placement and things like that. I think I really benefited from a couple more years of schooling, a couple more years of reading.

Q: Beyond the English section, what do you recall of the Jeopardy-like general knowledge section?

DODMAN: I felt pretty comfortable with most of that. I recall sweating a bit over some of the cultural questions and the much-too-specific consular topics. But I also knew enough about the Service to know I wasn't that interested in PD (public diplomacy) or consular. In the end I got a passing score on each of the functional areas and the general knowledge. As I recall econ wasn't actually my highest score, but it was high enough to get me in as an econ officer.

Q: So, you passed the test. You heard sometime in spring. You must have been invited for an oral exam. And I guess being in Washington made it a little easier, quicker?

DODMAN: Yeah. I seem to recall hearing I had passed the written test pretty quickly. I think the oral assessment was in March–April of '87. It was somewhere in Rosslyn, so yes, living in DC made it much easier. As an aside, I'm very glad they are moving to make the oral exam all virtual; the cost of traveling to a test site shouldn't be a barrier to prospective FSOs. Honestly, I'm not sure I would have pursued the Foreign Service if I'd had to pay any significant sum to take either of the exams. It seems crazy to say that from today's perspective, given how trivial the costs would have been in comparison to the great career I had, but money mattered a lot at that point in my life.

I have just a few vivid memories of the oral exam. I knew enough about the process to be focused on the group negotiating exercise. Everyone seemed to be most nervous about that. Several people testing with me had taken the oral exam multiple times. They all seemed intent on making sure the project that they were promoting was chosen by the group. I had decided going in that I wouldn't take that approach unless the project I was given was clearly a winner, but instead would quickly back off my project and work to form a consensus. I didn't know much, but I knew the assessors were looking to see if you could play nice. And that's the way it played out for me. I recall leaving there thinking I'd acquitted myself well, and that most of those people who had taken it multiple times would probably never make it in.

I also remember the in-box test, probably because I didn't have a lot of experience in a busy office so many of the tasks given were a little foreign to me. But I seem to recall I scored well on that, which makes sense since that's something that I did well in my career—managing time, prioritizing and delegating.

Q: And did they tell you right away after the test, you're in or you're not?

DODMAN: You know, that is interesting. I honestly don't remember. The only thing I remember clearly is that time on the Mall, but I can't be sure if that was the day I took the exam or after I received some notification.

Q: Okay. So, you walked out of there feeling pretty good. That was spring, but then, of course, you still had to go through the security clearance and the medical clearance and so forth. Do you remember anything about that at all?

DODMAN: Well, I remember the paperwork being a pain in the ass and a preview of what was to come. I remember being in Rosslyn for my interview with the security investigator, and particularly worrying about having to answer questions about drug use. I had enjoyed marijuana in college, and while I wouldn't say I was a habitual user, I knew it was something that could be an issue for the clearance. Someone had told me that marijuana usage alone wouldn't be disqualifying and the best thing was just to be honest with the investigator. And so I was. I also can distinctly recall that I smoked a joint at some point early in that period of returning to Washington and actively thinking, If I pass these exams, this could be the last time I ever smoke marijuana. And it was. And I haven't missed it.

Q: Okay. At that point they were putting you on a rank order register? Were they still doing that then, once you passed all that?

DODMAN: Yes, it was a rank order. And at some point that summer of 1987 I must have gotten the final word that I had passed all the final checks. I was on a one-year contract with Resources for the Future and had a one-year lease on my apartment, so I do remember a period of uncertainty when I didn't yet have a start date, but had to make decisions on continuing with RFF and staying in my apartment. But I seem to recall that that period was pretty short, and I was offered a place in the November A-100 class pretty quickly. I must have left RFF in August and moved out of my apartment. A friend and I spent several weeks in September and October on a really enjoyable road trip exploring the eastern half of the United States.

But much more important than the road trip was deciding on the future for me and Joan. As I said earlier, at some point after I moved back to DC in '86 the two of us got back together. And then at some point after the Foreign Service process got real—which was probably after I learned I had passed the orals—we realized we had some decisions to make. In another one of those indelible memories, I recall the two of us sitting on some hill at the National Zoo one afternoon in the summer of '87 and having, you know, *the* conversation, "Well, I'm going to be moving overseas at some point next year and may not be back here for a long time—do we want to have a long-distance relationship, or maybe we should just get married—" Or something romantic like that. I always did seem to put logic before romance. I don't remember exactly how Joan responded, but it was clear to me she was up for spending the rest of her life with me, and much of that overseas. I did subsequently do it the right way and made a formal proposal that summer or fall. So when I started A-100 on November 16, 1987, Joan was there at the FSI (Foreign Service Institute) building in Rosslyn as my fiancé.

Q: Did she have to get a security clearance and a worldwide medical clearance and everything before you—

DODMAN: I remember having to redo some of the security forms before coming in saying now I have a fiancé. But since she was an American citizen that didn't delay things.

Q: Okay. So, you were engaged but not married yet when you started your A-100. Was it still called A-100 at that point?

DODMAN: Yep. I was in the fortieth A-100 class.

Q: How did your family feel about your joining the Foreign Service and the idea that you were going to spend a lot of your life abroad?

DODMAN: Well, as I said earlier, I think my parents were initially more surprised about my joining the federal government than the Foreign Service per se. But they were proud. They came to the swearing-in at the end of A-100, which was done right: an impressive ceremony on the eighth floor of the State Department. That made an impact. They traveled to each of our posts until they really weren't up for international travel anymore, so they got to see some of the world. And to see that we and their grandkids were living just fine. Joan and I were very diligent about coming home every year so the kids could spend time in Buffalo and New Jersey and really get to know their grandparents, their cousins, and the United States. So that helped.

Q: Okay, I think that's a good stopping point. We can go back next time to anything you want to add, and otherwise move on to joining the Foreign Service.

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Q: Today is May 25, 2023, and this is Peter Eicher beginning the second session of the oral history interview with Mike Dodman. We left off last time in 1987 as you were just about to go off to your entering Foreign Service class. You gathered at FSI, the George Shultz Campus someplace?

DODMAN: No, FSI was still in Rosslyn at the time. I think A-100 was in SA (State Annex)-15. Not the high-rise building where most of the FSI language training took place, but a building a few blocks over. I remember that first day very well. As I said earlier, Joan was there as my fiancé. A lot of spouses were there. We were seated in alphabetical order for at least the first weeks of the class. I was seated between Rick Driscoll and Michelle Denney. Rick was, I believe, also an econ officer and someone I ran into throughout my career; Michelle I don't think I ever saw after A-100, and she tragically was killed in the Nairobi embassy bombing in 1998.

Q: Oh, gee. How many of you were there in the class?

DODMAN: I think we were around forty, maybe closer to fifty. These were not the really small classes you got during the real lean years of intake in the '90s, and definitely not the one hundred-plus that you got during the boom years after 9/11. I think it was a fairly standard intake for the time.

Q: Pretty good size in any case. And how was the makeup of it, the diversity, the age, the background and so forth?

DODMAN: Not particularly diverse by any measure. Maybe a quarter of the class was female. I recall one African American. Very few Asian Americans. Maybe a handful of Hispanic Americans. So overall very heavily white and male. I think geographic diversity and education diversity were better. I can say this: I do not have any recollection that not having gone to an Ivy League school I was, you know, the odd man out. There were some people with really interesting backgrounds, although I don't recall any details. I will say I recall being somewhat pleasantly surprised that there were as many females as there were. Not that a quarter is where it should have been, but this was the '80s. Obviously A-100 classes today are at or closer to gender parity, as they should be.

Q: And were there retirees who were starting a new career?

DODMAN: So, I was in my late twenties and I do recall some people were significantly older—in their forties or fifties. But I don't recall anyone making a big deal of starting this as a second career. I remember one woman was coming in as a tandem and had already done several tours as a spouse. She was a great source of ground truth about Foreign Service life. I made some good friends out of A-100. But unfortunately, we were not a class that had any long-term cohesiveness. I know some classes continue to have regular events to bring people together many years after most of them have retired. We didn't have one of those people who are naturally good at coordinating things like that, I guess.

Q: Okay. What do you remember about the class itself?

DODMAN: I guess I would say that it was useful. I mean, I certainly don't recall thinking that it was a waste of time. I don't recall there being any one session that I could say had a big impact on my career. Although there's one thing I recall that I guess gives some insight to how I was approaching this new career: among the many, many sessions about benefits and HR (human resources) procedures, I recall someone came to talk to us about opening your window [the process you go through to compete for entry into the Senior Foreign Service] and I distinctly remember thinking, I'm not going to still be doing this in twenty years, so this is not something I need to listen to, and actively shutting out the speaker. And of course, twenty-plus years later, I had to find someone to explain to me how the opening-your-window process worked.

There have been many debates over the years about reforming A-100. I was part of those debates. So I don't want to project those discussions on how I may have viewed A-100 back in 1987. I got what I needed from the class to succeed. Whether it was the right balance of the nuts-and-bolts sort of stuff versus the ethos of what the Foreign Service and the State Department are all about—I really can't say. But it worked for me.

Q: Did they take you off on a retreat or do team building exercises or those kinds of things?

DODMAN: Our retreat was nothing exciting. It was at a Quality Inn or something like that in Fredericksburg. That was the touchy-feely part of the class. We went over our Myers-Briggs test scores. I was an ISTJ, which apparently is a desirable combination of letters for a Foreign Service officer, although a relatively rare grouping. There were only two of us in the class with that combination. We both went on to become ambassadors, which I guess lends some validity to the test. Although I admit I was never a big fan.

Q: Since you raised that, how many members of your class did go on to become ambassadors?

DODMAN: There were a few others, so I would guess four or five total. So maybe 10 percent of the class.

Q: So, nobody went on to be under secretary or anything like that?

DODMAN: No.

Further on the off-site: as was the case when I was in HR decades later, all the CDOs (career development officers) were there and used the time to get to know their clients. I recall my CDO was a nice woman named Yvonne or something close to that, who was a Civil Service employee, which I found interesting. I recall being impressed with her. I distinctly remember sitting next to her at dinner one night; I don't recall the conversation, but I remember walking away from that dinner feeling like it had been time well spent, and that I had made a positive impression. I can't be certain that was it, but since I was very happy with the first assignment she put me into, I can only assume that dinner table chat helped.

Q: So, how did the assignment process work at that point? Did they give you a list of choices?

DODMAN: Yep, we were given a list of available jobs, probably in the first week of class. I'm not sure how many jobs were on the list or how many we had to put forward, but for some reason the number ten sticks in my mind, so maybe I had to rank order my top ten posts. I remember the process of researching posts was a bit stressful. This was pre-internet, so all we had were the files available in the Overseas Briefing Center at FSI. Obviously Joan was fully involved in that process.

Q: Still the old, printed post reports, those kinds of things?

DODMAN: Right, post reports and whatever other printed material they had on hand. I recall a little frustration—feeling like there wasn't sufficient information to make informed choices.

Q: Let me explore that a little bit more. At that point were you required to do a consular tour?

DODMAN: Yes. One of your first two tours had to include consular work. We had many non-consular jobs on the list and many rotation jobs as well. The consular jobs were not all visa mill posts. I suppose Manila and some Mexican posts would have been on our list. But it was not like today where you have massive consulates in China and other places, and you have such a significant demand for consular officers. But yes, I knew that I would do a consular tour, if not the first tour, then for sure the second tour.

Q: Do you remember what you were looking for? Were you more interested in the job or the place or what?

DODMAN: I don't fully recall the thought process, but probably some of both. I no longer have a copy of that list, but I do recall my top three: Havana, Warsaw and Ponta Delgada in the Azores. That's a fairly eclectic mix, and the one common theme was that I would need language training for each of them. Which was important since Joan and I had planned our wedding for April, so I needed to be sure my training didn't wrap up too quickly. I think both the Havana and Warsaw jobs were economic/consular rotations, so that would indicate my desire to work in my cone from the beginning. And being intrigued by the economics of a communist country. The job in the Azores is a bit of a head-scratcher today, I'll admit.

Q: And did the people running the course or your CDO or whoever actively interact with you or were you just suddenly surprised on Flag Day that you got one thing or another?

DODMAN: Oh, I was very surprised on Flag Day. I had no clue what I was going to get. The most memorable interaction with anybody was that dinner at the off-site with my CDO. I'm guessing that we met in her office as well, and perhaps Joan was also present for that meeting, but I don't recall. From running that office in HR thirty years later, I know that the number one goal of a CDO is to fill jobs, and only secondarily to make the dreams of their clients come true. I'm sure that was as true in 1987 as it was in 2014 or today.

Q: So, Flag Day—

DODMAN: Although I do think—sorry—I do think that, since the Foreign Service was a much smaller institution back then, that CDOs and perhaps all of HR did a little bit more of identifying talent and making sure that people who show promise are given the right assignments. I don't feel that during my time running Entry-Level Assignments that we did enough of that—I don't feel that that was a priority coming down from the heads of HR. The emphasis was getting boots on the ground and filling seats in consular sections. Maybe this is just nostalgia suggesting there was more care in assignments back in the old days. But I've had enough conversations with recent directors general to know that that is something they want to do more of—getting more back in the business of talent management and not just putting boots on the ground. But we aren't there yet.

Q: So, Flag Day came and everybody was given their flag. You hear all these stories about oh, my goodness, we had somebody in our class who suddenly got a flag to some

country they'd never heard of or something, anything like that in your group?

DODMAN: I don't recall tears at our Flag Day other than maybe tears of joy. Again, sorry to keep bouncing around, but when I ran entry-level ten years ago, we had a firm policy that if someone was being assigned to a post they low ranked—in other words, did not want—the CDO would meet with them before Flag Day so they were not shocked. Happily, that was pretty rare. The beauty of the Foreign Service then and now is that everyone has a different definition of a dream posting. In my class I remember one person being ecstatic at being assigned to Bamako, which at that time would have definitely been very low on my list. I can't remember who got the job in Havana, which was my top choice. But it likely was someone who already had Spanish, which makes sense. I got Warsaw and was thrilled with getting my number two. Joan had obviously cleared off on my bid list before I submitted it. We were both just thrilled.

Q: Okay, that's great. And at the time you got the assignment presumably they let you know what kind of training you were going to have to take before you headed out.

DODMAN: Yeah. So, I was going into a combined consular-econ tour—one year in consular, one year in econ. First tours only got six months of any language, no matter how hard, so I knew I had that. Plus con-gen [required training for consular work] and I think some kind of introduction to economic work overseas. I also had some spare time between the end of A-100 and the start of training, since I remember going to work for a week or two on the Polish desk at the department. Dan Fried was the desk officer at the time; I can't remember anybody higher up the leadership chain. But I found that very helpful since I'd never done an internship or anything at State.

Q: Were you already off language probation by that time?

DODMAN: No. My entrance score in French when I came in was, I think it was two-plus/three or something like that and you needed a three/three to get off probation. So, I needed language for tenure. But again, my main motivation—as I remember it now—was less probation and more making sure I was still assigned to DC in the spring, for the wedding. The one thing I do recall during A-100 was going to talk to the economic training people because at the time the year-long economic course was required for economic officers at the mid-level. But if you had sufficient economics at the university level you could get that requirement waived. Which I did.

Q: Okay. So, how did you find language training and did Joan take it with you?

DODMAN: She did not. Joan was working throughout and getting ready for our wedding. The Polish training at the time was in that same building, SA-15, not the main FSI building in Rosslyn. I had a great group of people that I was in training with. There were five of us that started that winter: two of us from my A-100 class, plus two other new FSOs out of the previous A-100 class—who must have done con-gen or other training in-between—and one of their spouses. As a group we all took to language training very well and gelled very quickly. I did well with languages and always enjoyed

the FSI experience, particularly the cultural immersion you got with teachers who are native speakers.

Our Polish teachers had all left the country during communism, so we obviously got some political commentary along with our lessons. Our main instructor was an older woman we called Pani Krysia. She could be tough, but inside she was a real sweetheart. The section was headed by a brilliant linguist—Pan Witek—which I realized later was unusual for FSI. He had a real gift for making a Slavic language stick. Don't get me wrong: Polish was hard. I had never studied Russian, so it was all new to me. But you know, I did well, they trained me well.

I really bonded with the other students I started with. We were all new and were all going to be doing consular work, so we knew we'd be together for a while. There was a larger group of students who were in full-year training who had started in the fall, and we all quickly got to know one another. My future boss in the econ section, Jack Spilsbury, was in that group. That spring all the students spent a week on the Outer Banks with several teachers doing a sort of immersion training, which was also a great bonding experience that set the stage for what would be a very positive first posting.

Q: Okay. That's great. And what do you remember about—were they calling it Con-Gen Rosslyn at the time?

DODMAN: Yeah, Con-Gen Rosslyn. A few flashes of memory from that. It was on one of the upper floors of what passed at the time for a high-rise building in Rosslyn, and I remember the frustration of the horrible elevators. Do you remember them? It took forever to get up and down because there were too few elevators. Obviously, that building was not built to be a school. I remember the mock jail, the role playing going to visit somebody detained. But beyond that I don't have really strong memories of con-gen. I did, you know, when I retired, I got all of my training reports and EERs (employee evaluation reports) and things like that and I remember recently reading my training report from con-gen and I did fine. It prepared me well for what I was going to do.

I also remember area studies that was offered along with language training class. I think all the satellite eastern European communist countries were grouped together but Poland was, as would always be the case, Poland was the dominant country. I think the professor who taught it was a Poland expert, so I remember being very happy I was going to Poland: not just the biggest country in the region but the one that—thanks to Solidarity—had the reputation of being plucky and questioning authority in ways that the other countries didn't yet have, although they all eventually caught up.

That whole period from A-100 through con-gen was an overall positive experience for me. I mean, I do not recall ever thinking that I wanted to leave this institution. That didn't come until a few years later when I had my first Washington assignment. But all of the FSI experience was sufficiently positive that I left for Warsaw feeling, you know, well-trained and quite positive about what I was doing.

Q: Was there a separate course that you needed to take on economic practice?

DODMAN: Let me see if I can find that— Okay, I've got my full FSI training transcript here. And yes, there was an economic tradecraft class that I took even before language started. I have to admit that class didn't leave much of an impression on me. Polish started in February and ended in July—I ended up with a score of two-plus/two-plus. Okay, wow—before I did con-gen I took something called Orientation for Designated Posts. I have no recollection of that, but obviously it would have been where the security folks gave us tips on avoiding counterintelligence traps and otherwise staying safe in a communist country.

Q: Okay. Good. Well, nice training. When was your wedding?

DODMAN: The wedding was in April. So, right in the middle of Polish. Obviously, there was a lot of talk in class about my wedding. Even before language, back in A-100, we had done speech training and the speech I put together was on why it makes more sense to elope than to have a traditional wedding, which Joan always finds very amusing. But, yeah, throughout A-100 and the first half of Polish I was very focused on the wedding, which took place in New Jersey in Joan's hometown. Although truth be told, she and her mom did everything. I was just, you know, sort of consulted on and off. Which was fine with me.

And let me be clear: it was a lovely wedding. We were married on a Saturday so went up there on a Friday. I guess I missed the day of class on Friday. But the next Monday I was back at FSI because you couldn't take any long break. The following weekend we went to the Maryland shore and called that our honeymoon, but again, it was only for two nights. We did eventually do a more traditional honeymoon when we spent a week traveling through Sweden on our way to post, although that was six months after the fact.

Q: Okay, so you would have headed off to post then, when, towards the end of '88 or what?

DODMAN: Yeah. This was meant to be a summer rotation, and I recall I ended up being one of the last people from my A-100 to get out to post. I finished con-gen in mid-September and started work the first week in October. Which I guess means a week in DC to pack and the week we took in Sweden en route. That period in Sweden was great, both because we got a real honeymoon, but it was also a nice bridge to taking up residence behind the Iron Curtain. We had ordered a car from Volvo that we were able to pick up at the factory and then drive for our vacation, taking the ferry to get to Poland. The ferry was Polish, so that ship was my first real introduction to the country and the joys of a communist economy. I recall it being as drab as a boat can be. That drive then from the coast to Warsaw I'm sure did me some good as well in terms of arriving a little better acclimated to the country.

Q: Okay, Mike, so you've arrived in Poland. Maybe you start by describing your position and how it fit into the broader embassy.

DODMAN: Okay. So, Embassy Warsaw in 1988. I spent the first year or so in the consular section as one of maybe six or eight entry-level officers, working mainly on non-immigrant visas. The Consul General—the head of the section—was Phyllis Villegourex-Ritaud, and Helen LaLime was her deputy. I never worked with Phyllis again after that first year, but Helen and I crossed paths from time to time.

That was a hard but really impactful year. I recall when I arrived the section was operating out of a repurposed auditorium or something in the embassy basement as the actual consular section upstairs was being expanded. That set the tone for the year: we seemed to be constantly growing and adjusting to a changing Poland. I remember it all being more than a little chaotic. Which in hindsight is the way I would describe my early years in the Foreign Service—a feeling of being thrown into chaotic and evolving situations, without much forethought or preparation, and being told, "Good luck," you know. (Eicher laughs) I'm sure this is a common sentiment among all FSOs, or at least those who started before 2000, but in my case the chaos was worse because we really were making it up as we went along. My first five years in the department were all spent literally observing and reacting to and to some extent shaping the end of the Cold War, and that's something we didn't have a playbook for.

Anyway, bringing it back to that first year of consular work, suffice it to say it was a very busy year, but I quickly found my footing and did the job I was sent to do. The language and consular training I had just finished in Arlington prepared me well for the technical aspects of the visa adjudicator job.

Q: Was Poland one of those posts that had the line of visa applicants out the door and down the street?

DODMAN: Very much. So, 1988 was of course the year before the communist regime fell. They were looking for ways to respond to popular discontent. One step they took was to start issuing more passports—or at least that's what I was told when I got to Warsaw and tried to wrap my head around the chaos I found. It seemed as though everyone's first stop with their new passport was at the embassy or one of our consulates. I mean, we all know about the huge Polish-American community—for me, a big part of Buffalo's population—and, despite the frosty relations between the two governments before 1989, most Poles regarded the United States very favorably. So, whether they had family in the States or not, it felt like everyone wanted to try their luck at getting a U.S. visa in their new passport. At the time we didn't charge applicants to apply for a visa—we only charged people who actually were approved and issued a visa. So, there wasn't the financial barrier there is now where you have to pay a couple hundred bucks just to get an interview in many countries.

The other big difference with today's consular work is that we had no appointment system. It was literally first come, first served, and we took in as many people as we could process in a day. As I recall the wait to get in was several months. Obviously, we didn't have people camped in front of the embassy. The Poles had a lot of experience

managing queues and things in short supply. As I understood it, someone maintained a book out on the street—operating out of a bus stop on Piękna street, across from the consular entrance—and people would put their name in the book, and somehow get an indication of when they should come back to get in line for the day. I could definitely be wrong about this, given that I was the low man on the totem pole, but as I understood it, we in the embassy had nothing to do with any of this—we just took as many people as we could each day, and didn't ask questions. Who knows how much money was changing hands out there? But I have to say, I don't recall any problems: no fights, or police having to come intervene. The waiting room was always full—overfull, really—and I remember at least one person fainting. Maybe there were more, but I remember my wife, who had started as the embassy nurse, coming to respond to at least one fainting. Somehow it all worked.

Q: Were you given, like, three minutes a person or one of these kinds of things?

DODMAN: When you have a mass of people outside the embassy, and a packed waiting room in front of you, I think it's natural to feel like you need to speed things up. Plus, there was always more work to do after interviews finally wrapped up—not least responding to the endless stream of letters from Members of Congress about why their constituent's relative had been denied a visa. Because that's the context we were operating in. Our visa refusal rate was ridiculously high. I mean, it was in the 80-plus percent range. Simply put, most of these people had no travel history, little or no savings, and poor job prospects at home. They could not overcome the 214 (b) supposition that they were intending immigrants.

The Poles put a lot of faith in documents and would always bring something from their local priest or letters from family in the States promising that so-and-so was just coming to visit Disney World and would come home in a few weeks. We all quickly learned most of these were fakes and not to be trusted. I had a standard set of questions about a person's job, property and travel experience, and I could generally decide in a minute or so if this was one of the 10–20 percent of applicants who merited a little more time to actually consider a visa. That said, the people in front of me had waited months for the chance to talk to me, and probably spent hours traveling to Warsaw. I recall trying not to rush too much and to be as friendly as possible—even if I was certain the applicant was lying through his or her teeth. But it was hard.

Now, the next logical question is, what did the ambassador and the political section think about this. There was a running debate within the embassy about reconciling our duties under the INA (Immigration and Nationality Act) to adjudicate visas according to section 214(b) versus the benefit of getting more Poles to the United States to be exposed to anti-communist thinking. None of us knew at that point that elections would happen in a few months and Solidarity would basically take over the government. All of us—even those of us slogging away on the visa line—were all very focused on a long game of changing the regime in Poland. I think all of us firmly believed that the more people you can expose to the benefits of capitalism and democracy, and the more money that can be sent back to support people in what was a very difficult economic situation, the better that

would be for our foreign policy goals. Plus, the fact that it's no fun to say "no" to nine out of ten people who come in front of you. So, there definitely were debates about this. And when I say debates, I don't want to suggest that I was talking with the ambassador directly—I imagine the CG was having those conversations. I'm talking more about discussions among the junior officers. Perhaps more a venting of frustrations. But during the year that I was there, there was no change in our adjudication standards. We stuck to the 214(b) criteria and refused the vast majority of applicants. The situation was the same at the consulates in Krakow and Poznan.

Q: It must have been kind of grueling, even depressing to come home at the end of the day after having rejected 80 percent of the applicants.

DODMAN: It was. I'll admit, I was sympathetic to this argument that the political section and others were making that even if these folks did come and work illegally in the United States, in the broader scheme of things this would help bring about the end of communism in Poland. Another piece of the grind was the blatant lying. Even in that pre-internet age, we had very good files and would constantly catch people who said they had never applied for a visa before or never overstayed a visa in the States. That took away a good bit of my sympathy. I remember the day a priest appeared in my window—which was not unusual. Of course, a priest by definition has a job and some job security. But when he gave me his documents, I could see immediately that his hands were not the hands of a priest, but the scarred and calloused hands of a farmer. Certainly, today I can appreciate—and I'm sure I did at the time too—that this was a reflection of the dire economic situation in the country, and the same dynamics that play out to this day at the U.S. southern border. So, I never fully lost all my sympathy, even as I did become fairly hard-assed.

Q: They say that the consular officers in a lot of these countries are the most popular people in the country. Did you find that outside the work environment you were constantly approached or badgered or harassed?

DODMAN: Not in Warsaw, no. Honestly, this was a much bigger part of my life later on, when I was in leadership positions and would constantly get complaints or requests for favors on consular matters.

But that reminds me of one interesting story. Consular stories are always the best, and we junior officers really bonded over this shared experience. So, there was one applicant who literally wore me down. This must have been towards the end of my time in the section, and this guy was a borderline case. Sadly, most of my borderline cases became denials. I recall explaining that to him, and he just kept repeating "please" and explaining why there was no way in the world he would not come home after visiting his cousin or whomever. If I recall right this was towards the end of the day—he may have been my last applicant of the day—and this turned into a five- or ten-minute conversation. And it was actually, you know, a real discussion about him, his family, and this town where he lived—more insights into real life in Poland than I normally got in my short interviews. And I guess as part of this discussion he promised to invite me to visit him in his village

when he came back. Now I really can't recall the chain of events after I gave him his visa, but I know that several months later my wife and I were in his living room in the village talking about his trip and meeting his family. I was in the economic section by that point, so used the opportunity to gain insights into village life. I must have gotten RSO (regional security officer) approval, since we had strict rules against fraternizing with Polish citizens—although presumably those rules were loosening by this point. I can't recall much of the conversation, but I do recall they went all out putting together a large spread of food for us, and that Joan—who was pregnant at the time—couldn't enjoy most of it. That was one of the very few times I was in a Polish house on that tour—and probably the only time outside of Warsaw or Krakow. And I guess I remember it so well since it validated that I didn't have to be such a hard ass and could still make the right decision.

Q: Did your consular tour last just until the next summer or was it a full year?

DODMAN: It went until the next summer. So, I ended up serving maybe nine months in consular. It wasn't all NIVs. I remember spending at least a few weeks working on American Citizen Services. That stands out because of the day I had to call someone in the States and tell them that their son had died while in Poland. I can still remember that man's gasp and how hard it was to get him focused on repatriation of remains. While I had lots of other difficult conversations over the years, I don't think I ever had to tell a stranger their child had died—or if I did it again, it didn't have nearly the impact of that first time.

Q: Who was the ambassador at the time?

DODMAN: Technically we didn't have an ambassador. We had downgraded our representation to the level of chargé after martial law was imposed and the crackdown on Solidarity in the early '80s. John Davis was chargé and the DCM (deputy chief of mission) was Darryl Johnson. Both were good, solid old-school Foreign Service. It was the DCM's job to keep tabs on the junior officers, and I remember him as being quite approachable. Both were kind and easy-going in my recollection. I didn't have too many opportunities to engage with the chargé. But I remember his wife, Helen, very well. I remember her as the embodiment of an old-school Foreign Service spouse, you know, very focused on community engagements, regularly hosting teas, and the like. She had my wife over for tea when my mother-in-law came after the baby was born. Joan definitely appreciated that and learned a lot from Helen Davis that she put to use when she eventually became an ambassador's spouse. So, I would say, it was a very supportive front office, even if I didn't have a whole lot of direct engagement with the ambassador himself.

Q: As a consular officer, you mean?

DODMAN: As a consular officer, but also as a junior officer. I don't recall that much engagement as an econ officer either. Don't get me wrong: it was a huge privilege—a thrill—to live and work through a historic moment in world history. But looking back I

realize that one cost of that was not getting any sort of structured introduction to all parts of an embassy that a first tour officer would hopefully have gotten in a more "normal" assignment.

Q: Did your nine months in consular fulfill your requirement to do a consular tour?

DODMAN: It did. I don't recall having to argue with anyone about whether I needed to stay a full year. Maybe my replacement in consular arrived and I was free to go. Or maybe my boss in econ—or the front office—made the case to consular that Dodman had to move early so econ didn't take a gap. This was the summer of 1989. The first elections had happened and the embassy was already deluged with visitors coming to meet Lech Wałęsa and see first-hand the end of communism in Poland, and we were already gearing up for what would become a major assistance program. As busy as it was in consular, there was a pretty good case to be made that econ needed bodies.

Q: Anything else you want to say about your consular tour before we move on to other issues?

DODMAN: One surprise for me when I look back at my EER for this year was the kind things my bosses had to say about my leadership skills. I had the opportunity to supervise some of the FSN (foreign service national) staff for a period. Honestly, I don't recall much from that side of the work. If anything, I think I mostly appreciated that the FSNs didn't let this ridiculous practice—having first tour officers take turns supervising long serving local staff for brief periods, so they would have something to say in their evaluations about leadership skills—drive them away from the embassy. I definitely learned in that first tour how essential local staff are to we Americans who come and go, and the importance of treating them with respect. It was a real pleasure to come back to Warsaw ten years later and have several of these consular FSNs greet me with genuine fondness.

One last memory from consular work. I lamented we didn't get much of an opportunity to rotate throughout the embassy. But I have to give post credit for allowing at least some of us to do a rotation with the consulates. I spent a week in Krakow doing NIV interviews—swapped houses and desks with another junior officer. It was gratifying to see that the working conditions and the applicant pool were similar to ours. Krakow is a very cool city and I visited many times, so living there for a week was both fun and instructive. That was the longest exposure I had actually working at a constituent post until I went to Karachi many years later, and it helped me better understand the sometimes-tricky consulate–embassy relationship.

Q: Okay. Well, there are a few more things that I still want to cover and I would propose to do them in this order. First, general life in Poland and how you found that. And then, secondly, set the framework of the enormous world events which were centered in Poland at the time and then more on to your particular role in the economic section and your role with those events and other things that you were doing in the section. Does that make sense?

DODMAN: It makes great sense. The year in the economic section will be a lot to unpack.

So, let me talk about housing—my first experience with U.S. government housing. When we arrived in our Volvo after the ferry ride and cross-country drive, I recall that we moved right into an attractive little townhouse, very old and basic but very nice and very well-situated. We could take a short tram hop to the embassy. My most vivid memory of that house was that it had a coal-fired furnace, and there was a man who came to the house every day and took care of the coal. We didn't end up staying there long, so I don't recall being bothered by the burning coal. But it did feel appropriate for Warsaw, which was a gritty place.

That house was a good base to explore the city. Warsaw was an easy city to get around because the public transportation was so good. You had the reconstructed downtown, the reconstructed castle and old town—a kind of touristy, historic core which, even under communism, was still touristy and it was attractive. It had a few good restaurants and we all quickly learned the restaurants that were safe to go to because you wouldn't get sick and because they seemed to have good suppliers—in other words, they were actually serving the items listed on the menu. Both the state-run shops and the few private stores did a good business in art and handicrafts, and we still have and use a lot of the pieces we bought during that tour.

The zloty—the Polish currency—traded at an artificial exchange rate, and it was hard for Poles to get dollars officially. So, there was a very active black market. Anyone who looked American or western walking down the street would be stopped constantly asking if they wanted to change money. This became something I spent more time looking at when I was in the econ section. I recall we were under strict orders not to sell our dollars on the black market. I can't say for certain that I never bought black market zlotys during that first year. Although I definitely did some of these street transactions in Czechoslovakia and perhaps other neighboring countries.

I recall that in Warsaw I had my first exposure to Roma people, which we would have called Gypsies at the time. As I remember it, I felt like I didn't pick up much understanding of the Roma during my time at FSI, so I let common prejudices about Gypsies guide my thinking. I recall being surprised by how aggressive they were begging in the streets. By the time I went back to Poland ten years later, and definitely in the Czech Republic after that, I must have done a lot more reading or had some instruction on the issue because I recall being much more aware of the stigmatism and racism against the Roma.

There were obviously remnants of the war, World War II, everywhere still in Poland. You could tell that it had been there. The heroic saga of the Warsaw uprising and then the razing of the city by the Germans while the Russians sat by and didn't come in to help was something I definitely heard a lot about at FSI and then constantly while living there. The ill-will between the Poles and the Russians was very, very clear.

I remember being very taken by the level of Catholicism, the importance, the role that Catholicism played in Poland, especially having grown up Catholic myself but not being particularly religious. My wife and I would often go to masses to try to experience this side of Polish life firsthand. I recall being at a church in Gdansk in the spring of '89, before the famous election. After the mass there was a spontaneous march—at least it appeared spontaneous to me—with a lot of chanting of pro-Solidarity slogans. We followed along because I had never seen anything quite like it—although I definitely had a sense that if the RSO knew what we were doing, he would not have approved. In the end the march dispersed, and the police made no effort to break it up. The point is, the Poles really did take inspiration from the church.

Okay, I guess a bit more about the economy and daily life. I already mentioned that shopping for handicrafts was mostly a pleasant experience. Food and other daily essentials, on the other hand, were a pain in the ass. And as bad as it was for us, it was of course worse for the Poles. The government ran a diplomatic grocery store, a diplomatic meat store, and a diplomatic gas station. We were happy to have those, but as I recall there wasn't that much we could get at those stores, and the supplies definitely weren't reliable. If we were outside of Warsaw and needed gasoline, we often faced huge lines. I'm embarrassed to say that most dips just cut to the front of the line; I'm sure I did sometimes but tried to avoid it. We had gas pumps at the embassy and the consulates, and by planning ahead I was able to avoid getting too much gas on the economy during that tour. We went regularly to West Berlin to go to the commissary and stock up there. We also had a well-stocked small store in the embassy, so in fact we didn't need to rely much on the local economy. I recall a Swedish company would bring milk and dairy products for the dip community every week. So, really, I have no basis to complain. We lived pretty well.

Q: What was it like traveling to West Berlin? You were driving and crossing through East Germany?

DODMAN: Exactly. We did that trip a lot, and almost always by car. Probably once every month or two, and even more once Joan became pregnant in early 1989, since her doctor was there. It was a long and fairly boring trip through Poland on a two-lane road. Not a lot of traffic in those days, but even then a fair number of trucks. Poznan was about the half-way point and we had friends at the consulate so we would usually spend Friday night there, and gas up before leaving. The border crossing into East Germany was always the most stressful part. A long time looking at your documents to both leave Poland and enter East Germany. We always got through just fine, and took full advantage of the CD [diplomatic] lines there to avoid the even longer wait the Poles and East Germans had to get through. We had East German transit visas that the embassy made sure were always current. Once you crossed the border you picked up an actual autobahn—or probably a 1930s version of an autobahn—and could travel pretty quickly to Berlin. Although the East Germans were as much sticklers for speed limits as the West Germans. When you passed a rest area you were supposed to slow down to maybe 20 miles per hour. One time I must have been exceeding that, so an East German cop

stopped me. I knew exactly why he stopped me, and understood enough German anyway. But I played completely dumb and just kept saying in English "I don't understand" and "diplomat" and he eventually let me go.

The road went around Berlin to the south, and you entered directly into West Berlin—never went through East Berlin. I recall that crossing as much easier, since you didn't have to deal with two paranoid border services—Polish and East German—but only the one. When you crossed you were in the American sector, and the base and facilities were very close.

Q: Were there any travel restrictions on you as a diplomat in Poland? If you just wanted to take vacation trips there?

DODMAN: There must have been some process for getting approval to travel, but I don't recall it being onerous. And we traveled often outside the city. I remember the embassy had a dacha at that time—a large house in the woods outside Warsaw used for recreation. There were also diplomatic clubs just outside the city limits. So that probably means we could travel that far without permission but had to go through some sort of process to leave the capital district. But I don't remember this having a significant impact on us.

Q: Okay. We're getting right up to the end of our time here. So, maybe unless there's something else you want to say today, we can stop here and put it off to that—continue life in Poland questions and then move onto the political economic things the next time?

DODMAN: Yeah, it's a good place to stop.

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Q: Today is May 30, 2023, and this is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Mike Dodman. Mike, when we left off, you were in Poland. We talked about the first half of your rotational assignment as a consular officer and had begun to talk about life in Poland. So, why don't we take up there?

DODMAN: Right. I realize I forgot to finish the story about where we lived. A couple months after we moved into that house with the coal-fired furnace, the embassy moved us into a new house. I think we knew this move was coming when we got there, and in hindsight I can see it was part of the embassy's efforts to upgrade the housing pool. We moved to Anin, a neighborhood across the river that was seeing a lot of construction of bigger villas. For the price of a twenty-minute drive to the embassy, we traded up to a huge house on a huge piece of property that was bounded on two sides by a forest. Even as a newbie I knew that we were way over-housed for a junior officer, but I wasn't going to complain. The place was a lot of fun, and our dog particularly loved it.

This whole time, 1988-1989, the ferment was growing. I talked a bit last time about protests. There were lots and lots of protests and strikes going on. This was partly a continuation of what had started in 1980 and was tamped down by martial law. But

clearly, things were happening and were changing. Everyone was trying to figure out what Gorbachev would do next, and our colleagues in the political section were trying to assess the tentative talks that seemed to be happening with Solidarity. Eventually in the spring of 1989 they agreed to the roundtable talks, and the rest is history. But we'll get to that in a bit.

Let me pivot to one other important part of life in Warsaw during that period: platform tennis, or paddle tennis as it was also called. At some point during the depths of the Soviet period, American embassies on that side of the Iron Curtain started putting in platform tennis courts, which were smaller, enclosed versions of tennis courts. A bit like racquetball and probably pickleball today. In Warsaw our court was in the parking lot behind the Piękna building. Best I can remember, every Saturday morning during the fall and spring there were paddle tennis matches, which usually just involved embassy staff, although there may have been a few other expats invited. The ambassador played. Just about all the American staff seemed to play, or at least come watch. It was just what you did. Kids would come and hang out on the little playground. If it was cold or raining, we hung out in the Marine bar, which was on the ground floor of Piękna. In my second year, I think, I became the treasurer if not the chairman of the paddle tennis association and helped organize things.

Other eastern European posts had similar courts, but the real rivalry existed between Warsaw and Moscow, and the high point of every year was a spring tournament between the two posts. So, in the spring of 1989 Joan and I and a lot of our friends set off by train for Moscow. I'd never been to the Soviet Union, so this was another of those trips that was both fun and educational. I remember being really impressed with how different the two cities were—it made me appreciate Warsaw much more. Moscow was obviously much bigger and, in some senses, more cosmopolitan, but it just seemed so much drearier and more oppressive.

It was a great weekend. We toured the main sites. We stayed on the new embassy compound, which was then being built. The new chancery was in that in-between stage where they had already discovered that it was compromised by the Soviets, but they hadn't yet decided how to deal with it. The top floors of this tall building had tape in the windows spelling out God Bless America, or something like that, in large letters

I don't recall who won that tournament or the one we hosted the following spring in Warsaw. I do recall a closing dinner at Spaso House because the ambassador, like ours, took this whole morale-building exercise very seriously. So, a highly memorable trip.

Q: Okay. Let me, before you wrap it up completely, I had a couple of questions. You had mentioned earlier that Joan was working as a nurse at the embassy. Was that something she did the whole time? Was it arranged before you got there?

DODMAN: This is interesting. The health unit in Warsaw at the time was a one-woman operation. It was housed in a single room in the Piękna building. The previous nurse—also an EFM (eligible family member)—had left post before we arrived. I know

they knew that Joan was a nurse and open to working, but still she wasn't able to start immediately. Shocking, I know, but it took months to sort things out. But she did work part-time for most of our tour. As I hope I've made clear here, the embassy community at the time was very tight and harmonious, and Joan was a big part of that—especially once she became the embassy nurse. But my real recollection is just how small and under equipped that little health unit was. When we came back to Warsaw nine years later, it had transformed into a full-fledged health unit with an RMO (regional medical officer), a secretary, two local nurses, plus Joan. Just a night and day difference. Really interesting to see how far medical services have advanced during the thirty-five years we were in the State Department.

Q: One other question I had was about life there. Poland was still a communist country. Did you feel like you were being followed or your telephones were being tapped or was there any sense of oppression of that nature?

DODMAN: Not really. If I was concerned about anything it certainly hasn't lingered with me. I mean, obviously, we knew what was going on. We had the counterintelligence briefs. I guess my point is we were never paranoid about it. And I don't remember anything aggressive or scary in terms of intimidation or surveillance. [Although my wife clearly has a better memory than I do. After reading this over she reminded me of several times our car was clearly being tailed, of cars surveilling our house, and of phone calls being cut off.]

Q: Okay, good. Let's move on. You said that it was the summer of 1989 when you shifted to the second half of your rotation in the economic section?

DODMAN: Right. I started working in the economic section in August of 1989.

Q: Okay. So, start by telling me about the economic section. How big was it and what was your portfolio?

DODMAN: Suffice it to say, the section was not staffed to cover a historic transition. That year we had the staffing we'd had presumably through the 1980s. There was an FS-1 counselor, an FS-2 deputy, myself as a junior officer, a secretary, probably two FSNs. I think that's it. I had a typical junior officer portfolio which was, you know, bits and pieces of everything. I remember doing finance, trade, aviation, intellectual property, fisheries, you name it. By the time I arrived, as we've talked about, the transition was well underway after the roundtable talks in the spring and the first semi-free elections had taken place in June. Actually, let me pause there to put in a memory of that.

I was still in the consular section then, but I distinctly remember waking up on the fourth of June. This was the first round of the first semi-free elections in Poland. My alarm was a clock radio that was tuned to the BBC, and I remember expecting to hear their lead story being the preparation for the elections. I mean, what could be more important than that? But of course, the lead story that day was China's crackdown on Tiananmen Square

protestors, which had happened a few hours earlier. So, that day, June 4, 1989, is really seared in my memory in a lot of ways.

Right after Solidarity's resounding victory, in July President Bush came to visit. This was my first presidential visit. It was all hands-on deck because we hadn't had a presidential visit there in God knows how long. A couple vivid memories from that first visit. I recall standing in the control room at the Hotel Victoria downtown and looking out on the huge open square in front of it—this was right next to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier—and the square was filled with hundreds of sparkling new Volvo sedans. We had gone out and rented or bought, God knows which, all these cars just for the visit.

My role was site officer for the state dinner at the presidential palace. I don't recall too much about it, to be honest. But I did read through my EERs and found from the DCM very complimentary words about how trouble-free that site was. Interestingly, when I was back in Poland ten years later, Bush Junior came and I had the exact same role. So, I guess I must have done something right that first time.

Sorry, that's all before the start of my time in the economic section. But really sets the stage for the year to come. Bottom line: the section was not staffed for the work we faced, and I did a little bit of everything. We were a small but cohesive team that got along and, I guess, just got stuff done.

Q: Well, what's going on? Was it a lot of privatization suddenly or was it too early for that?

DODMAN: It was pretty much everything other than privatization. The Poles on the economic side took a really aggressive approach and planned for a "big bang" on January 1, 1990, when most everything would be liberalized all at once: prices deregulated, zloty freely floating, borders open to all trade. It was bold and a little shocking to aim to do so much, so quickly. Recall the election had only been in June. Six months later they were going to remove all the controls, and no one really knew how the economy—or the population—would react.

The program was put together and championed by a Polish economist named Leszek Balcerowicz who was the new minister of finance. His presumption was that this would be painful and confusing for a few months, but then the economy would adjust relatively quickly to a new normal. And truth be told, that's pretty much what happened. But I remember we were all really nervous for a while. Remember we all wanted this transition away from communism to continue, which required not just Moscow letting the Poles make their own decisions, but also the population supporting the Solidarity government. I recall the USG (U.S. government) put together a stabilization fund of I think one billion dollars to give financial markets confidence in the newly convertible zloty. Not sure how critical that was to the success, but really—the big bang worked.

But then the harder part began. Privatizing state enterprises, improving government regulation, adjusting school curricula, new social safety net regulations, etc. Really,

everything had to change. The Poles quickly set their sights on EU (European Union) membership, so that gave them a roadmap. But we—the USG—came in heavy to try to support the transition. And of course to shape it—to promote regulatory structures that looked more American than European. And to negotiate agreements to promote bilateral trade and investment.

Reading through my EER, I was reminded that in early 1990 I helped organize a presidentially-appointed delegation that started talking about what became a massive USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) program to buttress the transition. I recall being control officer for several USAID visitors who were coming out to assess things. We had a bunch of trade talks early on and finalized a bilateral trade agreement fairly quickly. Then we started talks on an investment agreement to try to promote a more stable investment climate and legal certainty for U.S. investors. Those took a few years to complete. In fact, I ended up coming back to Poland a couple times from Washington as part of the U.S. negotiating team in 1991-92.

But back to your original question: the Poles didn't rush to move forward with privatization. The government was worried about too many workers getting laid off too quickly. In fact, when I came back to Poland in '99, a bunch of the hardest privatization cases where still being sorted out, even though most of the rest of the economic transition was pretty much complete at that point—to such an extent that we were actually closing down that massive USAID assistance program after less than a decade of operation. But of course, I'm getting ahead of myself here.

Q: At this point, it still would have been government bureaucrats who were in charge of everything, presumably the same ones who had been before the election.

DODMAN: Right. Obviously, the Solidarity-led government that took over in June replaced ministers and some senior staff, but the entire bureaucracy couldn't change overnight. People like Balcerowicz—a western-trained economist who spoke great English—were very much the exception. It would take a while for the old bureaucrats to adjust—and I ran into more than a few when I came back ten years later who were still struggling with that adjustment—but I don't recall significant problems. My recollection—although I don't have a lot of specifics to back up this assertion—is that most of the civil servants I dealt with were excited about the change and really did want to work with us—and the EU—to get the Polish economy moving again.

But where you really saw the changes happening after January 1990 was in the streets, the shops, the markets. Western goods came in very quickly, and I also recall some European grocery stores opening in those first months. I mentioned earlier a bunch of time monitoring the foreign exchange markets. Those money changers who used to operate in the streets and alleys opened small foreign currency exchange shops that operated freely after January 1. The economic counselor, Paul Wackerbarth, had me out monitoring those shops pretty consistently for months early in 1990, during that period when we were all worried what would happen to the zloty. I recall that was a lot of fun—getting to wander the city and see these new shops opening everywhere, talking to

people about how they were coping with all these big bang changes. Sadly, I don't remember many of these conversations. But my EER references some good reporting I did on the topic, so I guess those conversations are preserved somewhere for posterity.

Q: And did the zloty end up crashing at all or did the programs work?

DODMAN: The program worked. Eventually we stopped worrying so much about the currency and found other things to obsess over. And of course, by this time the Berlin Wall had fallen, the Czechs and Slovaks had launched their Velvet Revolution, and so on and so on. But through it all, it was the Poles and Hungarians who were at the forefront of change, and definitely the Poles who dove headfirst into the market liberalization pool. Kind of a great place for an economic officer to be, and a pretty heady experience for a first tour officer.

Q: Certainly the embassy would have had increased access with the new government. Given the limited embassy staffing, did that translate into you getting in to see higher-level officials? Higher than normal for a junior officer?

DODMAN: No, I wouldn't say so. I was in a lot of ministerial-level meetings, but that was always as a note taker for the front office or, much more often, visiting USG officials. I can't stress enough how many visits we had. After the president came in July 1989, it was as if the floodgates opened and we had a nearly constant stream of visitors. Actually, sort of like what Embassy Warsaw has had to deal with in the last year with the Ukraine crisis—every senator, cabinet secretary, you name it, wants to come see for themselves. I definitely learned quickly how to be a control officer, and even more how to quickly write up meetings into cables.

Q: You mentioned being in negotiations for things like fisheries and aviation and so forth. Were you doing these in Polish and was your Polish up to snuff to be able to do that?

DODMAN: The level of English knowledge in Poland at that time was relatively low. Certainly among folks who did international trade or who were in charge of negotiating treaties there were some with English. But I did the majority of my meetings in Polish. At that point I had the benefit of the year in consular, so I'd say my Polish had definitely improved from the two-plus/two-plus I had when I left FSI. Econ had a few great FSNs, and they would often join my meetings, and certainly they helped with some of the more technical language.

On the subject of FSNs, while in econ I definitely continued the practice I had had in consular of working closely and very collaboratively with our FSNs. I really liked and respected the econ FSNs at the time. The two that we had in econ—or I should say the two that I remember the best; maybe there was another I've forgotten—were still in the embassy when I came back in '99. In fact, it's interesting that the majority of FSNs hired under communism stayed on after 1989. Which either means we had done a great job rooting out spies and informants from our FSN ranks, or the regime hadn't been very

aggressive about planting them. I felt very comfortable working with the econ FSNs in 1989-90, and even more so when I came back ten years later.

Q: And overall, did you discern a huge change in atmosphere after this first election and were people suddenly more welcoming to Americans, were people happier on the streets? Or was it more gradual than that?

DODMAN: It was more gradual because nobody was certain that this was going to be a one-way movement. There was always concern that, you know, the Soviets could come in and change their mind and try to, you know, repeat what had been done in Hungary in the '50s, Czechoslovakia in the '60s and with martial law in the early eighties. No one was sure how the economic side of it was going to work out. The Poles were generally welcoming to Americans. Again, it was this strange dichotomy. With the huge Polish-American community and such a longstanding connection between the United States and Poland—including strong positive memories of Woodrow Wilson pushing for the creation of modern Poland—your average man on the street was not antagonistic towards Americans by any means.

At some point in late '89 or early '90, the embassy must have formally lifted our policy forbidding fraternization with Poles. But I don't remember that happening. Which in hindsight I attribute to the fact that all of us in the embassy were ready to reciprocate this pro-American—or at least not actively anti-American—stance of the Poles. Things probably just naturally evolved. Which makes sense since the political transition also took time. Solidarity won the June '89 elections and formed the government, but those were only partially free elections. Generał Jaruzelski was still president until Lech Wałęsa finally took that role in December 1990. Maybe that non-frat policy was formally still in effect when I left in the summer of '90. But between the Solidarity government and my move from visa adjudication to a crazy busy reporting section, I feel like there was a night-and-day difference in my engagement with Poles between my first and second years.

Q: Did you follow labor in the economic section or was that in the political section?

DODMAN: Yes and yes. Solidarity the labor union, Solidarity the movement—that was definitely a political section issue. This was the opposition before June '89, and then the government after that. But broader issues related to labor were handled in econ—and those became really critical once privatization finally started. I remember coordinating and trying to work closely with the political section. John Boris was the deputy political counselor and we'd been in language training together—or rather he had been in the full-year class, but we had gotten to know each other at FSI. I remember several times going up to coordinate directly with John—although this was probably as much about visit coordination as it was about reporting. Of course, I also knew the junior officers in political very well. In hindsight I see another benefit of how busy we were that year: there was simply no way to build silos or get bogged down in turf battles across the embassy. We had to work together to manage the onslaught of visitors and answer Washington's endless requests. The need for collaboration across sections was ingrained

in me that tour, and I have to say that's something I think I did well at throughout my career.

That said, let me rant for a second. The layout of that embassy didn't lend itself to smooth collaboration. Econ was on the second floor with management and a few other sections. Pol was on the fourth floor, right next to the front office. That reflected a lot of the biases present in the Foreign Service at that time - pol had to be adjacent to the ambassador's officer and econ did not. Happily, when I came back a decade later pol and econ were next to each other on the second floor, and that was a plus for closer collaboration between the two during that period.

Q: Were you already feeling this as a junior economic officer, that somehow you were a second-class officer, and section?

DODMAN: Economic officers learned that in A-100. I mean, it was clear before you even came in. Everyone knew that political was the top cone and the hardest to get hired into. Seeing it manifest in the layout of Embassy Warsaw just kind of drove that home to me. But I'm sure I won't speak throughout this conversation as someone who has a chip on their shoulder—because I don't. I loved being an econ officer. The work that econ officers do is as important as political officers. When I was in Prague, I led a combined political-economic section. After that experience I became convinced that combined sections make a lot of sense—even in large posts. I would even go so far as to say that combining the political and economic cones into one also makes sense. We're both reporting officers, we're just reporting on different aspects of the same thing, which is our foreign policy priorities. You can never 100 percent separate the economic impacts from a political debate or the political aspects of an economic decision. I think that having reporting officers who are fully literate in both political and economic issues would make for better reporting officers, and make for a better, more coordinated foreign policy. And so, if I were king of the State Department, I would do away with those distinctions, combine the two of them, and have one reporting officer cone. Obviously, people would specialize according to their interests in polmil, trade, science, labor, human rights, whatever. You would have some specialization, but people would have to be fluent in both pol and econ topics to be promoted. Anyway, sorry for that diversion.

Q: No, that's important to this as a history of the State Department as well as of you. So, you haven't mentioned the Polish pope. Was he playing a role in any of this?

DODMAN: For sure. John Paul II visited Poland at some point when I was there, I'm pretty sure. But even aside from that, his presence was constantly felt. I don't recall him weighing in heavily on any specific domestic issue. But every Pole knew that "their" pope was now a world leader and that he wanted to see his people free of communism.

Q: Did you ever imagine when you headed off to Poland that you would be there for this enormous historic period?

DODMAN: Well, I mean, yes and no. Even by the summer of 1988, things were happening in Poland. You'd had this ferment, you know, you had Solidarity coming to the fore in 1980, martial law imposed in '81, taken away a few years later. The economy was collapsing, and that couldn't go on forever. I do recall briefings before I went out and I mentioned that bridge I served on the desk. In hindsight I feel like I had some sense heading out to post that I would be part of some USG effort to move things in a direction that would support our goals and hopefully help Poland. So yeah, I guess I went in expecting it would be an interesting tour. But no way that I would see anything as enormous as I did. That I would be present, literally—and I'll tell this story in a minute—to witness the Berlin Wall come down and things like that. Luck of the draw. It was just a good time to be there.

You know, last time we spoke about that dinner in A-100 when I sat next to my CDO and thought that the conversation had gone well. I would be curious to know if the "system"—the EUR (European affairs) bureau and HR—had some inkling that really big changes were coming and we needed to send our best and brightest there. You know, someone who could carry a heavy workload, punch above his weight, dive in and get things done, all the sort of things that I see referenced in my early EERs. And that's why I ended up in this first tour that shaped so much of my career. But I'm sure the answer to that question is "no," there was no such foresight. I'm sure it's just that Warsaw was a big post with a crushing NIV workload, and my CDO saw someone who hopefully wouldn't drown in that environment.

Q: Yeah. So, you were there, you were in Berlin when the wall came down?

DODMAN: So, I had mentioned that Joan's obstetrician was in Berlin and the baby would be born there. As I said, we travelled there a lot in 1989—usually driving, although Joan flew alone for some appointments. Which was a story itself: she had to fly from Warsaw into East Berlin, then catch a bus from East Berlin to West Berlin to get to her doctor's appointment and then reverse the whole thing to come back. So, it was quite a pain.

Brian, our son, was born in late September at a German hospital in Neukölln. You could feel things starting to change there already. We visited East Berlin often—I had an A-100 classmate working at the embassy there—and during the two weeks or so I was with Joan in Berlin in September/October I went over a few times. Thirty-five years later I can't put my finger on anything specific that felt different. It was during this period you had a lot of East Germans fleeing to the west through Hungary and Prague. I expect I felt a little like the Poles had set an example, and I was just looking for signs that everyone else would follow suit.

Anyway, Brian had his first well-baby check in the second week of November. So the three of us were there on November 9, which was the day that the East Germans first let people leave freely from east to west. We were staying down by the American base, and I didn't get to the wall that first night. But I went downtown first thing Friday morning, November 10, which I recall being cold and foggy. I wandered around Potsdamer Platz

and other spots where we had so often gone to look over the wall. There were so many Trabants and other small East German cars coming through. And lots of West Germans with fresh fruit and other gifts to welcome people. I seem to recall some new openings had already been made in the wall, but it seems unlikely that happened during that first night. I'm probably confusing that with our next visit. We went several more times during 1990, so got to really see the wall being torn down. We did our share of hammering and still have several graffitied pieces of concrete.

Q: Oh, so you helped take it down.

DODMAN: We did. Everybody did. It was such a heady time. For months there was just a festival atmosphere along the wall. Very, very cool.

Q: Wow, what an incredible experience.

DODMAN: Yeah. Again, pure luck.

Q: Yeah, that's, serendipity is a lot of our lives, I suppose. Okay. So, anything else you want to talk about in Poland?

DODMAN: Let me look at my notes. Okay, this is interesting. Somehow in the spring of 1990, I was sent to Copenhagen for a couple days as the embassy representative to an International Energy Agency conference on Polish energy. I admit I don't recall too much about the conference or the decision-making process that led to me being sent. But I am a little surprised that it happened, given how much was going on in Poland. I'm sure there was a larger delegation from Washington that I was a part of, although I can't recall any of those details. It was my first international conference, so I'm sure it was a good learning experience, and so I'm grateful to whoever had to sign off on my attendance.

Q: Okay Mike, well while you were busy with these enormous changes going on in Poland you must have already been thinking about what happens next for you. What were you thinking about this onward assignment?

DODMAN: Luckily, since the EER form back then asked you to say something about your assignment goals in the coming years, I was actually able to check and see what I was thinking. Sadly, all I wrote in the summer of '89 was that I was looking forward to a second overseas assignment. I don't recall the bidding process at all, other than being a little surprised that I didn't end up overseas. I went back to DC. This wasn't unheard of at the time, although most of my peers did stay out for their second tour, unless they had a strong preference to serve in the department. I know I didn't have that desire, but still that's where we ended up. Maybe because I'd fulfilled my consular obligation and served in-cone on my first tour, so all my boxes were checked, and the "needs of the Service" were greatest on the home front. Don't know.

I landed the job of staff assistant in EUR, which is, quote, unquote, "a good job." I do recall I was assigned fairly late in the cycle, so I must have been working with my CDO

to try for some other positions that didn't come through. Or maybe EUR had me in their sights all along and just made their decisions late. Unlike some later episodes in my career, I don't recall any particular anxiety around this assignment cycle.

Q: That was going to start in the summer of 1990, just to put that in context, right?

DODMAN: Exactly, summer of 1990. Technically I should have stayed until the end of September to make it two years. But I started working in EUR in July, so obviously left early. Again, I don't recall the details. Maybe my replacement moved up to econ early, or maybe EUR pulled rank and said they needed me on X date. Whatever, the fact is I didn't do two full years in Warsaw. But I have no regrets. That tour was so full, so impactful, that I certainly don't feel that I lost anything by not being there for two or three extra months.

Q: Was this a one-year assignment?

DODMAN: Yup, one year as staff assistant in the EUR front office. It was shift work so perhaps 7:00 to 3:00 and maybe noon to 8:00 or something like that. Two of us split the day with some overlap. It came with a parking pass for the garage since you were working odd hours. Maybe it had a pay differential too. So overall a fine year. It certainly served me well by introducing me to the bureau and the building, including how the seventh floor worked. And I got to know the DASes (deputy assistant secretaries) and office directors. That was also a very busy year with the transitions in eastern Europe still happening, and increasingly the Two Plus Four talks on Germany unification.

One other benefit of that year: I became much more proficient in managing office equipment. Very little moved by email at this point. The most important machines in the front office were the fax and the Xerox machine, both of which were in my office. When we had an urgent memo for the secretary or another front office principal, I literally had to make multiple copies of the thing, put a physical red piece of paper under the binder clip, and run it up to the Executive Secretariat.

One moment I recall from that year was watching the TV in our office broadcast a CNN correspondent standing on a rooftop in Baghdad with missiles lighting up the night sky as the first Gulf War moved to its swift conclusion. I recall having two competing thoughts at once: I'm glad I wasn't serving there under a lunatic like Saddam, but also what a cool place that would be to work. And of course, I eventually did work there, and it wasn't under Saddam. I'm pretty sure I also thought: man, that correspondent has a cool job.

The downside to that staff job was, you know, it was all process. The job was to move paper and track taskings. And police for proper formatting, things like that. But I have no complaints. It's a necessary job in the policy machine. And really, everybody should do staff work like that at some point because the skills you take away from it and the contacts you make are going to serve you well. At least they did for me.

Q: How many of you were there?

DODMAN: There were two Foreign Service officers and two Civil Service aides or assistants. Above us there was the chief of staff, an FS-02 officer who sat outside the assistant secretary's office. Ray Seitz was EUR assistant secretary that year. Very nice guy, although I had very limited direct engagement with him. The PDAS (principal deputy assistant secretary) was Jim Dobbins, who was not a particularly warm and fuzzy creature but was very effective and had a lot of Germany experience. Among the others in the front office, I can only recall that Avis Bohlen and Ralph Johnson were DASes. Of the whole bunch I recall that Ralph Johnson was the only one who ever really stopped to chat with we lowly staffers.

Q: So, one of the DASes was probably your reviewing officer?

DODMAN: No, actually the assistant secretary was the reviewing officer. But the review was obviously written by the chief of staff.

Q: Still, that's a nice thing to have on your EER as a junior officer.

DODMAN: You know, it was interesting going back and reading over these early EERs. One thread I saw right from the start was about my managerial talents: being a hard worker, triaging effectively, just getting stuff done. Which was a trait I guess I demonstrated throughout the whole career. Another one that surprised me was references to computers. The one from the economic section in Warsaw makes a big deal about my setting up the section's first personal computer and how that improved the section's capabilities. Same thing in the EUR staff job, where I persisted with the really clunky digital interface we had with the seventh floor. That and my propensity to put in place SOPs (standard operating procedures). Which is another thing I've done—in one form or another—in every job I've had since.

Q: Well, this must have been about the time the State Department had the Wang computers and was just introducing email. I think I was in NEA (the bureau of near eastern affairs) at this time, which was the first time I remember being able to email something out for clearance rather than having to have a secretary haul it across the building for you.

DODMAN: Yes, I remember email being a revelation at that point, but it wasn't fully reliable. I recall as a staffer spending a lot of time pulling documents from one computer system to another. But in the end—when something was time critical—it had to move in hard copy. To further date myself, in Warsaw in '88-'90, every outgoing cable was still typed on a typewriter on these pink sheets of paper that had to be hand carried to the IPC (information program center) for transmission. I recall typing some of these myself, but more often we would write things out on paper and give them to a secretary to type. Incoming cables were also only read in hard copy, which was distributed from desk-to-desk. I know in the department in the early '90s we were typing things on computers, but it was still mostly those awful Wangs. I remember a few years later in Ankara fighting to get the first internet-enabled PC in our secure workspace. Anyway,

suffice it to say technology changed and I guess my takeaway is that from the beginning I was trying to push for increased use of technology to improve operations.

Q: Okay. How about your next assignment? Had you pretty much decided you wanted to stay in EUR and stay in Washington?

DODMAN: I don't recall giving that too much thought. I mean, it was just the logical choice. Our second child was born in the summer of '91, so right as I was finishing up that year as a staff assistant. It made sense to get a little more experience—actually, some substantive experience—in the department and not move again so quickly.

Stepping back, let's talk for a minute about the shock of moving back to Washington with a child. I was making maybe $35,000, which seemed like a decent middle-class salary at the time. We looked for a house to buy when we moved back, assuming that the American dream was waiting for us: starter house in the suburbs, decent schools, etc. We were sadly mistaken. There was not a thing we could afford with a reasonable commute. I'm usually pretty realistic about things like that, but in this case I recall being genuinely surprised. We ended up renting a house in Alexandria. Joan went back to nursing at Georgetown Hospital. Because I was working shifts we were able to make that work. With the double income—or more likely a drop in interest rates—we were able to buy a house a year later. A cozy colonial in Arlington, very close to where the new FSI was being built. So, getting back to your earlier question, I guess this whole house hunting story is confirmation that we were intending to stay for a few years. Which is what we did.

Q: Yeah. So, what job did you end up with in 1991?

DODMAN: I guess you could say I followed the path of least resistance. I stayed within the bureau and basically continued the themes from my first tour, moving to the east European office. At the time it was called EUR/EEY, Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia. By 1991, the bureaucracy had caught up a little bit with what was happening. They had expanded staffing in EUR/EEY, including several officers who were just doing economics. I came in as the economic officer responsible for Czechoslovakia and Hungary. There was a more senior officer who was responsible just for Poland, so he supervised me and I backed him up. So, I was working on what we called the northern tier of eastern Europe, and continued very much what I was doing my second year in Poland, but from the Washington perspective and looking more closely at the other two countries.

Those two years I recall spending more hours of my life than I would like to remember sitting in USAID conference rooms for meetings related to programs that we were creating for Czechoslovakia and Hungary. At the time USAID was still in the State Department on the Twenty-First Street side, so it was convenient. This was important stuff, but my main memory is just how mind numbingly boring it was.

More interesting was being part of a team led by USTR (U.S. Trade Representative) that negotiated bilateral investment treaties with Czechoslovakia and Hungary and Poland, so I was able to get out to all three countries, to Budapest, Prague and Warsaw. Getting back to Warsaw was fun—I remember chatting with the FSNs and seeing how much the embassy had grown. And the city had changed.

Jackson-Vanik was a big deal. That was the part of the trade act that prevented us from having normal trade relations with communist countries; each of these countries had to be graduated from Jackson-Vanik and I spent a lot of time on the paperwork to do that.

Also, a lot of paper related to visitors to the department. The one visit that I remember best was Václav Klaus, who was then the finance minister of Czechoslovakia. He came to see Bob Zoellick, who at the time was, I think, dual-hatted as both counselor and economic under secretary, both C and E. I remember this largely because I found Klaus to be absolutely insufferable. An assessment that did not change when I went to Prague as political counselor when he was president and I had to deal regularly with his entourage. Even in retirement he hasn't changed, as I got to see firsthand at a small dinner in Prague last summer. Insufferable.

Anyway, I did get plenty of good exposure to visitors. I found a document recently that indicated I had briefed Victor Orban—the current Hungarian prime minister—when he came to DC on an IV (international visitor) program.

And of course, Czechoslovakia decided to break up, due in some measure to Klaus and his ego, and that happened during my second year. January 1, 1993, was when Czechoslovakia split into two countries, so there was then a lot of work to be done normalizing our economic relations with the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Beyond the economic issues, I recall working particularly closely with the desk officer, Elizabeth Richard, as well as with the Czechs and Slovaks themselves as they managed the transition in Washington. The Czechoslovak DCM was a Slovak national married to a Czech, and he was very torn about the split. In the end he decided to stay with the Czechs, and I would end up working closely with him when I went to Prague as political counselor. The Czechs kept the old Czechoslovak embassy, and the Slovaks had to find their own building downtown. Happily, we had already opened a consulate in Bratislava before 1993, so we had a little less to do. But all in all, it was remarkable how smoothly the two sides managed the split, and to this day the two countries have great relations. In particular because I ended up eventually in Prague, I'm really grateful I had the chance to work on this. Again, another example of being in the right place at the right time.

All that said—and sorry for running on so long on this—this was the period when I came closest to quitting the State Department. The hours were long. The clearance process was brutal. The bureaucracy really got to me. And at the same time, life was rough at home. We had this new house, two little kids—soon to be three—and Joan's income was critical to keeping it all together. She worked weekends, but also some evenings. I often had to be home at 7:00 so she could leave for work. Of course, that parking pass was long gone. I used to catch a bus on Constitution at Twenty-Second that went to the Pentagon where I

switched to another bus. I remember more times than I like tearing out of the building and running down Twenty-Second Street to make my bus. Usually furious at whatever seventh floor staffer had just made me rewrite a memo. I remember sitting on that bus thinking: Why am I doing this? I'm not making that much money. I'm frustrated with the bureaucracy. You know, what's the point of all this pain?

Q: So, a desk job, your first desk job anyway, didn't turn out to be everything you might have hoped.

DODMAN: It almost killed me. And obviously, as I said, I'm no stranger to hard work. That's not the issue. It was the bureaucracy and the clearance process. Maybe to some extent the interagency process too. In hindsight, of course, it was a learning process, and the result of that pain was a real understanding of how the sausage is made. But there were other issues. The office was not particularly well run. This was when Yugoslavia was starting to fall apart. You started to have the atrocities in Bosnia and elsewhere. So, the southern half of the office, which I didn't deal with that much, was really in a state of turmoil. A lot of desk officers there were very frustrated with the weak responses from both the Bush and Clinton administrations, and several resigned publicly.

So, I get it, office management had a lot on their plate. But when I look at this more critically, I realize that I was blessed in Warsaw: in both cons and econ I had had good and caring bosses, and a supportive front office. The EUR front office was, relatively speaking, also supportive in its own way. Now being down in the trenches of Main State, I for the first time came face to face with the other kinds of bosses that I would get to know all too well: disinterested, distracted, poor decision-makers, and even petty. I'm sure that added to my questioning of whether I wanted to stick with the State Department. Once again, in hindsight I can see that I needed to experience the bad as well as the good. And I've said many times that I've learned as much from my bad bosses—learned what not to do—as I did from the good ones. Anyway, it was a hard two years.

Q: Okay. You mentioned the Clinton administration had come in. That must have been, what, midway through your tour.

DODMAN: It was only those last few months in '93. That tour was mostly under the Bush Administration, and I worked closely with several people in the Bush NSC (national security council). The director for eastern Europe there was Bob Hutchings, a political appointee, but he was on some of these delegations with me out to the region. I worked quite well with Bob, just a genuinely nice guy. He later moved to State to run the Office of Eastern European Assistance, which the seventh floor set up as a unit reporting directly to the deputy secretary as a way to cut through some of the bureaucratic quagmires that were driving us all crazy. That's actually an interesting story. The Bush administration saw our assistance programs in eastern Europe as short-term efforts: we go in with big programs to try to get these countries on the right path, and then we close them down. That was in part because the European Union clearly had a bigger role to play than we did. But it also reflected, I think, some hesitancy from the Bush team about USAID. The AID folks had their own way of doing things: setting up large missions at a

post and introducing programs that sometimes continued for decades. The Bush team didn't want that. State didn't either. The bureaucratic solution was to set up this seventh-floor office at State, and give it the policy lead. USAID wasn't happy. And I don't think EUR was happy either, since it wasn't under their control. I recall being happy because I had someone to work with who had some authority. And I was also able to reduce my time in those mind-numbing USAID project meetings.

So, Bob Hutchings came from the NSC to run this office for a while—probably until the end of the Bush Administration. But my real connection to that office was Jeff Feltman, who later went on to be NEA assistant secretary and under secretary at the UN. Jeff had served in Budapest while I was in Warsaw, so knew the region. He was also a no-BS kind of guy who got things done. We became good friends from that collaboration.

This model of setting up a policy office in State to oversee and coordinate all USG assistance started with this office, but was replicated in many other areas. I saw it in Pakistan when I was there. Another example of where I was present at the creation of something.

Q: Did you see many policy differences from your place on the desk between the Bush and the Clinton administrations.

DODMAN: Oh, sorry, that was a long tangent. No, I did not. You know, Madeleine Albright came in as UN ambassador at the beginning. Madeleine Albright, of course, being a refugee from Czechoslovakia, had a very clear focus on eastern Europe, and I think that helped ensure that the region maintained prominence in the new administration. There was no big difference in policy. We continued with assistance, promoted closer economic ties. Where we started to eventually run into political questions was on NATO membership, which Albright as secretary eventually was very involved in. But that was in the future. In '93 we were focused on making sure German unification was a success, figuring out what was going to happen with Russia and the Balkans, and shaping reforms in Poland and the others. So, in the areas I was focused on, I recall no significant shift in policy between the two administrations.

Q: Okay. So, good continuity between the administrations on this.

DODMAN: Definitely.

Let me jump in here with one good example of the innovations we introduced during this period. This was definitely a Bush administration idea but had support from Clinton's team and on both sides of the aisle in Congress. Enterprise Funds. This was another way the Bush team moved away from traditional USAID foreign assistance. These were corporate entities funded by the USG with a mandate to jumpstart private enterprise. So, seed money to invest in business start-ups. With the hope that some of the investments would make some money and eventually repay the fund. Now these were controversial. Using taxpayer money on somewhat speculative private sector projects overseas. On the

other hand, this was very American. We ended up setting up similar ventures in Ukraine and the other former Soviet republics. In the Middle East as well.

Interesting follow-on: as we'll talk about, when I went back to Poland in '99, just as the Bush administration hoped, we were in the process of shutting down our assistance program. But we had an unexpected problem: the Polish Enterprise Fund had invested so wisely, it actually made a profit. And no one knew what we were supposed to do in that situation. People knew that I had been present at the creation of these things, so I had several questions about what had been discussed in those mind-numbing USAID meetings about how to unwind a fund that had made a profit. And the short answer was that it didn't come up. No one anticipated this, at least as far as I remember. After months of debate, we came up with a good bureaucratic solution: the Polish Enterprise Fund was closed, with half of the money it made going back to the U.S. Treasury as a return on the investment of the American taxpayers, and the other half creating a new Polish-American Freedom Foundation, or something like that, to continue to support the private sector.

So, innovation at the beginning, and innovation at the end. We did some cool stuff.

Q: Yeah, it sounds like it was.

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Q: Good morning. Today is June 8, 2023. This is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Mike Dodman. Mike, when we wrapped up last time it was the summer of 1993 and you were finishing your two years on the desk in EUR. Some months before you must have been thinking about what comes next. And indeed, whether you would even stay in the Foreign Service. Why don't you describe for us what your bidding process was and what your thoughts were and what you ended up with.

DODMAN: I definitely questioned during that first year on the desk whether it was time to look for a job outside the department. I'd been in four-plus years at that point, and with tours both overseas and in DC, I felt like I had given the career a fair trial. Looking back, as best I can remember there were two reasons I stuck with it. One, I didn't have a second career to jump to. I wasn't a lawyer; I hadn't really worked as an economist. I liked international relations, and if I left the department or the Service, there was a good chance I would end up doing something similar in another agency, which wouldn't necessarily have solved the problems I had with the job I was doing. But second, in good Foreign Service fashion, I knew that when I moved to my next job, there was a good chance some of the things that were driving me crazy about this job would disappear. We were definitely interested in going back overseas, and since my experience in Warsaw had been so positive, I'm sure I was banking on the next tour being better than the current one. With the benefit of hindsight, I realize there was some risk in making those assumptions—I could have been going from the frying pan straight into the fire. But between being an optimist and the limited experience of my early tours, I decided it was worth the risk of staying in the Service and bidding again. And besides, like I said, I didn't really have any place better to go.

I was promoted to three in the fall of ’92, so that opened up assignment opportunities. I honestly can’t remember anything else I bid on other than the job I got, so I can’t say too much about my approach to this job. Best I can recall, priority one was serving overseas. Priority two was getting away from central Europe. And I expect I was also looking for jobs that had a year of language built in, as a way to decompress after a string of busy years in DC and Warsaw.

I ended up with an economic job in Ankara, which ticked all those boxes. I wish I could remember if I actively tried to find something outside of EUR, or if I just—once again—took the path of least resistance and stuck with the bureau I knew. And where I was known. Because those connections definitely helped. I recall this was a competitive job and that a couple friends were also interested in it. In good Foreign Service fashion, I expect the reason I got it was because I knew the right people, notably the DASes I had served working in the front office. So, despite this being the period when I was most sour on the department, I do recall being really happy when I got this assignment, which must have made my last six-plus months on the desk more bearable.

Q: I presume Joan must have also been excited about going back out again or not?

DODMAN: I would presume that too, although there’s a lot about that period that was lost in the stress of being young parents. But yes, Joan was certainly onboard with the idea of going back overseas, and I’m sure had signed off on anything on my bid list—and since Ankara was my top bid, she would certainly have been on board with that.

Q: So, you went off to language training then. Was Turkish, I guess, considered a hard language? You had a full year of training and what level were you expected to get to?

DODMAN: Yes, it was a full year or nine, ten months, which was needed for that. It was a three/three language designation. You know, I’d had a positive experience as we talked about in Polish. That was only six months of training, but I overall enjoyed my time at FSI the first time around. So, I was looking forward to the return to FSI both because it would be a better work-life balance—nice to get off the hamster wheel of the department for a while and have some time at home. But also because 1993 was the year FSI was moving to the new campus, the current campus at Arlington Hall, which was very close to our new house. Commuting to Rosslyn those first months of language was fine, but being within walking distance after the move was a huge added bonus. That plus the fact that the new campus was so nice.

Q: How did the Turkish training compare to the Polish training?

DODMAN: Two totally different languages. I struggled with Turkish early on. It had nothing at all in common with the Romance or Slavic languages I’d previously studied. But we had great teachers. I actually felt sorry for them. We were a big cohort that year—there were six of us in my group, which is the most I ever had in an FSI language class and frankly, it was too big. But the real reason I felt sorry for the teachers was the

way we all reacted to the grammar: they would explain some new concept and all of us would respond by saying, "No, that can't be; that makes no sense; why?" And they would just roll their eyes and repeat it over and over.

Now eventually I got it and came to love the language. Honestly, I think the key moment for me was in the spring of 1994 when all my classmates went on an immersion trip to Ankara. I didn't go, probably because it would have been too difficult to leave Joan with the kids. I think I was the only one of the twenty or so full-year students who stayed back at FSI. So, for two weeks I had one-on-one instruction and that just really helped me excel. I ended the year with a three-plus/three-plus and was very comfortable using the language throughout my tour. The language plus the area studies component both really set me up for success. And going back to my experience on the desk, the year at FSI was just what I needed: a great mental break, a change of pace, better work-life balance, and just a really positive experience. Sort of an "only in the Foreign Service experience." Which was what I really needed to get me fully back into a more positive outlook on the career.

Q: How was the transition to the new campus? How did you find that?

DODMAN: You know, like any transition to a new embassy building or anything like that, it had its problems. It was delayed, of course. Was supposed to happen in the summer, so the full-year students could start in the new space. Instead, we started in Rosslyn and moved in the fall. The classrooms all had windows, and you had that nice lawn to look out at. I don't recall any teething pains with the cafeteria or shuttle buses, but I was in a bit of a privileged position living so close and not being dependent on that. So mine probably isn't the best brain to pick on that period.

I do think the idea of a real campus, even given the hassles of being away from the Metro, was the right move. It was a much nicer place to learn. And gave much more room to grow and innovate. Right up to the very end, FSI was one of my favorite parts of my Foreign Service career. And it's not just because of that house, since we never lived there again after we left for Ankara. Even with all the hassles of the shuttle, parking, and security, whenever I walked through that revolving door and saw that quad area, I'd get a real warm feeling—a mix of nostalgia, like I'm back "home" again, and excitement at the fact that I'm about to be paid to learn something.

So hearty thanks to George Schultz and everyone who made that dream a reality.

Q: Okay, so that's great. Did you have other kinds of training as well before you went off?

DODMAN: Nothing significant. If I hadn't been excused from the intensive economics class, I almost certainly would have tried to take that in 1993. I don't recall any functional training, since I was going into an economic job. Surely there would have been some security refresher class. And then the area studies. But my only solid memories are of the struggle to make Turkish stick.

Q: Okay. So, you arrived in Turkey. Maybe you can start by describing the embassy and how your position fit into it.

DODMAN: This was the old embassy building near the center of Ankara. By the mid-nineties that building already felt old and not up to the needs of a growing diplomatic mission. And even pre-9/11 it felt a little too close to busy roads. Even thirty years ago there was talk about how the embassy needed to move to a new facility—something that only finally happened about five years ago.

Anyway, the physical layout was fine as far as I was concerned. It was a two-story chancery. We were on the ground floor. The front office and all the other reporting staff were on the second floor. But that split didn't seem to bother me as much as it had in Warsaw. Maybe because we were situated much closer to our FSNs, which was a real timesaver. Actually, the political and protocol FSNs were also close by, which gave me ready access to the people who actually got things done.

The econ section was maybe five Americans. There were no junior officers there so as an 03 I was probably the most junior. There was another 03 officer who had been there for a year at the time we arrived, Ric Roberto. Ric had been slated to go to the consulate in Izmir, which had closed while he was in language training, so he ended up with us. Ric was a great guy and a great officer, who sadly left the Service after Ankara, but we became and remain good friends.

Initially my portfolio was trade and macroeconomics. But during my time there my portfolio evolved a lot and I ended up taking on all kinds of things. But trade was the one constant throughout, which in Turkey meant primarily a lot of focus on textiles.

Q: So, was it basically a reporting job?

DODMAN: Very heavy on reporting. There were a few programs to be managed. I was the point person for the annual bilateral economic dialogue between the two governments, for instance. And the textile quota system in the nineties was something that was heavily managed. But I recall most of my time in the embassy was spent in front of a computer screen. We had those old Wang classified terminals centrally located in one office full of secure filing cabinets. A pretty dreary space, and of course not user-friendly technology.

Q: So, you didn't have a classified at your desk yet in those days?

DODMAN: Not yet, no.

Q: So, who was the ambassador when you got there?

DODMAN: Richard Barkley. We only overlapped for a few months. But that was long enough to form a not-so-favorable impression of him. Actually, I only needed about a

week to do that. So let me launch into one highly memorable anecdote that also sets the stage for this tour.

Our trip to Ankara was one of those "how did we manage it" stories. When we had left Warsaw four years earlier it was the two of us and one kid who couldn't walk yet. Piece of cake. Now we had three kids under five, and Joan was pregnant. We get on the Dulles-Frankfurt flight, with all our bags and car seats and things, and our oldest has a complete meltdown. Even thirty years later I feel it is my obligation to apologize to anyone seated anywhere near us at the start of that flight. As soon as the fasten seatbelt sign was off, I picked him up and started rocking him to calm him down. At which point—of course—he decides to vomit all over me. Which, you know, calmed him down so that's good. But I had an eight-hour flight ahead of me. We were not yet experienced enough world travelers to have put a change of clothes for the grownups in our carry-ons. The flight attendants were great and helped me clean up, but I think I ended up washing the shirt in the bathroom and just spending the rest of the flight with a blanket over my shoulders.

Anyway, then we had like six hours in Frankfurt. We made it to Ankara without any other major mishaps, but pretty spent. My new boss, the economic counselor, picks us up and takes us all out to a restaurant that first night, which was probably the last thing we wanted to do. And during the meal he drops the bombshell that it has been decided that I was the perfect person to be the control officer for the ambassador's trip to the Black Sea coast in about a week's time. I recall him turning to my wife and saying, "I hope you're ready to fly solo." This guy was a complete tool. I could go on and on about what a jerk he was, but I'll keep it short by saying he was the worst boss I ever had, and I'm forever grateful that I learned more things not to do from him than I did from anyone else.

Anyway, this particular story isn't about him, but the ambassador. I did that trip, and it was a great opportunity to get to know how things worked. We flew on the DAO (defense attaché office) C-12 airplane, so built some good connections there. Beautiful trip. But I did form a negative impression of the ambassador—who I now realize was "getting short" and in pre-retirement mode—and in particular his wife, who seemed way more enamored with the gifts being given than was appropriate. Again, more negative examples for me to avoid as I moved up the ranks.

I guess the fact that I'm telling this all as a mostly positive story is a testament to Joan. I don't recall her ever suggesting that I should ask to be taken off this control officer duty. She managed the kids and got us all settled. Surely without any help from my idiot boss—but happily there were plenty of other good folks in that community.

Q: Yeah. Unfortunately, it's not an uncommon Foreign Service experience. So you said trade was your main responsibility. Do you recall any particular big things going on at this point?

DODMAN: Yeah, there are two thorny issues that stand out. I've already mentioned textiles. In that period textile trade was heavily regulated. There were quotas that we put

in place for imports from most countries around the world to protect the U.S. textile industry. And the Turks were very, very good at textiles. Turkish towels, for instance, were very popular, but we still had a domestic industry to protect, so the quota for Turkish towels was well below market demand. There was a big office in the U.S. Trade Representative's office to manage the quotas and negotiate quota levels. My role in the embassy was not to negotiate but to report on the state of the Turkish industry and the government's priorities. Happily, that gave me the opportunity to do lots of travel. I really enjoyed getting to know the small businesspeople who dominated the industry. It was a great way to get insights into the economy and the politics outside of Ankara. And to hone my language skills. And then in terms of the reporting, beyond talking about the nuts and bolts of the production side, I had to put the government's requests into the context of the bilateral relationship including, you know, what they were doing with us in NATO or in terms of access to Northern Iraq. Really, the textile stuff could be tedious, but I enjoyed it.

The other big trade issue was intellectual property rights (IPR) and relatively weak Turkish protections for both patents and copyrights. This was less fun to work on—a real slog pushing for improved legislation and enforcement, which helped U.S. interests but cost the government support among Turkish business. This also involved a lot of coordination with U.S. firms in country and their Washington lobbyists. It was tough, but we made progress during the time I was there. But I have to say, I've worked on IPR in a number of countries, and it's just not my favorite topic. Way too much political influence involved, particularly on the U.S. side. It was hard for me to feel too sorry for big American pharmaceutical companies. Not the sort of policy I would ever actively complain about. But one of the more egregious forms of corporate welfare that I've had to deal with.

Copyright issues were handled by the culture ministry because of their connection to music and other things, which was different from other countries where I worked on IPR. The culture ministry folks were fun to work with and were interesting because Turkey has such a rich culture. So at least that was a nice change of pace.

Q: Was Turkey one of those places where you could just sort of walk into a corner kiosk and buy all the latest U.S. movies for a dollar?

DODMAN: Indeed it was. As was Poland when I was there on my first tour. It was easy to find pirated material. One of the jobs of an econ officer is explaining to the rest of the embassy that it's illegal to buy this stuff. Not sure how successful that was.

Q: A hard battle to win, I imagine.

DODMAN: Yep.

Q: Did things improve during your time there or were they still as bad as ever when you left?

DODMAN: So, there were incremental improvements. We would sanction the Turks periodically under the Special 301 trade procedures. It would get their attention. But it was a hard sell. The bedrock of the Turkish economy was and is small entrepreneurs. For them, any new IPR regulations were just another thing to be evaded. Like taxes.

Q: Generally speaking, how were relations with Turkey at that time? Pretty good, I guess.

DODMAN: Pretty good about sums it up. The governments were generally pro-American, pro-NATO, pro-European. So that was a positive. We had a big airbase in the south of the country at Incirlik, but overall our military presence had gone down since the end of the Cold War. The real problem with the governments during the time I was there is that they were all weak and ineffective. Really nothing significant got done that I can remember. Inflation was a constant problem. The frustration with these do-nothing governments in the '90s helped pave the way for Erdoğan and the Islamists to take over a few years later, bringing in much more effective governments, but of course more authoritarian and conservative.

One constant problem was the Kurdish terrorists. The PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) was very active, especially in the east of the country. The PKK was not particularly anti-American. It was anti-Turkish. But this still impacted our life and work. We had 24/7 guards in front of our residences and became very used to seeing heavily armed Turkish troops patrolling the streets from time to time. Frankly the biggest impact of this for me and my family was that large parts of the east of the country were off-limits to us for personal or official travel for most of that tour. Happily, the security situation improved towards the end, so during my last year—'97-'98—I was able to do a fascinating swing through the east for work, and later took the family for a road trip where we got to see a very different part of the country. We never made it as far as the Armenian border, but we saw almost all of Turkey.

Q: Governments switching back and forth suggests that there was a democratic process. What kind of influence did the military exercise at this point and how did that affect the economy?

DODMAN: The military had more influence then than it does today, that's for sure. But honestly, I didn't work much with the military. Which I guess is a partial answer to the question: the civilian bureaucrats were sufficiently in control of the economic and regulatory levers. You know, I can recall going into the General Staff HQ maybe once or twice, and that was probably as a notetaker or control officer for senior visitors. That was my first experience seeing what I later saw very clearly in Pakistan and Mauritania: the size and opulence of the generals' offices compared to those at the defense ministry said a lot about who called the shots.

Turkey's last real coup had been in 1980, and ineptness of the civilian governments meant that we were always on the lookout for signs the army might feel they had to step in again. In fact, there was a "soft coup," as I think we called it, in 1997 when an Islamist-led government was formed under Prime Minister Erbakan—a guy who was in

many ways a precursor to Erdoğan. The military was always the guardians of Ataturk's legacy of a secular Turkey, and they saw the Islamists as a threat. The generals forced Erbakan to resign, and the useless centrist politicians came back to center stage. But it wasn't a coup in the real sense: no tanks in the streets or curfews or the like. Of course, five or so years later Erdoğan took power democratically, and set about bringing the military—and secularists generally—into line.

Q: Was it a problem at all to be in Ankara when the main commercial center of the country was in Istanbul?

DODMAN: No. First of all, I traveled to Istanbul a lot. We had a big consulate in Istanbul, as we do to this day, with a very active economic section. We worked closely with them. I recall relations between that consulate in Istanbul and the embassy being fine: no jockeying for position or trying to steal the turf of others. The Istanbul consular district, though, was relatively small, so there was plenty of interesting stuff to report on in the rest of that huge country.

I have to say, I was always very happy that we lived in Ankara and not Istanbul. I absolutely love Istanbul. We went many times as a family in addition to my work trips, and I've been back there several times since. But to live there, particularly with small kids, would have been difficult. Traffic was awful. The school was far out of town. We lived more comfortably in Ankara, and being located in the middle of the country, we had a better base for exploring. Istanbul was a great place to visit; Ankara a great place to live.

Q: Now, initially your assignment would have been for two years, is that right? Did you extend in the middle or did you switch to a new job after two years?

DODMAN: No, it was a three-year tour, and we went fully intending to stay for three years. We requested and got an extension for a fourth year. A couple reasons for that. First and probably most importantly, we were really happy as a family. Our youngest was born in February of 1995. We had a very full house, but a wonderful nanny. The apartment that we'd initially been put in was a real dump and we were able to get moved to a new apartment after the first year—a lovely place on the ground floor with a yard for the kids to play in. The older kids were at a small and very nurturing British school. Joan was working at the embassy. The community was great; travel opportunities were limitless. So personally, it was an easy decision to extend and keep the good times rolling.

But I wouldn't have stayed if leadership hadn't changed. I've already mentioned I wasn't a fan of either the economic counselor or the ambassador. But everything changed when Marc Grossman took over as ambassador. Actually, before he even arrived. In late '94 as he was getting ready to head to post, I somehow got tapped to draft a speech for him to give to a major Turkish-American conference in DC. He loved it. So, for the next two or three years I became his primary speechwriter. I got a lot of facetime with him, traveled quite a bit with him, and just really respected the guy. A great leader and a super decent

person. His wife, Mildred Paterson, was also superb. That all made the extension decision a very easy one, and he fully supported my staying.

As far as the economic counselor goes, we spent two years together and found a relationship that worked. He knew after my first year that he was going to TIC out [be forced to retire after exceeding his time-in-class limit] of the Foreign Service, so for my second year he was completely checked out. Had no interest in running the section. He didn't seem to have much respect for his deputy. I guess because he saw that I just got shit done, and didn't need a lot of direction, he realized I made his life easier. He just kept giving me things to do, and I did them. If he was bothered or threatened by my relationship with the ambassador, he didn't show it. I back briefed as needed, and I guess I made him look good, so somehow the relationship worked. And then this guy left and was replaced as counselor by Scott Kilner, who was a night-and-day difference. Super decent guy, a caring boss, and a real expert on Turkey. Working for Scott and Marc Grossman gave me the leadership role models I had been craving.

Q: When you were writing speeches for Grossman did you write them in English or in Turkish?

DODMAN: English. Grossman spoke some Turkish, but always gave remarks in English, as I recall. And he had very clear themes, you know, he knew what he wanted to say.

The speechwriting led to another task. Grossman was really impressed by a briefing he had gotten from a Wall Street firm before he came out. Probably Goldman Sachs, but it doesn't really matter. A private sector firm that knew how to brief. This was before we all had access to PowerPoint, but they had given him a printed and bound book of what today we would call slides, full of charts and color and bullet points. Grossman was a great communicator who loved to give Congressmen and other VIP visitors a crisp and memorable briefing, so he wanted a bound book like this developed for that purpose. He gave me the task of creating it. I recall spending a lot of time at a personal computer trying to make whatever word processing software we had create these slides, and trying to put together maps that showed pipelines and borders clearly. After a lot of back and forth we came up with a version he liked, and I kept it updated for the rest of his time at post.

So, thanks in large part to Marc Grossman, I was able to do a lot more than what a mid-level economic officer would have done. These special projects, the direct access to the front office, the crash course in public diplomacy and computer technology—it all gave me a lot of opportunities to grow. And to shine. All of that, plus the fascinating country, great food, and really positive atmosphere for my family—it made it an easy decision to extend and made this just an awesome tour.

Q: Your fourth child was actually born in Turkey?

DODMAN: Yes. Great story: Joan went to work in the medical unit in Ankara as she had in Warsaw. It was a big operation, serving a large embassy and indirectly supporting the

American military community in Ankara, after the closure of the military base right before we arrived. Whether it was her choice or the result of bureaucratic delays, she didn't start working until February '95. And wouldn't you know it: her first day on the job she went into labor. We had planned for a local delivery all along, since it would have been a real hassle for her to head back to the States for the delivery. We had a great local gynecologist and Joan was happy with the small hospital where she eventually delivered. Of the four births this was by far the easiest, and Joan was home the next day.

This is all interesting because until recently Joan was working in the medical bureau and specifically managing the medevacs of expecting mothers. State Med today strongly encourages everyone to come back to the United States to give birth, since it will be easier to deal with any complications here. I do not remember if in 1995 we had that pressure coming from Med, from Main State, but if there was pressure, we successfully resisted it and had the baby as we wanted and went on with our life.

Q: Okay. You've made a couple of brief mentions of visitors. Was Turkey a country that had lots of CODELs and other high-level visits? Did the president visit? Did you get involved in any of that?

DODMAN: Yes, there were lots of visitors. A lot of working-level folks related to my portfolio that I took care of. But definitely a lot of VIPs that I got dragged into. President Clinton didn't visit, but Hillary Clinton came as first lady. There were lots of CODELs, but I can't single out one that made an impression on me.

The visit that I recall most vividly was Richard Holbrooke during the period when he was trying to put together the Dayton peace talks. The Bosnian president was going to be in Ankara, and we got twenty-four hours' notice that Holbrooke was coming to town to meet with him. This was in September of '95, and I recall this happened over a holiday weekend, so it must have been Labor Day. I was tapped as control officer. It was an insane visit, but frankly having no time to prepare made it easier. Also the fact that this was Holbrooke and he was very direct with what he wanted. The bilat with the Bosnians was easy—we did that at the CMR, so we controlled it. But as EUR assistant secretary, Holbrooke of course wanted a bilateral program, and a bunch of press. Happily, the details of how we did it all have mostly faded. But I do recall being at the airport for the arrival, with a schedule that was probably 80-plus percent tentative at this point. Chris Hill was one of Holbrooke's staff. I had worked with Chris in Poland or maybe on the Polish desk before. I remember Chris pulling me aside before we left the airport saying something like, "The schedule looks great; don't worry; you'll understand Holbrooke soon enough. Just do what you're going to do and ignore all the drama; everything will be fine." That was very reassuring. Grossman liked his visits to run tightly, so I'm sure he wasn't happy that we didn't have more locked in. But he was supportive too.

I only recall one point where he almost lost it. This must have been close to the end of the visit, and we were heading back to the hotel for a press conference or something high profile. Now this was before we all had cell phones, but I must have been issued one of those early phones—the big bricks that were so heavy. Because I recall getting a call

from the control room telling me that the venue for the event had been switched from the delegation's hotel to the one around the corner. I wasn't in the lead car with the ambassador and Holbrooke, and I had no way to call to them or their driver. So, I had to literally lean out of the door or window of the follow car and gesture wildly to get the driver of the lead car to see me and point him towards the other hotel. I remember seeing the ambassador turn around and look at me and I read his face as saying (a) you are crazy, Dodman, and (b) what the hell are you doing? Everyone relaxed when we got to the new hotel and someone was there to take us to the briefing. Now that I think of it, Holbrooke didn't seem the least bit concerned. You know, he also must have had a cell phone, and presumably was on it the entire ride. So maybe he even knew about the venue change. Anyway, it all ended well, and the ambassador sent a lovely note after the visit.

Q: What was your impression of Holbrooke?

DODMAN: Holbrooke was, you know, larger than life. I mean, I don't know that he and I exchanged more than a couple of words. Suffice it to say, he lived up to all his advance billing—plenty of drama, lots of last-minute changes, endless demands. But it all worked in the end, and the Dayton talks happened that November, so I have to assume this visit helped.

Q: Were you actually in the meetings with him?

DODMAN: No. I was constantly on the phone working with FSNs or others in the embassy who were trying to finalize upcoming engagements. So, I unfortunately can't recall any of the substance of the discussions.

Q: In Warsaw you had been on the visa line. Did you have a lot of Turks asking you for visas when you were out in these places visiting businesses and such?

DODMAN: This definitely came up, as it does in every post. A lot of the small businessmen I engaged would have wanted to go to the States to talk with importers and retailers and the like. But truthfully, in light of the really intense visa pushes I would get in later tours, I don't remember this being a big deal in Turkey. Don't forget, this was all pre-9/11. The problems that Muslim males would face getting a visa were all in the future. I know I did my share of visa referrals—that was just part of the job. I don't recall any pushback from my consular colleagues about the volume or quality of those referrals, so hopefully I wasn't a major source of grief to them.

Q: Okay. Well, I have to ask, did you come home with a house full of beautiful carpets?

DODMAN: Yes, indeed. Carpet shopping was a major pastime. To this day we have more carpets than we have floor space. Since we already had four kids, we were definitely buying with a view to having things we could pass along to them. As the kids have set up their own homes, it's been great to start them off with Turkish carpets, Polish pottery, and other things we collected during these tours.

Q: Very good. I would have been disappointed if you had not. Is there anything else you want to cover about the Turkey years?

DODMAN: There are so many great stories about Turkey. We seemed to be travelling all the time. We would get away for long weekends frequently to Cappadocia where the kids loved running around and exploring the caves and the surreal landscape. We had a lot of visitors and we loved taking them to Cappadocia, to the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts, and of course to Istanbul. And everywhere in between. I have to say, I loved driving in Turkey, although it could be painful. Crazy drivers and unpredictable roads. We had our share of flat tires. There were checkpoints from time to time. For me, and for many of our family and guests, this was the first time seeing police and army officers with rifles patrolling the streets and highways. I remember one time being pretty much in the middle of nowhere with my brother-in-law and being stopped by a young guy at an army checkpoint. We had diplomatic plates on the car, so normally these were pretty quick checks. But this guy started getting obnoxious and giving us a hard time, so I did something out of character for me and said to him in Turkish something like, "Do you realize who I am?" and threatening to make a fuss about this back in Ankara. He let us continue. My brother-in-law was in the passenger seat and getting pretty nervous not understanding what we were saying, and he was like, "What did you say? What did you say?" To this day he loves to tell the story of how I boasted to the army patrol, "Do you realize who I am?"

Probably the most memorable trip we took as a family was to the east when that finally opened up our last year. There is a mountain in eastern Turkey, Nemrut Dağa, that has these huge ancient stone sculptures on the top of it, kind of like on Easter Island. I think at the time it was already a UNESCO site, but it was pretty loosely managed. We took the kids there, and we could basically sit on these statues if we had wanted to. Of course we didn't, but we did get some incredible photos. It was a cold day and we were the only visitors. There was a caretaker up there and he had a little trailer and he invited the whole family into his trailer and made us tea, which was very typical Turkish hospitality.

Travelling with our kids had some challenges, since a lot of the accommodations were pretty basic. But it was overall a great experience. Turks love kids. And our kids were all blond and very fair, which made them stand out. They got very used to people coming up and pinching their cheeks saying "Maşaallah". It really was just a great tour and a great experience for all of us.

Q: Did you get to Troy?

DODMAN: No, we wanted to get to Troy or the battlefields at Gallipoli. Both could be done fairly easily from Istanbul. There was just always so much to do in Istanbul itself that we never took any day trips from there.

At that time the consulate still had the *Hiawatha* which was this beautiful old wooden launch that employees could rent to take trips on the Bosphorus. We did that several times. On one memorable trip Joan and I happened to be alone in Istanbul, staying at the

Kempinski or one of those gorgeous hotels right on the Bosphorus. This was unusual for us—being there without kids, and not staying in the old part of town, in Sultanahmed. As it happened, Marc Grossman and Mildred Patterson were there that weekend and they invited us to join them on an excursion on the *Hiawatha*. I vividly remember standing on the landing right in front of the hotel as the boat docked for us to join and thinking how surreal the entire scene was. Like something from a Jane Austen novel.

The boat still exists. But it became too expensive for the consulate to maintain, so it is now owned by a rich Turkish businessman. Although I understand the consulate can still use it. But I'm sure staff don't get to enjoy it nearly as much as we did back in the '90s.

One last story, this one getting back to the embassy itself. We had two FSN positions in the economic section. As in Warsaw I worked closely with both and supervised one or perhaps both for much of my time there. Both positions turned over while I was there, and I was part of hiring two great new staff, which was a new experience for me. All four of these people were great, but one in particular I became good friends with. Mehmet Şimşek was our main economist. We worked very closely together until he won the U.S. visa lottery and left for the States in 1997. Mehmet was just a super decent and a super bright guy. He was a Kurd and came from a small village in the east, from very modest means, but stood out to local school administrators and ended up getting scholarships, including to study economics in the UK. Mehmet became a great friend. We traveled a lot together. The first time I was able to travel in the east we were together, and it was great being with a Kurd who could speak in Kurdish. This obviously was only done when out of sight of officials, but I definitely recall getting some good local insights being with Mehmet.

So, I was sad when my friend left for the United States, but also happy for him. I was able to make some introductions that helped him get an internship or some sort of position at an international bank in New York. But Mehmet didn't need much help. He ended up moving to London and working for Merrill Lynch. Either there or in the States he met an American woman. They got married in 1999 in New York—by this point we were living in New Jersey and I was able to be a witness at their City Hall ceremony. I saw him in London once or twice in the 2000s, by which point he had given up his American green card. But then—pretty much out of the blue as far as I was concerned—he moved back to Turkey and ends up getting elected to Parliament as a member of Erdoğan's party. Which was a surprise to me—the party I mean. Well and also being in parliament, since he was always such a serious economist and I don't recall a political side to him. But I guess he had been advising the AK Party for some time. As soon as he was elected, he was appointed minister, and eventually became deputy prime minister. He left the government for a while when Erdoğan's economic policies went really out of control, but eventually came back. It's been over twenty years since we've seen each other, although I do look forward to getting together one day—probably after he's out of government again—and meeting his family and hearing more about his journey. Anyway, a pretty amazing tale.

Q: Yeah, quite a story. That's great.

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Q: Today is June 14, 2023, and this is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Mike Dodman. We left off last time you were on your tour in Turkey, in Ankara, which was from 1994 to 1998, and I think we'd gone through most of those years but you had a few more things you wanted to talk about. So, over to you.

DODMAN: Thanks. Yeah, a couple things that slipped my mind. One of the biggest accomplishments that I had in Turkey was getting a bilateral tax treaty done. It was something that had been lingering for eight years, as I just read in one of my EERs. And I was able to bring it to closure and get it signed. Now I have to be honest: I don't have many clear memories of actually working on this thing. But it features prominently in every EER for the four years I was there, and was the basis of my first Superior Honor Award. So, I must have done something right. It was signed in 1996 and ratified by the Senate in 1997. Which is a sign of how different Washington worked thirty years ago.

Second, I should mention the major preoccupation during this period with the situation just over the border in northern Iraq. Remember that after the first Gulf War we put in place a no-fly zone over the north of Iraq. That gave the United States, and the west generally, relative freedom to operate in that part of Iraq. That was mainly an issue for other parts of the embassy, but econ wasn't spared—somehow we ended up in charge of assisting American NGOs (non-governmental organizations) who used Turkey to access their operations in northern Iraq. I didn't work this account directly so don't remember the details, but there were dozens of NGOs, including a lot of small faith-based groups, providing medical, educational, and other services to the Kurds. The Turks were always suspicious of anything we did with the Kurds, so they made it very difficult for NGO staff to come and go through Turkey. That was where the embassy came in—as the interface with the Turkish authorities to get whatever permits were needed.

All that was interesting enough, but the real story came in I think it was 1996 when the situation on the ground became less stable—I can't recall the circumstances now, but there was suddenly a need to get anyone who worked for the United States out of northern Iraq, including all the local staff. In very short order we worked out a deal with the Turks to bring all these Kurds into eastern Turkey and immediately airlift them out of the country. Initially this was locals who were supporting the USG directly, but then that expanded to anyone who had worked for one of these U.S.-funded NGOs. So hundreds of people, plus their families. And believe it or not, they were all flown straight from Turkey to Guam, where they were eventually processed for entry into the United States. A few points about that: First, amazing that we got the Turks to agree to this, given their neuralgia about the Kurds. Which I take as an affirmation that in the '90s, we still had a lot of global power. Second, I'm really bummed that I didn't volunteer to go down to Diyarbakir and support this effort—another once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I missed. I heard some incredible stories from friends who were there, largely involving the culture shock many of these folks had leaving their village for the first time and then getting on a plane. Third, of course the circumstances are different, but I can't help but compare this

to the fiasco surrounding our withdrawal from Kabul in 2021 and the haphazard way that we took care of the Afghans who worked for us. I wonder if anyone involved in that craziness from either State or DoD had any knowledge of this evacuation and tried to learn from it.

Q: Indeed. Well, if you have nothing else to share about your time in Turkey, let's turn to the search for your next assignment after the one-year extension in Ankara. What did you have in mind and how did it go?

DODMAN: No regrets, first of all, about extending. Working with Marc Grossman for two plus years was superb. The ambassador who came in for my last six months or so was Mark Parris, also a really first-rate career officer. I travelled with him a few times in country and was able to continue that close partnership with the front office. Professionally and personally a great four years, despite a bit of rockiness at the start.

In going back over my evaluations, I noticed starting in 1992 and right through my time in Turkey I used that part of the old EER form where you had to state your future career goals to talk about my interest in long-term training. And that's where I ended up: going to Princeton for the one-year master's in public policy. The program had just launched in 1997, and I remember there were a lot of cables coming out promoting the program and encouraging applicants. I didn't have real strong views about what I wanted to get out of a year of study. For me, the attraction was to take a solid mental break. Going to a prestigious place like Princeton was a plus, but honestly the real attraction of that was to be in New Jersey, not far from Joan's family. So I applied, somehow took the GRE test in Ankara, and got accepted by both Princeton and HR.

But of course, that was just one year, and frankly that was the only real downside to the assignment: I was going to have to move the family twice in a row. But there was a job on the bid list that would help ease the pain of that. The deputy economic counselor position in Warsaw was open in the summer of '99, via a year of language, which I already had. I liked the idea of going back to someplace Joan and I already knew, but more importantly of setting myself up for the next four years—so putting off any more bidding for a while. Happily, EUR and post agreed, and so I was able to get paneled to both positions during that bid cycle.

Q: So, that actually came together?

DODMAN: Well, yes, but not without the typical last-minute drama. I had sorted both these jobs out myself, and back briefed my CDO (career development officer) with a detailed email setting it all out. I vividly recall getting a phone call at home one evening in Ankara—which was a pretty rare occurrence—from my CDO telling me we had a real problem: I was all set for the Princeton program, which was a priority for HR, but EUR was trying to screw that up by assigning me to Warsaw. Which in the CDO's mind was impossible. As politely as I could I said to the guy, "Did you read my f'ing email?" and explained that I had the Polish and everything was fine. And he just kept repeating, "You mean you're supposed to be paneled to both? That's unusual!" After I assured him

several more times that it was all set and was what I wanted, he let it go. Now I can't possibly have been the first person who already had a hard language to get assigned with a one-year tour to fill the language gap—but with HR, as we all know, it is always the first time.

Q: Indeed. Tell me, with a year of university training, was the system back then that you had to commit yourself to three times as long in the department as the time of your training?

DODMAN: Yes. And since I'd just been paneled to a three-year tour, that was simple.

So, again, once I prevented HR from torpedoing what I'd put together, I was set for another four years, which made us all pretty happy. Because leaving Ankara in the summer of 1998 was much harder than I expected. The youngest had been born there, really didn't know anything else, and had had one nanny all that time. Pulling away from the house for the airport she was a wreck, which made everyone else weepy. But I guess it was fitting: I arrived in '94 with vomit on me, and left in '98 with everyone's tears on me. But despite that, it was a superb tour.

Q: Okay. Well, let's talk about Princeton a little bit. How did you find the program?

DODMAN: So, I have mixed feelings. The year itself was mostly fantastic. I loved living in Princeton, the family loved living in Princeton. As I said, we were close to Joan's family so we could spend a lot of time there. Princeton itself is just a lovely little town. The kids went to great schools. They were able to adjust to that well. The program itself was stimulating, it was exactly what I wanted in terms of a thought-provoking program. Those of us in the mid-career program were a relatively small group—less than twenty, of which five of us were from State. We took a lot of classes together with the MPA students, those in the two-year public policy program that was the heart of the Woodrow Wilson School. Great students in both programs, and excellent faculty. So, intellectually it was fantastic.

The program was very flexible. I did some economics—not the basic stuff, since I already had a master's in economics, but topical classes. For example, a class on central banking with Alan Blinder, a former Fed governor. But I tried to get away from economics and do more international relations, international policy, international law. I took a great class on international law and the UN. The faculty were happy to have experienced diplomats in the class to offer real world examples, which was an added bonus.

The reason I said I had mixed views is that while the program was great, it wasn't—and to this day still isn't—well integrated into the State Department. I would have assumed that there would be some greater thought put into the program that State was sending a lot of its best and brightest to. Either by lining up a follow-on assignment to take advantage of the specific curriculum. Or ensuring that the curriculum filled a gap in an FS-02's knowledge base. The Princeton program is very theoretical with lots of ivory-tower

policy focus. I loved the intellectual side of that. But in hindsight I can see that I and the rest of my peer group needed some more exposure to the practical side of things. Maybe some discussion of things like ethics in government or congressional relations. Focused skills that would have direct impact on mid-career officials in government. Princeton is not that kind of a place. You get more of this at the service colleges like National Defense University. But not at Princeton.

Years later, when I was in HR, I made a half-hearted effort to talk with the leadership about this. The long-term training division was in a state of transition at the time, so it didn't go anywhere. And no one else seemed as bothered about this as I was.

Q: Right. So, not necessarily directly relevant to the work you expected to be doing.

DODMAN: To put it in HR-speak, I don't feel like my leadership and management skills were at all improved by the experience. And if the department is going to invest in a full year of training for 02s or 01s—the future leaders of the organization—they should make sure that at least some piece of the training is designed to strengthen their leadership and management competencies.

Q: The courses and programs, I found, when the State Department sent me back to university, the way that the professors thought about things and taught about theories of development and political thought just didn't relate very much to the way the State Department functioned. Did you find that sort of ivory tower twist to how people looked at courses?

DODMAN: Definitely. And don't get me wrong: I'm sure that I was a better reporting officer and a better FSO after the program just because I went through a period of thinking critical thoughts and broke out of the State Department groupthink a bit. Again, it all worked fine for me. These concerns all came up in hindsight. I got exactly what I wanted, which was an ivory tower experience and a break from State. It worked well for our family, and I have no regrets about the path taken.

Q: Okay. Now, you said it worked well for your family. That's interesting and great. The one time we had a one-year tour for going back to school it was a great year as you've described for all of us, but it was very disruptive to do those two moves in one year. Plus sorting out the kids' schools and finding a place to live and the like. It sounds like that wasn't so much of a problem in your case.

DODMAN: That would be incorrect. I glossed over some of the difficulties. One in particular. The year actually almost didn't happen. After our home leave that summer, we all arrived at the Princeton Residence Inn in August. I had a one-month prep session for mid-career folks to sharpen our skills. We also had a month to find a house and get the kids enrolled in school.

Suffice it to say, this did not go well. First, a family of six in one suite at the Residence Inn was a real hassle. Second, the house search was much more difficult than we

expected. Third, everyone was still missing Ankara. This came to a head one night when the kids were acting up and my efforts to reason about how we would have a home soon completely failed as one of my daughters screamed out "I don't have a home anymore; my home is in Ankara." That was probably the lowest I've ever felt in terms of Foreign Service guilt over what my career was doing to impact the kids. Because I really didn't know where we were going to live and was getting worried myself. It was bad.

After seeing dozens of houses that were too small, too expensive, in the wrong school district, and so on, we finally found one that was just okay. We actually went back to it several times, and it went from "no" to "okay" the closer we got to Labor Day. So, we signed a lease and prepared to make the best of it and to get the kids registered to start school the following week. I remember it was the Thursday before Labor Day and we were at the hotel and our agent called and said, "Mike, I have bad news. The house just burned down."

Q: Oh, no.

DODMAN: Yes. (Laughs) So, it did not actually burn down but there was a fire and it was uninhabitable. We were back to square one. And you know, this was kind of the last straw. We were, coincidentally, trying to sell the house we owned in Arlington at that time, because it was now too small for us, and we knew we would be going overseas again. But that wasn't going well either. So, I said to my wife, "The kids have to start school next week. I'm not going to disrupt things any more for them. Princeton just isn't going to work. We have a house in DC—too small, but we'll make it work. Let's just move back to Washington. I'll break this assignment and get a job in the department. Everything here is wrong." And reluctantly she agreed that we didn't have any other option. So, on Friday I went to the university and explained the situation to the head of the program, the associate dean of the Woodrow Wilson School, who was actually somebody I'd worked with in my eastern Europe days in the early '90s so I knew him well. Told him I had no choice but to quit the program and go to Washington. He was sympathetic and I guess said something like "Let me see if there's anything I can do." Well, lo and behold, later that day he called and said there was a university-owned house slated for a visiting faculty member who had just pulled out for the coming year, and did we want it. A beautiful old three-bedroom house on the edge of campus. Just a block from the train station and the Wawa, if you know Princeton. And just like that, we were back to plan A. We managed to get to the local elementary school before it closed for the day and got the kids registered to start school after the long weekend. We moved in a few days later. It was still a little small for us, but absolutely no complaints.

Q: No, it sounds like it had a very happy ending so that's what counts.

DODMAN: It was wild. So, we survived that horrible month at the Residence Inn, and all the kids settled in pretty well for the year. They all knew there would be another move soon, but maybe because I was so much more relaxed about moving back to Warsaw, they seemed to be more relaxed about that move. Or at least that's the way I remember it.

Q: I always think a Princeton curriculum would be pretty rigorous but how did you find that it compared to working full-time at the State Department in terms of rigor?

DODMAN: It was rigorous. I recall many evenings in the library and the pressure of deadlines to complete research papers and things like that. It was a real curriculum, and we got a full master's degree out of it. We definitely earned that master's degree. But it still felt like a break after ten years in the State Department. And it wasn't all work. We did a lot as a family that year. We'd go to football games and hockey games and often visited Joan's family in northern Jersey. It was all definitely manageable.

Q: There's been a lot of controversy lately about naming something the Woodrow Wilson School. Was that an issue at all while you were there?

DODMAN: Not that I recall. But it is no longer the Woodrow Wilson School and I should properly refer to it as the School of Public and International Affairs, SPIA, which it has been for five years now maybe. Wilson's name is pretty much completely erased, as far as I can tell from the alumni magazines and the Princeton events I go to in DC. Now I really can't say for sure if this debate was or wasn't underway in 1998-99. As an older student with a large family, I wasn't living in the graduate housing or eating at a dining club or even going to the graduate school bar. I completely missed that part of the Princeton experience. So, as I said, if there was a debate happening about Wilson's legacy, it wasn't prominent enough to grab my attention.

Q: Okay, no, that sounds great. And from there you would have graduated in May or June of 1999?

DODMAN: Ninety-nine, yep. I did go to graduation, had a nice party. I can't remember who spoke but it was in a beautiful building.

And then, right away I was off to DC to do several weeks of Polish brush-up at FSI. Joan and the kids stayed in that house in Princeton until the end of the school year, but I remember coming back up to pack out at some point. They would have spent several weeks with her mom while I was in Arlington. I think I spent about two months at FSI and doing consultations. The language refresher was great—basically one-on-one, with teachers I already knew. I left with a three-plus/three-plus, feeling very confident with the language. And in August we left New Jersey for our return to Warsaw.

Q: Okay, This is a good place to stop and we'll take up with Poland next week.

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Q: Today is June 21, 2023, and this is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Mike Dodman. When we left off it was August 1999 and you were just heading off for your second assignment in Warsaw. Let's start with how the embassy had changed in the years you were away and how your new position fit into the structure.

DODMAN: Sure. So, it had been nine years since I left Poland. In that summer of 1990 the transition was very much underway. But there was still real trepidation about whether the transition was going to be permanent, was it going to continue moving forward or would there be some retrenchment. Germany had yet to reunify. Many things had yet to happen. Fast forward to 1999, and things looked very different. It was a more confident country that I went back to. NATO enlargement, which happened that spring, was one big reason. They were also well on their way to EU membership, although that wouldn't happen until a couple years after I left. So, it was nice to go back to a place that we knew and loved, but it was also nice because it was, in fact, very different. The embassy was obviously much bigger.

I went back as the deputy in the economic section and into a portfolio focused largely on finance and macroeconomics. My first tour in Warsaw econ I had done a little of everything, because it was such a whirlwind. Ankara had been mainly trade and macro, but I also dabbled in a whole lot of other things over the four years I was there. Finance was the only major area of economics that I hadn't spent a lot of time on, so that was a big draw of this job. And I tee it up that way because in fact for my first year I really didn't do finance.

It was a section of five Foreign Service officers, one Foreign Service secretary and three FSNs. The 03 officer, the mid-level officer that did trade, curtailed or maybe resigned right before I arrived, so I ended up working on trade most of my first year, which was fine. I eventually got to the finance later.

There was a big USAID mission that was located outside of the embassy. In both the trade and finance portfolios there was a lot of cross-coordination with USAID. When I arrived, they had already set the date for closing up their mission, which I think happened in 2001, so for people like me who were going to be left tying up any loose ends from USAID, there was a real strong incentive to make their departure and the handover as smooth as possible.

The ambassador when I arrived was Dan Fried, who is very much a force of nature, certainly on Polish issues. He had been the Poland desk officer when I joined the Foreign Service and did a bridge assignment on the desk before my first tour. He had been working on Poland and eastern Europe issues his entire career. The DCM was Mike Mozur, who was an economic officer as well, which was helpful for me.

Q: Was the expanded embassy all crammed into the same building?

DODMAN: For the most part. Some folks were off-campus. USAID was up near the main train station. Commerce was near the Sheraton a few blocks away. There may have been a couple others. But most everything else had grown in the chancery on Ujazdowskie and the annex building on Piękna—which no longer had any apartments, just offices. The economic section was still on the first floor, and political had joined us. Actually, when I arrived in the summer of 1999 there was construction going on in the economic section so we were in swing space somewhere in the basement. The consular

section was huge by this point and had taken over the garage and motor pool—so those things must have moved off-campus. Suffice it to say, there was still a lot of movement going on to fit a growing staff into the old building.

Q: U.S. relations with Poland were already pretty good in your first Poland tour. Had they further improved by the time you got there?

DODMAN: Well, sure. Of course, relations when I had first arrived in 1988 weren't good since it was still a communist country. But yeah, by the time I left in 1990 the love fest had really begun. And nine years later we were just getting closer and closer. NATO was a big piece of that. But the pro-American sentiment that was clear at the personal level even under communism was now official government policy. And even though Poland was on track for early EU membership, we all knew that there would remain a special U.S.-Polish bond.

For us in the economic section we were still experiencing rapid growth in trade and investment with the United States. As I said, we still had an active USAID assistance program in 1999, and in fact that program was by all measures very successful, particularly on economic matters. The advice that we were giving them, and the things we were asking Poland to do—it all just seemed to stick and to work in ways that I never saw anywhere else in my career. This became a lot more visible after 9/11, but even before it was clear that this bilateral partnership was something special.

I should say here that USAID deserves a lot of credit for quickly setting up a strong assistance program, and then for shutting it down after only a decade. I was present for both the beginning and the end. When the AID mission closed, I was the recipient of several boxes—literally a few documents that someone from the mission thought I might need to handle follow-up on projects in the economic area. And then AID was basically gone. As we'll talk later when we get to my work with massive U.S. assistance programs in Iraq and Pakistan, this model of USAID coming in, doing its job, and then closing up shop was pretty unique in my experience. But it was great to see, both because the program clearly had been successful, but also because that's exactly the way it had been set up back in the first Bush administration.

Q: That's great to have a success story now and then. If Poland's main economic goal was joining the EU, did you find yourself working closely with your EU counterparts on these kinds of programs you were talking about?

DODMAN: That's an interesting question. I really don't recall any significant coordination that I did with EU reps or with European embassies on EU matters. I had worked pretty closely with the EU Mission in Ankara, so I was no stranger to that kind of coordination. Maybe this was something the counselor or others were doing. Or maybe it really wasn't happening much. In other words, maybe by this point in their accession process our goals had begun to diverge, in the sense that it wasn't really a question anymore if Poland was going to become a member, but rather how. So, how much of the

economic regulatory system that Poland had adopted based on the U.S. model could we get Poland to maintain as it worked to meet the requirements of the EU Acquis.

Q: You said the first year you were focused mainly on trade. What issues can you recall that you were dealing on and did you have any successes or failures?

DODMAN: I had mentioned that in Warsaw in ’89-’90, but then more when I was on the desk from ’91 to ’93, I was involved with the negotiations led by USTR on investment and trade agreements with Poland and others in the region. Those agreements were all completed and ratified by this point, but we were still working closely to intensify as much as possible our economic ties in advance of EU accession. My main partner at USTR ten years earlier had been a career official named Cathy Novelli, who by the late nineties had moved up to be the assistant USTR for Europe and the Middle East. She and her team were frequent visitors in Warsaw. That’s one reason I didn’t mind taking on the trade portfolio that first year: I always enjoyed working with USTR, and with Cathy specifically. And her name will come up again in future interviews.

As in Turkey, one of my least favorite parts of the trade portfolio was intellectual property rights. That was still a big issue in Poland. Both with patents—and specifically pharmaceuticals—but much more on the copyright side. You could still find pirated DVDs and CDs everywhere. So, I recall a lot of engagement on IPR issues. We definitely made progress, but I can’t say how much this was because of our needling the government about these issues, and how much because of pressure from the EU.

There was one trade issue that really left an impression on me. Towards the end of my time in Poland, in the spring 2002, President Bush took the really controversial step of introducing new steel tariffs. This had been under debate for some time, and we knew this would have a significant impact on a number of partner countries, including Poland. For whatever reason, when we got news from Washington that a decision was made and we were instructed to go brief partners like Poland, the task fell to me. I must have been acting counselor at the time, and the trade officer must have been out as well. Happily, I had worked enough with the trade ministry, so I knew the key officials. So I did it, and remember enough about the meeting to know that I did it all in Polish, not English. The fact that I remember this particular conversation so well tells me two things. First, I was really upset about these trade measures which were just so blatantly protectionist and political. It was bad economics and bad foreign policy—a purely political move. Second, I must have been really worried how the Poles were going to react. In the end, I recall that the conversation went fine. I guess we’ll never know if that’s because I handled the issue so smoothly, or because the Poles were smart enough to have read the tea leaves from Washington and weren’t surprised.

Q: Well, that raises the issue you were there during the transition, I guess, from Clinton to Bush Two. Was that reflective of a lot of changes in U.S. policy as the administrations changed or was it—was that kind of an outlier?

DODMAN: I do not recall any significant change in policy. Just as I saw in the transition from Bush One to Clinton, Eastern Europe really wasn't that controversial. I can't think of any significant change in policy relevant to us, although maybe that's because the policy changes that came after 9/11 were so significant. I definitely remember the confusion in November 2000 over the Florida vote. I happily was not a guest at the Ambassador's election night party—sorry, the election morning-after early breakfast where the politicos gathered to watch the U.S. returns. But I heard it went on for quite a while before everyone realized there would be no victor called that day.

We did have George W. Bush visit Poland in the summer of 2001. In other words, for one of his first international trips. Another sign of both the close relations and the continued prominence of central Europe from one administration to the next. Funny: I reprised the role I played when his father came in 1989, as control officer for the state dinner and other events at the presidential palace. But by this point I'd seen enough VIP visits—and this embassy had been through more than their fair share—so this didn't have nearly the impact that the visit did in '89. Pretty much all I remember is a meet and greet at the hotel, then a wheels-up party, and then heading out the next day on R&R (rest and relaxation travel).

Q: Poland was still a so-called hardship post at this point?

DODMAN: Yes. I can't recall what continued to justify the hardship pay and R&Rs in 1999. It could have been pollution, which was still an issue. Healthcare also wasn't yet that great. Or maybe it was just inertia. I'm sure our pay differential was much less than it had been during our first tour. But I am also certain that we got two R&Rs, because when I went to Prague a couple years later, I recall the shock at being in our first non-R&R post and needing to pay my own way to get the six of us home for the summer.

Q: I guess that highlights that Poland was still in transition, it was not yet what we might call a fully western country, and the living conditions were not the same as they were in western Europe yet.

DODMAN: I think 1999 and the first part of my tour in Warsaw represented the end of an era in a couple ways. As we've already discussed, Poland wasn't yet in the EU; Warsaw, Prague and Budapest were still in this golden era that many Americans and other westerners remember fondly: they were trendy, cheap and exotic—they still had enough of the remnants of communism to make clear to you that you weren't back home. And, I should add, I don't recall nearly as many Brits coming over on cheap flights for their beer-fueled stag and hen parties. But also, it was pre-9/11. It was before we talked derisively about "new" and "old" Europe. And of course, with the benefit of today's hindsight, we can also say that it was before Putin became an existential threat to these countries.

There was a very large expat community in Poland, including many Americans. A lot of folks who had come early in the transition either because they were Polish American or just, you know, drawn there. You had a lot of American investment by that point.

Citibank was there, I recall, very big. They bought one of the biggest local banks, Bank Handlowy. Privatization was still very much going on. Poland had taken its time dealing with state-owned enterprises. There were some that were shut down early on because they were never going to be profitable but there were others that they just kind of put off the decision about how and when to privatize it. USAID had provided a lot of policy advice on this, and we continued to provide help, and to advocate for U.S. firms interested in privatization deals.

The biggest commercial success of that period was the sale of F-16 fighter jets. Econ didn't have a huge role in this process, or at least I myself didn't. But I remember towards the end of my tour this was priority number one for the mission. The Poles did choose F-16s over the Swedish Gripen fighters. Interestingly enough, there have been echoes of this deal in my career during the decades since. The Czechs were also modernizing their air defenses during this period and, unlike the Poles, the Czech government opted for the European product. Many Czechs saw this as a potentially fatal mistake: both failing to acquire the best technology and missing an opportunity to cement ties with the United States. We saw that reverberate during the missile defense debates I took part in in Prague a few years later. And then when I was back in Prague as chargé in 2022, the Gripen lease was up and the Czechs made sure not to repeat their mistake and opted for F-35 fighters.

Q: So, during your last two years you moved on to your intended portfolio of finance and macro, yes? What else was driving the agenda besides military modernization?

DODMAN: The finance ministry and central bank became my primary destinations during those two years. There was a lot of activity related to either closing or transitioning former assistance programs. In fact, the U.S. Treasury started some new assistance after USAID departed, mainly to help bolster the tax administration arm of the finance ministry. We were also spending a lot of time helping to build up the anti-money laundering apparatus at the ministry. This really proved its value after 9/11 when we very urgently needed someone to talk to about terrorism financing.

Q: Right. Before we get to 9/11, a couple more questions about the economy. Did Treasury have their own person in Warsaw full-time?

DODMAN: No, there was not a Treasury attaché. I'm pretty sure they had someone based in Frankfurt at that point, since the euro and the European Central Bank came into effect in 1999. So we probably had visits from that person, even though Poland wasn't yet in the EU.

But that's on the policy side. For Treasury's assistance on tax administration, that was run through the economic section. Treasury did end up sending someone on that program, but this was a technical advisor who actually sat in the ministry providing direct assistance.

Q: Okay, well, let's talk about 9/11. Where were you?

DODMAN: I was at my desk in the embassy that afternoon. I believe I was in the middle of an email to the NSC (National Security Council). I can't remember why that sticks in my mind, but I know I was in the middle of an email. There was a TV in the hallway near the elevators. I guess I could hear it from my desk, or else I heard others gathering, because I came out when the news broke of the plane hitting the first tower. I remember watching for a few minutes, being amazed but not thinking too much of it and going back to work on this email. But then bolting out when the second plane hit. And never finishing that damned email.

For the next hour or so, through the plane hitting the Pentagon and the collapse of the towers, I remember being glued to the TV. If I remember having any coherent thoughts about the future, they were more about U.S. policy. Nothing really involving me or my family. This all seemed far away from Warsaw. But then there started to be speculation about the fourth plane. And I think the State Department was evacuated because it was a possible target. And for some reason that jolted me into action. I hadn't been able to reach my wife—we didn't all have cell phones at the time—and suddenly felt that I had to be with my family immediately. Our kids went to the American school, which proudly had an American flag out front. I wasn't worried about the building I was working in, but I was suddenly very worried about them. I don't remember if there were directions from the front office about staying or going. All I know is I left and headed home. It must have been around 4:00 in the afternoon at this point. I was riding my bike in those days, and it was a good half-hour to get back to our house in Ursynów. And really that's the story—that momentary sense of panic that made me feel I had to get home ASAP. I don't even remember if my wife and kids were there when I got home. Maybe I chilled out a little on the ride. Eventually everyone did get home safe and sound, and we all somehow processed what had happened.

The other vivid memory of that period was the way that the Poles responded. It was absolutely amazing. Within 24 hours, literally half the street in front of the full length of the embassy was filled with candles, flowers and other memorials. The Poles definitely know how to mourn—they've sadly had a lot of practice—but the scale of this was just incredible. Another example of those amazing close ties.

One other strong memory of 9/11 was the next morning having a previously scheduled meeting with the financial intelligence people, the money laundering people, and going ahead with that meeting. It was with my main contact at the ministry, someone I dealt with every week, so knew quite well. There were lots of condolences, but also my first real talk with a Pole about how the world was never going to be the same. And lots of speculation about ways our work on money laundering would start to expand. So even without instructions from Washington, I was just naturally pivoting into—I hate to say it—but pivoting into war-on-terror mode.

Q: And Poland turned out to be a strong ally in all of this. You mentioned the old Europe and new Europe controversy. Was that accurate from where you sat in Warsaw?

DODMAN: Yeah. Happily, in the economic section our role in prosecuting the global war on terror was limited. For the eight or so months I had remained in Warsaw, the main issues I dealt with was terrorist finance and sharing lists of suspected terrorists. But obviously as time went on and our engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq grew, the Poles were strong partners. But I didn't have much visibility from where I sat, during the time I was there.

Q: Okay. Ambassador Fried was not there the whole time you were there. Had he moved on at this point?

DODMAN: Yes. He left not too long after I arrived—maybe spring of 2000—I think to a senior job at the NSC. It seems to me he left post rather abruptly, but I don't recall the circumstances. Fried and I never developed any great working relationship. He really didn't give a shit about economics. And he thought he knew everything and everyone who mattered in the country, so I got the impression he found most of the embassy staff just an unpleasant distraction. Chris Hill replaced him. Chris had been, like Dan, the Poland desk officer in the early '90s when I was working as the staff assistant in EUR. So like Fried, he knew the country well. I spent much more time with Hill than I did with Fried, although I cannot for the life of me think of any particular economic issues that Chris was really interested in other than the F-16 sale. But anyway, I got along well with Chris Hill and would end up working with him again in a later tour.

Q: You must have been getting high-level visitors all the time. Did Colin Powell come?

DODMAN: He came with President Bush in 2001, but I don't recall a stand-alone S visit. As I said earlier, we had a steady stream of economic visitors. But unlike the chaos of my first tour, we had the staff and support structure in the embassy to make it all manageable. I'm sure I was control officer for a CODEL (Congressional delegation) or two, but have no strong memories, so they must have gone off without any problems.

I'll tell you the one thing I do remember related to visits. A big part of my job this time was running the section and specifically supervising the two junior officers who rotated through the section every year—one year in consular followed by a year in econ. I supervised six JOs (junior officers) during my time, plus I remember a steady flow of interns. This was my first time with formal supervision over American officers, and I remember focusing a lot of time on visit management: teaching them how to do a visit right. So I'm sure I had my hand in more than my fair share of visits. But as I said, the fact that I can't remember any of them is a good sign.

Q: It's funny how we remember the disasters better than some of the successes. Did you enjoy the mentoring?

DODMAN: Very much. The JOs and the interns I had during those years were all very different, with their own strengths and weaknesses. I grew a lot as a manager from the experience.

I have some really strong memories of some of the junior officers in the political section as well, so at this point I was already actively mentoring folks beyond those I directly supervised. Which was a practice I continued in future posts.

Q: Well, I want to ask you also about life in Poland at this stage but let me first see if there's any other substantive issues you want to talk about during your years there.

DODMAN: Let me see. Yeah, I guess I will close out on that side by noting that I did a lot of reporting this tour. As I did in Turkey. No surprise—this was a reporting job. But I remember a lot of positive feedback on what I sent in, both in Warsaw and Ankara. During both of these tours I was nominated for the Salzman Award, which is the department's primary annual award for mid-level economic officers. I didn't win either time, but it was great to see my reporting and other work recognized with the nomination.

Now all that said, what I value most about this tour in Warsaw—and what, other than 9/11, I have the strongest memories of—was not reporting but managing. As I remember it from twenty-plus years after the fact, I was confident that I would make a good boss, a good leader and mentor, and I feel like Warsaw was where I proved that was the case. I didn't really manage people in my next assignment, but did for the remainder of my career, and got my main job satisfaction from those leadership roles. Of course, you don't need to be formally supervising people to be a good leader, and reading through my evaluations I see consistently strong assessments on that score. But I really enjoyed the satisfaction of helping to make someone a better drafter, a better visit coordinator, a stronger FSO. So, to wrap it up, I guess this tour marked a transition for me. In Warsaw I would say I was a reporting officer who discovered his talent for management, whereas two years later in Prague I was a leader and manager who did a bunch of reporting on the side. And from Warsaw onwards, I started to question the value of all the reporting we were sending back to Washington; whether as an organization we devote too much of our overseas time and talent to reporting, as opposed to more actively engaging partners and winning hearts and minds.

Q: Well, you had worked at the other side, at the receiving end of the reporting cables as well. Didn't that make you feel like what you were doing in the field was useful?

DODMAN: Yes and no. Reporting is essential, even during the age of the internet and instant communications. The context, analysis and recommendations are all essential. My concern the higher up I went in the organization is that we put too much emphasis on reporting per se. Too many of us define ourselves as reporting officers, as I've just done. And of course, we are too often judged based on the volume and quality of what we write, not the outcomes that writing achieves. So, I guess what I really would like to see is a rethinking of the job—and probably some new nomenclature—that reduces the emphasis on reporting. But absolutely: a diplomat, an FSO, absolutely needs to be able to write clearly and persuasively. I'm glad I can do that, and that I enjoy doing that. But I'm even gladder I found out there are other parts of the job I did as well or maybe better, and got as much or more satisfaction from.

Anyway, back to Warsaw: I did a lot of reporting, and I trained a bunch of FSOs on how to do better reporting, and I think it made a difference. It was a good tour.

Q: Let me switch a little to life. How had that changed and was Joan the embassy nurse once again?

DODMAN: Yes. So, life was very different compared to that first tour. We lived and worked in a much more developed country with a lot of modern conveniences; the host government was now one of our closest allies. We had no more reporting requirements or travel restrictions. Life was good. Of course, our family situation was very different. We had a great housing assignment: in Ursynów, which was kind of an old, Stalinist neighborhood with a lot of high-rise buildings from that era, but also with a bunch of new townhouse communities along the outskirts. We lived in one of those—a compound with a lot of embassy families and other expats. Safe and full of English-speaking kids. The schools were excellent, and that was a big part of our social life. Our last year the American School moved into a big new campus south of the city, which only added to our satisfaction with the schooling.

Joan worked at the embassy. By that point there was a full-fledged medical unit. There was an RMO (regional medical officer) and a couple of local-hire nurses, in addition to Joan. The growth in the health unit was a good example of how much that embassy had changed in nine years, going from one part-time position to four or five full-timers.

You could get everything you needed in Poland by that point. The embassy still had a commissary, but it wasn't essential to living a good life. We went very rarely to Germany, unlike the previous tour, partly because the roads were still so bad—with that Berlin-Warsaw-Moscow road just a miserable drive. But we traveled elsewhere in Poland a lot, especially south to Krakow and Zakopane. Every February we went skiing at the U.S. Armed Forces recreation center in Garmisch in Bavaria. And like everyone serving in Poland at that point we became collectors of Polish pottery and we would make the pilgrimage to Bolesławiec, which was right on the border on the way to Bavaria. Fun fact: it is easier to get to Bolesławiec from Prague than it is from Warsaw, so we made that trip even more from Prague than we did from Warsaw. And despite all the pottery we brought back—which we use to this day—we left there underweight.

It's nice that the country was so different in so many ways. There were enough new things to discover, and we were at such a different place in our lives, that it didn't feel that much like a repeat tour. Frankly, if there hadn't been such big changes in the country and in our family, I'm not sure I would have enjoyed going back for a second tour in the same post.

Q: Yeah, things were changing so rapidly even during the years you were there I guess it would be something quite different. In your first tour you had talked a lot about how you traveled constantly to Poznań and Kraków and around Poland. Did you continue to do that either professionally or as a family in your second tour?

DODMAN: Much less to Poznań because the consulate had shut down by that point, and anyway we wouldn't have had our good friends there. Plus, we weren't going to Berlin all the time. And if we had, we wouldn't have needed gas from the consulate. I seem to recall being in Poznań once during that tour—can't recall if it was business or pleasure. Many trips to Kraków on business, with family, and with visitors. We did some trips to the Baltic coast with the kids, and to the mountains in the south. By this point the kids were doing lots of sports, which involved travel for several weekends a year and cut into the amount of time we could get away as a family.

We did one great family road trip through central Europe in the summer of 2001, stopping in Berlin, Garmisch, Salzburg, Vienna, Prague, and Kraków. At least two-plus weeks. Great visits. That was our only time in Berlin, and I think probably my first time back there since 1990. Very cool to show our son where he'd been born and explain the wall to everyone. We all had a blast in Prague, and that definitely paid dividends when I ended up getting assigned there. Really one of our best family trips.

Q: In Turkey you had extended for a fourth year. Were you thinking of doing that in Poland as well?

DODMAN: No. I don't think I ever actively considered it. Not completely sure why. Leadership was probably a big part of it—unlike the super experience I had with Marc Grossman in Ankara, I didn't have the same relationship with or respect for either Fried or Hill. It could have also had something to do with this being our second time in Warsaw. But three years was definitely enough.

Q: So, what were you thinking about doing and how did the bidding process go?

DODMAN: I don't have real strong memories of the bidding process or my thinking going into it. I ended up going back to Washington, so I probably thought that my focus should be on jobs there, so I could get some solid experience as a mid-level officer. One thing I do recall—and this may relate back to that email I was drafting on 9/11—I know I talked with a friend who was doing the central Europe portfolio at the NSC about maybe taking that job. But I remember affirmatively deciding against an NSC job because I didn't want to work the hours that would be required. Which is a bit ironic since I ended up in a seventh-floor job that also had long hours. But not as bad as they would have been at the NSC.

I ended up as a special assistant in E, the office of the under secretary for economic affairs. In good Foreign Service fashion, I called on the connections I had. Marc Grossman was the under secretary for political affairs at that point; he sent what I'm sure was a very kind note to Al Larson, the under secretary for economic affairs. I recall a phone interview with Larson that was pretty perfunctory. I think that note from Grossman was pretty much all it took.

The tour on the seventh floor ended up being a great experience. But to this day it puzzles me a little bit because it's never something I saw myself doing. You know, a lot of people

set up their career ambitions and punching the ticket with a seventh-floor job is part of their master plan. I never had a master plan. Never saw myself working on the seventh floor. If anything, my experience working with the executive secretariat and other parts of the seventh floor when I was a staffer in EUR argued against my ever going there. All I can say is that I've followed the path of least resistance in a lot of my bidding, and in this case that path led through Marc Grossman.

Q: And were you assigned to that as a one-year assignment?

DODMAN: Yeah. So, these were and still are one-year assignments. You know, I really should talk the job up more. These are sought-after assignments, they are really good assignments, they're hard to get. And they can be tough with long hours, which is why they are one-year jobs.

Q: Okay. Well, still that's what most people would consider a plum, to go work on the seventh floor, so you know, it's another feather in your cap. Anything else you want to say about the bidding process or leaving Warsaw before we turn to E?

DODMAN: Let me tell one anecdote about that transition. Maybe this can prevent some young FSO reading this from making the same mistake. Well, not necessarily a mistake, but something I should have spent a little more time thinking through.

As I mentioned when talking about my housing drama in Princeton, we had owned a house in Arlington. We ended up selling that in 1998, so we faced the dilemma about where to live and where the kids would go to school. Probably still feeling some of the shock of that Princeton drama, I wanted to make sure this was taken care of well before starting the PCS (permanent change of station) travel. Somehow Joan and I decided that the best course of action was for me to fly back to DC for literally a long weekend and buy a house. And so that's what I did. We'd done our research. Knew what we could afford, and that for the size house we needed we would be in Fairfax County, not Arlington. Picked a few schools we wanted to aim for. Lined up a realtor. And over the course of two days I must have looked at, I don't know, fifteen, twenty houses, all, you know, in a very limited price range and in a few neighborhoods. Only one house was the least bit attractive. Although I guess this is one case I should look at the glass half full and say "Isn't it great that given the ridiculously short amount of time available, I was able to find one house that worked for us."

I'll skip most of the gory details. But Joan agreed with my assessment, and our bid was successful. We were able to line up schools and some minimal housework, and move in in August after a much less stressful Residence Inn stay than we'd had in 1998. But the thing about all this is: I always hated that house. And the neighborhood. I never saw myself living outside the Beltway, in a "development" with a pool club and nothing else within walking distance. It worked fine for the relatively short time we were there, and it was much less stress than what we'd gone through in Princeton. And who knows: maybe if we'd spent a month looking for a house—as we did in Princeton—we still would have ended up in the exact same sort of house and neighborhood. Anyway, I would not

recommend anyone as picky as I obviously am giving themself only forty-eight hours to buy a house.

Q: Okay, so it is the summer of 2002 and you are back in Washington working on the seventh floor. Tell me about E staff and both what E did and what you did in E.

DODMAN: So, E is the under secretary for economic affairs. At the time it was probably formally the under secretary for economic and business affairs. Al Larson was under secretary. Larson was perhaps the greatest Foreign Service economic officer there ever was. He is, I believe, the only career economic officer to ever hold that position of under secretary. He was great. A super inspirational boss. I learned a lot from him. Peter Chase was the chief of staff in E, so really the person who hired me and my direct supervisor. Peter and I became good friends and worked together in Brussels, as we'll talk about later. There were five or six FS-02 special assistants in E, a couple Civil Service special assistants, and a couple political appointees. Maybe fifteen people in total.

Each of the Foreign Service special assistants took the lead for one region of the globe—so worked primarily with one regional bureau—and then had a couple functional portfolios. I was hired as the Europe person and handed transportation and a couple other things that I honestly don't remember. The EU was the biggest piece of my portfolio, and of course our relationship with the EU covers pretty much every economic issue, so I had a little bit of everything on my plate.

The context in 2002-03 was very much post-9/11, pre-Iraq invasion. One of my most vivid memories was standing next to Larson in his office watching Colin Powell testify at the UN about the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and just thinking, Oh, that poor man, this is not going to end well. A happier Colin Powell memory was flying back from Davos with Larson on Powell's plane and seeing the secretary come around to greet and chat with everyone. I'm thrilled that I had the chance to work in the department in somewhat close proximity to Powell, since he is far and away my favorite secretary of state. Such an inspirational guy.

Q: So, you had the European portfolio in E. What were the main issues coming across your desk?

DODMAN: Well, there was a lot tied to responding to 9/11 and preparing for the Iraq invasion. My main engagement on the latter was supporting Larson in the negotiations he led with the Turks on a package of measures designed to make it possible for us to attack Iraq from the north, from Turkey, should we end up going to war. The idea was that if we were going to invade Iraq, we would be more successful coming in from two fronts: from the Gulf in the south, and from Turkey in the north.

Having served in Turkey before, I was frankly shocked at the lengths we were prepared to go to win Turkey over on this. For instance, recall the discussions about how difficult it was for the Turks to get the textile quotas they wanted for increased exports to the United States. Well, in order to sweeten the pot to get what we wanted on Iraq, we were prepared

to give the Turks pretty much whatever they wanted in terms of textiles. I don't recall the numbers. But I do remember being shocked by what we offered. For me, this was one of the clearest signs of just how 9/11 had completely upended the apple cart in terms of long-held foreign policy standards. Again, I don't remember the details but we also offered huge amounts of financing and other inducements.

Larson led the negotiations with a Turkish official named Babacan. A relatively young guy and newcomer in the Erdoğan government. I hadn't known him when I worked in Ankara, and don't recall spending too much time speaking Turkish with the delegation or otherwise schmoozing them. It all happened very quickly in the fall of 2002, with just a couple rounds of talks. Basically we said "Tell us what it will take to get a deal that will win parliamentary approval, and we'll do it." We came up with a deal—as I said, a very generous package—very quickly. But here's the kicker: the Turkish parliament rejected the deal and refused to let us invade through the north. So all these goodies we had promised the Turks were lost.

In terms of other post-9/11 work, the thorniest was probably related to transportation. We put in place a lot of new rules about passing data to Washington on passengers arriving at U.S. airports. This ran afoul of many EU privacy regulations, leading to lots of very detailed negotiations to make this work. Happily, the EU and European countries were still in a state of shock over the attacks, and we weren't yet into the full divisiveness over the Iraq invasion. So, while these were hard issues, I felt like there was a lot of common desire to solve problems. We had a standing economic dialogue with the EU that was led by E, where these and many other issues were hashed out. I started travelling with Larson to Brussels a fair bit, and worked really closely with the EU office in EUR. The agenda was much bigger than just terrorism and privacy issues, but those were definitely at the forefront that year.

There was a lot of Russia focus, particularly on trade issues. In those years the Russians imposed a lot of barriers on U.S. agricultural products, and we were under constant pressure from the U.S. farm lobby to make headway. I recall a lot of calls with lobbyists, with USDA and other parts of the interagency, and of course with the Russians. This was another area where having someone like Larson, who wasn't just incredibly skilled but was known and trusted by everyone, proved to be invaluable. And for me, just a great introduction to how to succeed in interagency negotiations.

And let's be clear: a big piece of the job was clearances. I was now part of the dreaded seventh floor machine. So not only tasking bureaus with papers needed for the under secretary, but also clearing on pretty much anything that had an economic angle. The job of special assistant was very process driven. I can't say I loved that side of it. But I guess I did a good enough job with it. One upside was getting to know a lot of folks really well in the European bureau, the economic bureau, and others. I definitely achieved my goal of better understanding the building and the interagency.

I should also mention travel. Al traveled a lot, particularly in Europe. I would put together his trips, work with the embassies to arrange meetings, and assemble a briefing

book. And then accompany him. As I mentioned, there were a few trips to Brussels. A very memorable trip to Davos. And a complicated trip to Moscow and central Asia. I recall we saw Mikhail Khodorkovsky when he was still working for Yukos. We talked a lot about energy in Moscow and then in Astana, which was slowly becoming the new capital of Kazakhstan. Then a short visit to Uzbekistan which included a surreal visit with President Karimov. Anyway, a whirlwind trip in the middle of winter. Fascinating,

Q: Usually just the two of you on the trip?

DODMAN: Yes. I can't think of any time when it wasn't just the two of us, which says a lot about how self-sufficient Larson was. I can contrast that to my later work as chief of staff for a political appointee in E, who I can assure you never traveled with fewer than two or three staff.

Q: Even assistant secretaries tend to travel with their retinues. Well, it sounds like you were involved in a lot of substance, not just the paper pushing staff aide kind of stuff you didn't like so much in your previous incarnation.

DODMAN: For sure. In particular on EU matters I learned a huge amount from this assignment, which proved to be helpful when I got to Prague, and then obviously in my later assignment in Brussels. The 9/11 context was also very helpful, especially when I served in Baghdad.

The Middle East stuff was, of course, fascinating. I can't suggest that I was deeply involved in planning the invasion, beyond the few things I've already mentioned. Of course, the White House and Pentagon kept plans very close hold. Which meant that even on issues related to post-invasion economic questions like how the oil industry would be managed, Larson and EB (bureau of economic and business affairs) and NEA (bureau of near eastern affairs) had no role or visibility until very late in the process. We'd talk about this in staff meetings—senior folks passing along tidbits of what they had heard and how their attempts to get a seat at the table were rebuffed. A lot of incredulity on the part of the people at State who could have really made a difference. This was a case where even someone like Larson, with his sterling reputation, couldn't break through the cone of silence until the very end. I imagine a lot of this stemmed from Rumsfeld and Cheney not trusting Powell. Just crazy. And so sad, since it goes without saying we could have avoided a lot of mistakes after the invasion if we had had a more inclusive process in advance.

Q: So, even from where you sat near the corridors of top power in the State Department, it seemed to you at the time that we were making a mistake?

DODMAN: I wasn't at all an expert in the region, so I didn't have the basis to judge at the time whether it was right or wrong to try to stop Saddam's alleged WMD (weapons of mass destruction) machine. But I knew and saw enough to know that the way it was being done was a crime. So much secrecy and the willful lack of communication and coordination. Lack of considering and planning for negative scenarios. And the tension,

you know, even though I wasn't in the room in these meetings, we all felt the tension between Powell and the White House and the Pentagon. Just a very weird time.

Q: On a more mundane level, the under secretaries often had to make decisions when two bureaus disagreed with each other. Did you find yourself in the middle of those situations?

DODMAN: You know, I saw that more my second time on the seventh floor. I don't remember it this time so much. Again, that speaks to Larson being, you know, well-respected by everybody, not just in the economic realm but by the regional bureaus as well. He was often able to anticipate and, in my recollection, head off differences like that before they required a split-decision memo. Maybe it was also a reflection of that post-9/11 period where there was a lot of consensus being driven by the White House on the way forward

Tony Wayne was the EB assistant secretary at that point. Tony was not quite as smooth or experienced as Al in the economic realm. But the two of them got along great and made an effective team, as far as I could tell.

Q: Was EB the only bureau that was directly under the under secretary?

DODMAN: Yes. First of all, there was no energy bureau yet so energy was part of EB. And the OES (oceans and international environmental and scientific affairs) bureau, was under, I think we called it G at the time, the global affairs under secretary. Fast forward ten years to the Obama administration and Hilary Clinton as secretary when one of her signature reforms was to expand the remit of E. That brought OES under E, along with the new energy bureau. This made so much more sense. During my time with Larson there was a lot of discussion with the Europeans about an emissions trading scheme to address climate change. This obviously has a lot of impacts on energy, trade, finance, and other things important to E. But OES owned that issue. It really hampered the department's ability to speak with one voice on climate issues. Of course, Larson's great diplomatic skills made it all work, but I could see how this could have been a disaster if you had two political appointees with big egos sitting in the G and E chairs. The Clinton era reforms were really important, when they finally came.

Q: I guess you ended up with the long hours you anticipated?

DODMAN: Yeah. Not as bad as I thought they would be. You know, Al was decent. He would take a lot of work home with him. It was not—I don't recall being that difficult on me personally or on the family. Having a parking pass was great, I got in early and I left late so I kind of missed rush hour, which was good. Especially living a little further out, that parking pass really made a difference. But again, the key was having a sensitive boss like Larson, who didn't insist people wait around in the office just to make him feel important.

Q: Okay, did it make sense for that to be a one-year assignment?

DODMAN: Yes. People can burn out in that role. I saw that more during my later stint overseeing the office as chief of staff. It was a hassle always recruiting and training new staff. But getting in fresh new talent every year had definite advantages

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Q: Today is June 26, 2023. This is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Mike Dodman. When we left off last time it was summer of 2003 and you had just finished your assignment as a special assistant in E. Since it was a one-year assignment you must have been thinking very early on about what would come next. How did that process unfold?

DODMAN: Yeah. I knew, because we'd done that one year in Princeton, I knew we were not going to stay for just for one year in Washington. The kids were now in middle school and upper elementary—continuity was even more important than it was four years earlier. My assumption going in was that I would follow the one-year seventh floor job with a two-year job and then try to move back overseas. But that's not how it unfolded. There were two issues at stake. One was—as I mentioned in my house hunting story—we really weren't thrilled with life in the DC suburbs. We were in Fairfax County for the schools, and they just weren't that great, certainly not when compared with the experience we had had in Warsaw. Those first few months in the fall of 2002—when I was already thinking about bidding—were not great. Both the adjustment to big, industrial suburban public schools and to suburban family life. So, I quickly grew disenchanted with the idea of living another two years in that environment, and then maybe a fourth year with language. The other thing was promotion. I was up for promotion to 01 that fall. I ended up preparing two bid lists depending on the promotion results. Out of all the options available, the job that most attracted me, or rather both Joan and me, was not a Washington job but the pol-econ chief spot in Prague. It would bring us back to a part of the world that we knew well, would give me the leadership position I craved, and get us back to a lifestyle and schools that we knew the whole family would thrive in. But I had to get promoted for that to happen and as luck would have it, I did get promoted. And EUR, after some machinations with other bidders, gave me the job. I seem to recall it was December when I got the handshake, so only four-plus months after we'd arrived from Warsaw.

Now as seems to always be the case, there was a bit of a downer to this happy tale. As I said, the kids' transition to their big new schools hadn't been that smooth. And in December, they were definitely not yet settled. But the older ones, at least, knew by this point how the game was played, and that since I was in a one-year job, there would be an announcement soon about what comes next. This was another one of those moments where I had very serious doubts about whether this Foreign Service career was doing damage to my family. Because when we told them about Prague—emphasizing of course how great it would be to go back to our old stomping grounds after another eighteen months—they all burst into tears. It was the only time that I can recall that many tears

with the announcement of a new posting. So, I felt like shit but you know, we got through it.

Q: How old were the kids then?

DODMAN: One was in middle school and three were in elementary school.

Q: Okay, old enough to matter to them, yes.

DODMAN: Yeah. I just think it had been so much stress trying to fit in at their new schools that the thought of doing it all again so soon was just too much. The good news is this didn't create a long-term crisis. Because they were all genuinely happy with the idea of a smaller school, in a part of the world they knew and a city they had positive memories of. Even going back to the same sports league, so they would get back to Warsaw. And skipping ahead in the story, that's just how it played out. The tour in Prague was fantastic. The school, the community, it was all pretty close to perfect, and the kids, all of us, look back at that tour with real fondness. All's well that ends well. But I really did feel like shit for a while.

Q: Happy ending. I guess we've all been through that multiple times in this kind of career.

DODMAN: You hope that father really does know best.

Q: Yeah. Okay, well, let's talk about language training. You'd been through that, what, twice before already.

DODMAN: Yeah, so it was interesting. First of all, you know, the job on the seventh floor was challenging. Joan wasn't able to work much that year. So, I was happy to have a much more manageable FSI schedule for a year to decompress a bit. And Joan was able to work some more. In the end we were both happy for that second year in Annandale, as we settled into a routine. So, the year at FSI was all good. Now, unfortunately FSI wasn't nimble enough to offer a Czech program for someone like me, who at this point had a four/four in a very similar language, so I knew I would be doing the full nine-month language class. Which again, was fine from a family perspective, but didn't make great sense in terms of government resources. They made the best of the situation by pairing me with a student who, conveniently, was just coming out of Bratislava and had fluent Slovak. Which meant two of us managed to butcher the languages that we knew best and muddle through with some form of passable Czech. I think I left with a three-plus/three-plus. As with my two previous language stints, the best part was getting to spend time with the Czech instructors and really emerge with a great understanding of the country.

So, it was a fine year. And then it was summer of 2004 and we were ready to move again.

Q: Okay. So, off you go. Maybe start, as usual, by describing the embassy in Prague and how you fit in.

DODMAN: I ran a combined section of political and econ. I'd never served in and certainly not supervised a combined section. But as you could probably guess from some of my comments about the Warsaw tours, I was a fan of having the two sections together. I was very happy to be doing something that was not a straight economic job. The section was big. It varied some over the time I was there, but we were around eight-to-ten American officers, one OMS (Office Management Specialist) and four FSNs.

Q: Wow, it was a big section.

DODMAN: Yeah. And it seemed to always be supplemented by interns, Civil Service officers on detail and others. I don't know exactly the history of the section, but I'm sure that joining NATO in '99 and the EU in 2004 led to some increased staff. In particular with the EU membership, we had a whole new range of issues—Europe-wide issues—to lobby the Czechs on.

So, yes, it was a big management opportunity. Physically, the embassy in Prague is a unique place. It's an old palace that was never meant to be an office building, certainly not one that had to be divided into CAA (controlled access area) and non-CAA spaces. It's a challenging place to work because everything is spread out and you're constantly running up and down stairs. Truly, it's easy to get lost in there. On the other hand, of course, it's a fascinating place with a ton of history. And it's in a great location, very close to everything. Since we were now in the post-9/11 era, it's worth pointing out that security was a challenge since the place had literally zero setbacks. Thanks to creativity and great collaboration with the Czechs, our security folks have made it work for the last twenty-plus years.

Q: Who was your ambassador?

DODMAN: I served under two ambassadors, both political appointees. The first was a guy named Bill Cabaniss, a former Alabama state senator, I believe, and a businessman. Very much the Southern gentleman, just a super, super guy. We got along great. He'd been there maybe a year already when I arrived. I really respected Cabaniss. He took the role seriously. He listened and was very respectful of the talent in the embassy. The Czechs enjoyed him and he was quite effective.

After two years there he was replaced by Rick Graber, who had been the chairman of the Republican Party of Wisconsin, I believe. He was a lawyer by training, much younger than Cabaniss. In fact, we have kids the same age, so we ended up becoming good friends with Rick and his wife, Alex. He was also great to work for, also took the job seriously and always sought out the views of the embassy team. This was my first experience working for political appointees, and I guess I really lucked out. They were two super guys who ran the embassy well and who to this day I consider good friends and colleagues.

Q: And how about the rest of the embassy? Were there a lot of other agencies also having offices in Prague? Was Prague already kind of the place to be in central Europe?

DODMAN: Definitely. This was before the Czechs got into the visa waiver program so we had a very large consular section. Full DoD operation. FCS (foreign commercial service) had a country-specific office with two American officers, which was a lot for a mid-sized country. Actually, the second officer position was eliminated while I was there. USAID was long gone. FBI was expanding their overseas presence at this time and had just opened their Prague office. Some of these folks covered Slovakia as well

But the other really important piece of the puzzle for the U.S. government was Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which has been headquartered in Prague since Václav Havel invited the stations to move there from Munich in the mid-90s. These U.S.-funded broadcasters are not under chief of mission authority, so were not part of the embassy and didn't sit on country team. But the mission worked closely with RFE/RL, especially on security issues. Washington was anxious for them to move into a more secure building than where they had been—which was the old federal parliament building in the very center of the city. Basically, they needed to find a plot of land to build a building that met current embassy standards in terms of setback and the rest. I spent a lot of time engaging on this during the tour, and happily by the time I left the new building was under construction. It was really satisfying when I came back last year to see not only how at home RFE/RL was in that new building, but also how much stronger the collaboration was between the broadcasters and the Czech government. A really positive story.

Q: How was your section structured under you?

DODMAN: There was a deputy who was also the senior political officer. On the political side there were probably three, four 03 and 04 officers doing the typical pol portfolios: pol-mil, external political relations, human rights. As I said, there was an active effort underway when I arrived to make sure the section was structured to deal with EU issues. On the econ side there was another 02 officer in charge, and one or two more junior officers handling all the economic, science and other pieces. There were two FSNs handling political issues and two economic. If I remember right, two of the positions in the section were rotational positions of the sort I had had in Warsaw, so a junior officer doing a year in consular followed by a year with us. So always a lot of turnover and training.

Q: In a section like that did you keep the two portfolios pretty much divided? I mean, would it have been like an embassy that had a political section and an economic section and you were sort of like the mini-DCM over two separate structures?

DODMAN: Pretty much. But there are always issues that don't fall cleanly into one side or the other, so having the flexibility to move things around was helpful. But truthfully, the greatest benefit was probably that I could deal with all the pol and econ issues whenever I went to the foreign ministry or prime minister's office. It took away from my

daily workflow the constant coordination or deconflicting of issues with another counselor.

Q: So, this was a three-year assignment?

DODMAN: Well, that's an interesting story. In 2002, when I got this assignment, the department had decided to switch the standard tour length from three to four years. I think this was largely a cost-saving measure, trying to reduce the number of PCS moves. So, I was actually paneled to Prague for a four-year tour. Which was perfect for us, since that would get our oldest through high school there. I was pretty confident Prague was going to be a great tour both professionally and for the family, so had no hesitation or concern about this new policy.

Peter, you may not remember this change in policy, since it was extremely short lived. By 2003 we were ramping up staffing in Iraq and Afghanistan. I guess HR decided that locking people into four-year tours would make it harder to staff up those posts. So, I'm pretty sure that by the time the 2003 bid cycle started, everything was back to three years. At some point I was given the option to have my tour shortened from four to three years. Happily, it wasn't mandatory, and I stuck with the initial assignment. Very happily. In fact, if we hadn't lucked out with the timing of that short-lived policy, I'm sure we would have tried to extend in Prague for a fourth year. But that would have been denied, since extensions at non-hardship posts also became impossible once the Iraq/Afghanistan staffing crunch kicked in. So, it worked out well, since it was a great tour and post.

Q: What were the major issues you were working on?

DODMAN: Lots. Let's start with EU accession. The Czechs and their neighbors entered the EU in the spring, right before I started in Prague. Like the Czechs and the EU more broadly, the USG had to change how we dealt with the EU and the new member states. We had to find a new rhythm to our engagement with the MFA, and more broadly in Prague, and we needed to develop working relationships with our mission to the EU in Brussels and the EU folks at State. In what could have been a real disaster for us, the 03 job that was to be the lead on all these EU issues was given to a first-tour officer—this was part of the effort to find jobs for all the new hiring being done under Colin Powell. Luckily, we got a very sharp and energetic officer who I worked closely with to mentor and guide her in setting up all these new partnerships. And I think it all worked well. We developed a very effective dialogue with the MFA. The Czechs were—and still are—somewhat Euro-sceptic. But they had a vote and wanted to use it wisely, and they were always open to hearing our views on EU-wide issues.

Pol-mil issues were probably the next big bundle of issues. The Czechs were still adjusting to being NATO allies, and we were still working to help with the process. We had a very active State partnership program between the Czech military and the national guards of Texas and Nebraska—two states with a lot of Czech-Americans. That program continues to exist to this day, now thirty years old, and it really helped advance the

Czechs along the way to becoming fully NATO-compatible. We'll talk about that more when we get to present day Ukraine.

But the most significant pol-mil issue during my time was a bilateral one. The Bush administration decided that we needed to expand our missile defense network to counter potential Iranian attacks, and somehow the perfect place to locate these assets was in central Europe. The missiles themselves were to be placed in Poland, and we wanted the Czechs to house a missile defense radar. This was controversial for a whole bunch of reasons. The whole missile defense program had of course been controversial ever since Reagan started it. There were questions of how serious the threat was from Iran. Some Czechs—and certainly the Poles—saw the bigger missile threat emanating from Russia, so really didn't spend too much time debating how real the Iranian threat was. Certainly Putin always thought this system was aimed at him, not Iran. Then within the Czech Republic there was a lot of concern about having American troops—or any foreign troops—on their soil. Then a bunch of environmental questions about the radar itself. And a lot of internal Czech debate between the right and the left. So, yeah, a complex issue. The process of winning government and public support, and then negotiating and getting through parliament a status of forces agreement, completely dominated the embassy and me for most of the second half of my tour. Happily, the government at the time was center-right and liked the idea of anything that brought our two militaries closer together.

So just skipping ahead: we negotiated the agreements and worked closely with both the Czech government and Washington to come up with compromises that recognized that the Czech public, and large parts of parliament, had real concerns about this project. In the end we got it passed. By the time I left in 2008, it looked like everything was moving forward. Sadly, soon after President Obama took office, he pulled the plug on the project. So, no radar and no U.S. troops in the Czech Republic. We can second guess that decision today in light of Putin's aggressiveness. But the real issue in 2009 was the way this was handled. Typical: no advance warning; a phone call at the eleventh hour. The Czech government had toiled mightily to get this done and was pissed. Fifteen years later, when I went back to Prague as chargé, that bitter taste was still real. But more on that later.

Okay, more of the laundry list. Lots of domestic political reporting. I didn't do much of the reporting myself, since we had a superb FSN following these issues and several great pol officers. But I enjoyed following the ins and outs in ways I hadn't done in previous jobs.

One of the great things about working in Prague was continuing to engage with Václav Havel. He was no longer the president of the Czech Republic by the time I got here, but the ambassador saw him often, and of course all of our visitors wanted to meet him. I developed a good relationship with his office, and got to sit in on a few meetings with him. A real treat.

Now working with his replacement wasn't nearly as fun. In 2003, Václav Klaus—the former finance minister who I had really come to dislike when I was working on

Czechoslovak issues back in 1991-92—took over as president. My opinion of him never changed. I had to deal with his people at the Prague Castle all the time, particularly related to CODELs and presidential visits. Not a positive experience overall. But I managed it well, as some of the FSNs were kind enough to remind me when I went back last year as chargé.

I never expected to become an expert on Cuban affairs serving in Prague, but the Czechs had developed a niche of expertise on Cuba, building off their own fight against communism. They were very engaged supporting human rights groups there, and we worked closely with both government and NGOs on this.

You can see I focused heavily on the political issues. Of course there were big economic issues. I had made a conscious decision not to micromanage the economic section, and I think I succeeded at that. Frankly, the political issues ended up being the more complicated ones and the area where the front office really wanted my support. So those end up being the issues where I spent the most time, and the ones I remember best.

Q: Did you enjoy the political work as much as the economic work you'd done up to that time?

DODMAN: I did. I loved it. I should say I loved working with the Czechs. So, here's another interesting anecdote. I worried about coming to Prague after two very happy tours in Poland because the Czechs—and this goes without saying—but the Czechs are not the Poles. The Poles have such a fascinating and sad history and as a county they can be incredibly emotional, whether it's pro-American or anti-Russian. Now the Czechs obviously have their own history, and have very strong opinions, even if they are a little less passionate, more Germanic in their approach. But you only have to look at the city of Prague to realize how different their World War II experience was from the Poles'. As I was preparing to come to Prague, I was worried about whether I would be able to accept the Czechs for who they were, or would I be constantly comparing them to the Poles. I'm very happy to report that I got over that quickly after arriving and discovering that Czech history is also very palpable here. The Czechs resisted Hitler and communism and Russian hegemony and such in their own way. Just because their history isn't quite as tragic as Poland's, it is real and impressive and fascinating. So, I quickly put aside any comparisons and came to accept the Czechs for who they are.

And I loved working with the Czechs. And honestly, working with them in a Republican administration was a good thing. The Cuba stuff was a perfect example of why. I really feel like we built so much with the Czechs during that early period of NATO and EU membership. I say that in part based on the experience of coming back here last year after the Ukraine invasion. The shared values we have, the shared experiences over the last twenty years—they all made the Czech-U.S. collaboration in 2022 very quick and effective. But we'll get to that later.

Q: Right. And I should just say for the record that you are sitting in Prague as we do this interview, since you have used the word "here" a few times. So, were the Czechs part of the coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq?

DODMAN: They were. If you go back to the Rumsfeld dichotomy of old and new Europe, the Czechs were definitely new Europe. They weren't as active as the poles, but the Czechs did their part. They had a PRT (provincial reconstruction team) in Afghanistan in Logar province. One highlight of my tour here was accompanying the chairman of the general staff, the Czech CHOD, to Afghanistan when he went to see the Czech troops and the Czech-led PRT. I believe that would have been the spring of 2008. I went along as a kind of liaison officer. We flew on a Czech military plane and spent maybe three days there. They had a medical team at the airport in Kabul, and liaison staff at the big base at Bagram. Then both military and civilians in Logar. We visited all three. Really, I had little to do since the U.S. military handled all the logistics. Frankly my only significant contribution was during a refueling stop in Turkey where there was no U.S. support and where the Turks somehow didn't realize that they had a four-star VIP at this little airbase. So, I dusted off my Turkish language skills and said the magic words that got them to produce a VIP lounge and some tea very quickly.

Q: You had talked about one of your big issues in a previous post, I can't recall whether it was Poland or Turkey, being the sale of F-16s. Were there big military sales issues like that in the Czech Republic while you were there?

DODMAN: I'm sure there were, but nothing comes immediately to mind. I recall some advocacy on behalf of Boeing, but I think that was for commercial aircraft. Although that wasn't unique to Prague—I had advocated for Boeing, countering Airbus lobbying, in every assignment to that point. But on the military side, I'm sure there were major procurements going on—since NATO modernization was and remains a big deal—but nothing that took on the level of prominence of the F-16 deal in Poland. Or the F-35 deal here that we'll talk about when we get up to last year.

Q: You haven't mentioned parliament. Did you deal much with it?

DODMAN: Yes. Both houses of the Czech Parliament are located near the embassy, which made it very easy to engage them very often. For me this was mainly around the missile defense agreements and working with the leadership and protocol offices of the two chambers on VIP visits.

That being said, the place where I spent far and away the most time was the foreign ministry. Which of course was new for me—my visits to the MFA on previous tours had been few and far between. In Prague I think I was there a couple times every week. I felt very much at home there. And it was great to be back here as chargé last year and have the opportunity to again spend a lot of time in that building. I made some great friends, many of whom are now in leadership positions. Really, it was only in coming back here to work again after fifteen years that I realized how impactful the personal and professional contacts were that I formed over those four years.

Q: So, how was life in Prague in general?

DODMAN: Fantastic. As you can tell by my enthusiasm about this tour—and the fact that I'm sitting in Prague right now—we all loved it here. Traditionally the pol-econ counselor lived in an apartment in the ambassador's residence—which, if you've never seen it, is one of the crown jewels among residences. But that apartment was too small for my family, and frankly I found the idea of living that close to the ambassador a little weird. We lived out by the school. It was a community of detached houses that was built in the '90s together with the new International School campus. We had a fenced yard, two-car garage—probably the most "American" house we lived in during our career. The best part: it was literally right next to the school. Just steps away from the main gate. That's one of the reasons this turned into such a great tour for the whole family. The school was excellent and quickly became the center of everyone's life.

Obviously this house wasn't in the center of the city. Very much on the edge, in an area with a suburban feel. But in a good way. Quiet and plenty of room for the kids to play outside. The community was surrounded by forests and we could take long walks or bike rides in any direction. But being a good European city, public transportation was excellent and reliable, so we were very connected to all the beauty that awaited in the center of town.

Prague was the only posting we had where our social network was much more school-focused than embassy-focused. Of course there was overlap between the two. But our best friends from Prague were expats working in the private sector and mostly living in the same neighborhood, to be close to the school.

So, that was the personal side of it. Of course, Prague is a gorgeous city. We loved exploring it. Our kids really came of age in Prague and all learned to travel on the buses and metro independently. We traveled a lot in the country as a family, and I traveled a good bit for work. We had a good friend from college stationed in Bratislava so we got down there often. We also got to Germany regularly, and loved having a military commissary just a couple hours away. So, yeah, just a great place to live.

Q: Did you do official entertaining at home?

DODMAN: Very rarely. Our neighborhood wasn't that convenient for a lot of folks. And while the house was spacious enough for us, I wouldn't call it representational. But that was all just fine, because we didn't need to use our house. The ambassador's residence was the place to entertain because everybody knew it and loved coming there, it was very centrally located, and it had a great staff. Both ambassadors were very open to my section or others doing events there. So, between that and a lot of meals in restaurants, there was no need to do much rep at home.

Q: Lots of personal visitors, I imagine.

DODMAN: Oh, yeah. We had many visitors here, family, friends. Unfortunately, we didn't have a guest room. But one of the kids would always give up their room when my parents or someone came.

Speaking of house guests, one of the big parts of our life was school sports. Our kids seemed to always be going off to tournaments in Moscow or Turkey or Romania. And of course, we had to house kids from those schools when it was Prague's turn to host. I really can't recall where we ended up squeezing these house guests in. But we did, and we did it gladly, since that was such a big part of our overseas life. When there was a tournament at ISP (International School of Prague), that became our entire weekend. Because we lived so close, we would be back and forth to the school all day, running home when something was needed for the booster sale or whatever. And our kids really got to see some cool stuff. For some reason, it seemed like Romania was the place they travelled the most. I've never been to Bucharest, but I think each of my kids has. Just a really cool part of our life in Prague, as it was in Warsaw and would be in Brussels.

Q: I'm glad you talked about that because it's, you know, it's a key experience that so many of us have had and that I don't think it's mentioned very often in these interviews.

DODMAN: Let me just go on a bit more about family life. Skipping ahead a little bit here, most of my family ended up spending a fifth year in Prague because I went to Baghdad out of here. So, for everyone but the oldest, those five years in Prague were the longest they lived anywhere growing up. With the great school and tight-knit community, it all just worked incredibly well. As I said, these were my kids' formative years, particularly for the two who graduated there. I mention this all because I spend a lot of time talking with people interested in the Foreign Service. I always make it a point to stress how difficult the career can be for families—spouses who can't work, and kids who have to be uprooted so often. But sometimes it does all just come together. We had great tours in Ankara and Warsaw. But Prague is just where it all clicked. You know, I would guess that one of your questions in this interview will *not* be "What was your favorite tour?" But of course, people ask me that question constantly. And my answer—diplomatically, but truthfully—is that every tour was great in its own way, given where I was in my career progression and where we were as a family. All true. But certainly from a family perspective, Prague was the favorite. And I'm sure we'll come back to that some more when we talk about my chargé stint.

Q: Okay, good. Anything else you want to say about Prague at this point?

DODMAN: Let me take a look at what I jotted down here. Yeah, there are a couple other experiences from these years that proved important as I moved up. One positive piece of being in a leadership role was the really strong and broad partnership I developed with all other elements of the embassy. But particularly with public affairs. I worked closely with both the press and cultural sides and was able to get out to do a lot of speaking engagements. This was new to me, and something that became much more prominent in later assignments, so I'm really grateful for all the opportunities I got in Prague.

One of the coolest PD (public diplomacy) events was not something the embassy organized, but one we served as the backdrop for. Every May, Czechs celebrate the liberation of the western part of the country by Patton's troops—something that couldn't be celebrated or even acknowledged during the forty years of communist rule. There are dozens—maybe hundreds—of old American jeeps and ambulances that reenactors have kept functioning, and every May a bunch of them gather in front of our embassy for a big party before driving to Plzen in western Bohemia where the official celebrations take place. There is usually a band and the police shut the street so everyone can dance and celebrate this important part of our joint history that was suppressed for so long. Being back as chargé for this last year was just such a thrill—the party is still going strong 35 years after communism. And so are those jeeps.

I haven't talked too much about consular issues since we discussed my first tour, but I actually did engage on this a fair bit in Prague. Not visa cases per se, but getting the Czech Republic into the visa waiver program. It was a very, very long push and a very high priority for the Czechs. One of the keys to success was using the many CODELs that came through here to constantly make the case about how important visa waiver was for the Czechs, how allied we were on things like Iraq and Afghanistan, Cuba and all the rest. It finally came to fruition at some point in that tour. Very satisfying.

I mentioned we had lots of visits in Prague. The biggest for me was President Bush's visit in June 2007. Lucky me: I was tapped to be overall control officer. Having done a bunch of previous presidential visits, and knowing the local landscape as well as I did by this point, I figured I could handle this all pretty easily. Big miscalculation. Those were some of the worst days—or rather weeks—I spent in Prague. With my main frustrations coming from the U.S. side. But we got through it, and it ended up a very positive and productive visit. And I ended up better equipped to manage big egos.

Finally, I got to spend a lot of time as acting DCM in Prague. A lot. I would guess that over my four years there, I spent one full year combined as acting DCM. Once for six months when the DCM went off to Iraq to run a PRT, and then for several shorter stints to fill other gaps. Certainly some time as chargé, although never for an extended period. So, in addition to what I think was a great education and experience running a big section and coordinating across the country team, I got to know the front office from the inside. I never was assigned as a DCM despite trying several times. But I had such a rich experience doing it in Prague that I felt very confident when I eventually became ambassador that I knew and truly appreciated the challenges of being a DCM.

Q: Did you enjoy that management experience? You've been pretty hands-on up until this time.

DODMAN: I did. I mean, I enjoyed the management experience in the pol-econ section immensely. It was exactly what I wanted in terms of a big section and a meaty bilateral relationship.

I can't get quite so excited about the acting DCM-ships. It helped that I really liked and respected the two ambassadors. I was very happy to work even more closely with them, to give them my advice, and to keep problems off their plate. I'm flattered they kept asking me to come back. Although my happiest days were always when I could go back to my real office and leave some of those management headaches behind. But I already knew the truth of the saying: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. While Prague was generally a happy and well-functioning post, of course you had the exceptions. I had my first and only EEO (equal employment opportunity) complaint filed against me for an alleged hostile work environment while acting DCM—which of course amounted to nothing other than a lot of paperwork. That was probably the most painful of the personnel challenges, but there were others. Working through them helped me become a better boss and manager, so I'm grateful I had so much time to understand just how difficult the DCM's job is.

Q: Yeah. Absolutely. Okay, well, it sounds like a dream tour and I'm glad you enjoyed it. Let me end this for today.

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Q: Good morning. Today is July 10, 2023. This is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Mike Dodman. Good morning, Mike. And I should add for the record that you are still in Prague as we record this interview. When we left off last time it was 2008 and you had finished your assignment as pol-econ chief in Prague. As always in the Foreign Service, as you get to the end of that you're thinking ahead as to what comes next. So, why don't you talk about that a little bit.

DODMAN: So, what came next for me was Baghdad. Several reasons for that. The most significant was family-focused, as so much of my bidding to this point had been. You'll recall when I talked earlier about how happy I was to get Prague as a four-year tour, which got our oldest through high school. Well, we went off to Prague well aware that the second oldest was just a year behind her brother, so we were hoping all along we could find a way to extend there. The opportunity for extensions went away as staffing needs in Iraq and Afghanistan grew. But that also opened a new window that I took advantage of. To encourage bidding on these war zone posts, the department decided to let families remain at their current post while the officer TDYed (went on temporary duty) to Baghdad or Kabul.

But beyond this tactical maneuver, I also was ready to get out of EUR. I can't say I was bored with European issues, but I definitely felt like I was stuck in a rut in terms of the bureau. And knew I needed some greater regional diversity under my belt. Plus, I liked the idea of being somewhere important, somewhere truly in the headlines.

In the end, I only pursued Baghdad. The main reason was the same as so many of my previous bidding strategies: following the path of least resistance. I knew the economic chief there in 2007: Ambassador Charlie Ries, who had been in charge of EU issues in EUR when I was working that portfolio in E, was filling sort of an uber econ minister position, coordinating all U.S. assistance and economic policy. At some point in 2007 I

reached out to Charlie to talk about the possibility of pursuing the economic counselor job. He must have been very convincing about why Baghdad would be the best place to go and why I'd be a good fit for it. I don't recall spending any time pursuing jobs in Kabul or Pakistan.

The economic counselor in Baghdad was an MC (minister counselor)-graded position. I was an 01, so it was a double stretch. That was definitely an attraction. Also, Ryan Crocker was the ambassador and the thought of working for that legendary FSO was a major plus. And I knew and liked Pat Butenis, the DCM, with whom I had worked in Warsaw a few years earlier. So, it definitely made a lot of sense to choose Baghdad: a good and challenging job, working for people I knew or at least highly respected, and it solved the problem of our daughter's senior year. Plus gave the rest of the family a bonus year in a place they loved. I got the job without too much stress, and in the summer of 2008 I got ready to leave my family and start a year in Baghdad's Green Zone.

Q: Okay. Before we get there, was that a time when serving in one of those posts was seen as necessary for career advancement as well?

DODMAN: Well, I don't know that you could call it necessary. But it was definitely strongly encouraged. Now, this wasn't my experience—sadly—but a couple years prior to this, serving in a post like that often led to very rapid promotion. That was one way people were being rewarded, along with good onward assignments and other things. At some point there was talk of revising the promotion precepts to make extreme hardship service a requirement to get into the senior ranks—I can't recall if that was in place at this point, or even if it ever got put into place. There were so many proposals like that being bandied about. But there is no question: service at these priority staffing posts, as they were called at one point, was heavily, heavily encouraged. And incentivized. High differentials, extra R&R travel, obviously the benefit of keeping the family at the previous post. I didn't need my arm to be twisted too much. Just skipping to the end: I had no regrets about the tour. It was challenging but it was, you know, it was worth doing and I learned a lot from it.

Q: And it was a one-year tour from the summer of 2008 to the summer of 2009?

DODMAN: Yup. I arrived in August of 2008 via various training back in Washington: crash and bang, a class on leadership at high-threat posts, and some Iraq-specific orientation. Plus lots of consultations. This being my first time in the Middle East or, for that matter, in an oil-producing country, which was a big part of the economic portfolio.

Q: Okay. You mentioned crash and bang. Just for the historians who are non-State Department who might be perusing this at some future decade, maybe you can say a couple of words about what that is.

DODMAN: So, in the post-9/11 era, as we were sending more and more civilians into war zones and, frankly, as we all realized that terrorism can be a threat anywhere, the department and specifically DS (the diplomatic security bureau) started to train personnel

better before deploying. There were some FSI initiatives, like the leadership class I took. But the biggest and best-known program was a week-long security class run by DS and known popularly as "crash and bang." The formal name, at least currently, is FACT or the foreign affairs counter threat course. When I took it in 2008, and when I took it again in 2017, it was offered at a racecourse in West Virginia where you were given hands-on, very hands-on, training in defensive driving, weapons and explosives familiarization, mass casualty medical training, stuff like that.

Obviously, this was nowhere near as intense as the training DS agents received. This was just meant to be a familiarization for diplomats to both know how to detect and avoid dangerous situations, and how to respond if you end up in such a situation. But the highlight of the class was that you actually got to get in a junker car and ram another car at a high speed to move it out of the way. That's where the name came from, and it was quite the adrenaline rush.

As I said, I took crash and bang twice, both times in West Virginia. DS has since opened up their own training center in southern Virginia. I actually worked as a role player for FACT down there for a little while after I retired, so I got to see how much the class has evolved. I think it was one of the smarter decisions that the State Department made in putting that class together and it has only gotten better with time.

Q: And physically how did you get to Baghdad? Were there airlines going in that we used by that time?

DODMAN: I believe there were airlines flying at that point, but we didn't use them. The only way USG personnel could get in and out of Baghdad was via military aircraft. Mainly C-17s. You flew in from either Jordan or Kuwait. I always went through Jordan so I can't talk about the Kuwait option. So, you flew commercial to Amman, got put up in a hotel for a night, then got driven early in the morning to a military base where you sat and waited, sometimes for many hours, for your eventual flight.

I think you were allowed to take two large suitcases and those were all strapped into a pallet and loaded into the back of the C-17. You flew into the Baghdad airport, which we still controlled in 2008. This was the period when the road between the airport and the Green Zone—which the military called Route Irish—was one of the most dangerous places in the country. I was never on that road. Every trip in or out began or ended with a helicopter flight between the Green Zone and the airport. So, a lot of steps to get there, with a lot of waiting around for our military colleagues to shuttle us through these steps.

Q: Okay. I do want to start as I usually do with the structure of the embassy but let me start instead with your first impressions of Iraq at that point.

DODMAN: So, arriving in Iraq in August of 2008 I'd say my first impression was one of heat. It was just ridiculously hot. But of course, desert heat, which I would come to know and appreciate.

As we'll surely talk about more, it's debatable how much of that year I spent in Iraq per se as opposed to in an American bubble. But certainly all this transportation I was talking about and the first few days actually in country were—well, other than looking at the city from the helo—they were all very much inside this bubble. So, my earliest impressions were of the logistical feats it took to get people in and out and to house and feed them. This was all really impressive. The embassy comprised well over a thousand direct hire employees, plus many times that number working for various support contractors. To put it mildly, there were a lot of moving pieces. This was 2008 so five years after the invasion, and we'd managed to work a lot of the kinks out and regularize things. And as we'll talk about the embassy itself became much more regularized over the year that I was there.

The country itself, you know, my first impressions of it were literally flying in a helicopter over the city, so it looked rather underdeveloped, it looked bifurcated, you could see walls, you know, very clearly walls dividing neighborhoods, T-walls everywhere. And then suddenly you're in this protected enclave of the Green Zone. And it really was green, since Saddam had spared no expense. And being right next to the river I had the sense that it was a little cooler.

Q: And to set the context as well, what was the status of the war at that point? What was happening?

DODMAN: I mean, the war was still very much going on. We were definitely into the George Bush surge phase. This was the end of the Bush administration. We had set up the provincial reconstruction teams throughout Iraq and Afghanistan to try to have a greater direct impact on the local population, in other words get the military and the civilian components out of the capitals to work more closely with local authorities to try to promote economic development, democracy and human rights.

Fighting was still happening. I was never particularly focused on the military side of it so I can't talk about where any engagements were. But to set the context, Ryan Crocker was the ambassador and Petraeus was the commanding general at that time. Petraeus was very much involved in his counterinsurgency efforts that were his hallmark during his various tours there. Petraeus left soon after I arrived and was replaced by Ray Odierno. He worked very closely with Crocker until Crocker left towards the end of my tour.

The major bilateral initiative underway was negotiation of a status of forces agreement that would transition us from the military occupation that we'd had since the invasion and basically give the running of the country back to the Iraqis, but with the ability for limited U.S. forces to stay on.

Q: And in terms of administration then was it actually the Iraqi government who was in charge of administering the country or was it still the transitional authority?

DODMAN: The transitional authority was gone. That was a pretty short-lived phenomenon. There was an Iraqi parliament and government in place that we dealt with.

But the United States was still calling the shots on many matters, and attempting to safeguard the country. The transition from full U.S. control to full Iraqi control was a long one, and it definitely advanced during the year I was there. For instance, in January 2009, control of the Green Zone, in terms of, you know, manning the checkpoints and deciding who got in, was transferred from U.S. to Iraqi forces. The SOFA agreement was part of this process.

Q: Okay. Moving back to the embassy, Crocker was ambassador. At various times we had multiple ambassadors in Iraq. Was that still the case?

DODMAN: Yes. To use a technical term, the embassy structure was weird. But again, this was part of the evolution from the transition authority and full military domination to a more normal bilateral relationship, which included a more normal embassy. Crocker was a big part of this process. In the two or three years he was there, the mission came to resemble an embassy of sorts, although as I said, still weird.

At the time I arrived in the summer of 2008, Crocker had a single DCM: Pat Butenis, who was a former COM herself. I mentioned Charlie Ries, also a former ambassador who coordinated all economic policy and assistance. That position was an innovation from Crocker, and I'm sure he had to use a lot of his personal capital to get USAID and the other agencies to agree to report to Ries. Towards the end of my tour, under the next ambassador, this position would be elevated into a second DCM position. In terms of the rest of the embassy you had all the normal offices and agencies, just all much bigger than I'd seen anywhere. You had a big pol-mil section, but there was also basically a second front office that the commanding general—Petraeus—used when he was in the Green Zone. We had a strategic planning office, which gave us some of the military's ability to do reports and conferences. And a huge office to manage all the PRTs around the country. Oh, and one of the weirdest things was a State Department-run assistance office that did major construction projects around the country, but was completely separate from USAID. That little piece of weirdness was a big reason why the Ries position was needed.

Q: And what was the embassy's footprint and physical structure?

DODMAN: When I arrived, the embassy was still housed in Saddam's old palace at the center of the Green Zone. This added to the weirdness of the place. Not so much the lack of functionality, but more the strange murals painted everywhere and bathrooms with gold fixtures.

Behind the palace, Saddam's beautiful pool was still functional. There were some lovely gardens, but the rear was mostly filled with trailers where people had been living. Most of these were surrounded by sandbags, but the tops were still exposed to incoming mortar fire. Nearby there was a huge dining hall—a DFAC in military-speak—where we took all our meals.

But everything I've just described was in the process of being shut down. We had pretty much completed the massive new embassy compound inside the Green Zone, maybe a mile from Saddam's palace. Most everyone had already moved from those trailers into more comfortable and secure apartments on the compound, and I was able to move in there straight away. We commuted to the old palace for a few months until the chancery and other office buildings opened in January.

Q: Did we turn the palace back to the Iraqis at that point?

DODMAN: That's a great question. I assume so, but I'm not sure. I remember debate about turning it into a museum. But that's something we would have left to the Iraqis to decide.

Q: And your living conditions at the embassy? Presumably you're not in trailers anymore?

DODMAN: Happily, no. Probably the largest part of this massive compound was six—I think—multistory apartment blocks. They were quite functional, although I wonder what state they are in fifteen years later. Luckily for me, I was senior enough that I got my own apartment—and in fact it was a corner unit that was significantly larger than the standard apartments. Unfortunately for most everyone else, all of the standard one-bedroom apartments had been divided into two, with the living room turned into a second bedroom, so that we could house twice as many people. Obviously, the place was designed pre-surge.

As for my apartment, I don't want to suggest that it was a representational space, because it was hard to think of entertaining on a secure compound like that. But I did a lot of internal entertaining, hosting dinners for my staff and regular parties that military and other colleagues attended. I put the space to good use. The A/C worked; the bullet-proof glass worked. People felt much more secure than they had in the trailers, and it was all part of making the place a little more normal.

Q: Okay. Great. Well, I think it's time to move onto the economic section, what you actually did while you were there.

DODMAN: Right. So to start, like everything else in Baghdad, the section was huge. Probably around twenty people, although it's impossible to give an actual number since things were in flux the entire time. We had many flavors of personnel in the section and reporting to me. As a result of the normalization under Crocker and the surge in staffing, the bulk of the staff was Foreign Service personnel. But I had lots of contractors under various hiring mechanisms. Some of these had been in country since the immediate aftermath of the invasion, and had been slotted into various sections as the embassy took shape. Frankly, a lot of these folks were more trouble than they were worth. Both because they didn't take well to being in an operating environment where they couldn't do whatever they wanted. But also because—to put it simply—their time had passed. Finding ways to terminate these contracts was a big part of my year.

I don't recall having any military under my authority, but we did work very closely with the civil affairs folks at military headquarters. Worked quite well, actually. These were largely reservists and didn't seem to chafe as much as some of the career military did to being told to follow the embassy's lead.

Substantively, the overriding issue in econ was the same as everywhere else: continue the transition to Iraqi sovereignty. And of course, make sure that the country had a functioning economy that could provide for its people. I'll start out talking about oil, since that was so important to the overall economy and transition. And, of course, also important for American economic interests in Iraq. We definitely didn't invade Iraq to take over the oil. But there's no denying that American firms had an interest in the future of the sector.

The sector had been heavily damaged during the war. But perhaps even worse, Saddam's decades of mismanagement meant that there were very few Iraqis around who had either the technical skills or the experience working with western oil firms to manage this transition. The senior folks I met at the oil ministry and the state petroleum company were all impressive. Unfortunately, they were all in their seventies or eighties. So, our efforts in those days were focused on training staff, and in particular preparing the country to welcome international oil firms back to Iraq. It was these firms who would have the expertise to get the fields back into production and do the necessary training of the Iraqis. We also provided a lot of advice on logistics, particularly upgrading and safeguarding the main oil export platforms.

During the year that I was there the biggest event on the econ side was the first auction to bring foreign companies in to run the oilfields. I remember it was in the Al Rasheed hotel—the only hotel in the Green Zone where foreigners would stay, and the only one with decent conference facilities. The auction was designed to be as transparent as possible. There was literally a glass box where the company reps deposited their bids. Exxon and I think a few other U.S. firms were successful. I think the general impression was this had been a well-run process, and a key step to get the economy back on track.

That leads me to another oil-related story. I did get to travel a good bit outside of the city. That was possible given the network of bases and PRTs throughout the country, supported by a contract with helicopters to transport us. My best visits were to Basra, which is on the coast right near Kuwait. Most of the oil fields are in the south, and the main export terminal is based in Basra. We had put a lot of time and money into helping the Iraqis build a new offshore terminal. I got to travel out to this terminal several miles offshore and see it as it was just about to go into full operation. Very cool.

There was also an interesting oil situation in the north of the country. The Kurds—who basically ran an autonomous government in the north—had smaller but still significant fields. The Kurds were very forward leaning in terms of offering their fields directly to western companies. This presented a policy dilemma for us. We were working to get legislation in place that would permit the auction I talked about earlier. The Kurds didn't

want to wait for national legislation. They contacted firms—including some small U.S. firms—directly and tried to conclude deals on their own, without any role for the oil ministry or national parliament. We were put in the awkward position of telling the Kurds—who were in most cases our closest partners in the country—and U.S. companies that we did not support these contracts. I recall all kinds of congressional inquiries about, you know, why were we not supporting U.S. companies, why were we not supporting the brave Kurds who were trying to do all these great things and were more agile, more entrepreneurial, doing all the things we wanted them to do. Oh, that was a pain. I cannot remember where any of that ended but it was a, yeah, it was a mess and probably still continues to be a mess to this day.

So, yeah, oil and gas overall were the biggest issues. Ambassador Crocker had a good, healthy interest in economic issues. His main focus was the military and the pol-mil and the, you know, legislation for the SOFA, but he was definitely tracking the economic issues. We would meet with Crocker every week, I'm pretty sure it was every Sunday morning, you know, the beginning of the workweek. Crocker always wanted a tight briefing, so we would have an agenda for these meetings and make sure that he was up to speed on emerging issues, particularly anything that had Washington's interest. I was in charge of the meeting, which could be stressful at times, but I really appreciated the face time with the ambassador.

Q: Did you have a regular country team as well?

DODMAN: Yep. It probably met once a week. Although there may have been other configurations of the meeting too at various times. I was there as economic counselor. Charlie Ries was there too, although in the end Charlie and I didn't overlap too much. He was replaced by Mark Wall, who had been our ambassador in Chad, I think. Nice guy, but not nearly as dynamic and plugged in as Charlie.

So, anyway, let me touch on a few other economic issues. There was a big push to get private investment into Iraq, and not just in the oil sector. This was still the Bush administration. There was still a strong belief that the private sector would rescue Iraq's economy. We did some investment conferences. I remember meeting John Sullivan, who was deputy commerce secretary and would come back as Trump's deputy secretary of state and later ambassador in Russia; a really great guy. But oddly, most of the action on investment promotion was led by a DOD-funded operation known as the task force on business stabilization operations, or something like that. TFBSO was a genuinely shady group, led by a civilian but with lots of military staff. It was a classic example of the sort of ad hoc organization the Pentagon put together after the invasion in the absence of any plan, and the sort of operation Crocker and the embassy wanted to get rid of, or at least bring under the embassy's umbrella. I had an FSO on my team whose full-time job was basically to figure out what TFBSO was doing, support it where it made sense, and try to stop it from doing any harm. They hosted all sorts of business delegations at huge expense. I'm not aware of a single one that turned into anything lasting. I could be wrong on that, but I doubt it.

In addition to the SOFA, we needed a bunch of other bilateral agreements to normalize our relationship and transfer sovereignty. A big piece for us was negotiating a civil aviation agreement, not that we had any of our planes flying in and out but eventually we would. We worked closely with Treasury on banking reform, to try to stabilize that sector as well. Like every embassy, we focused a lot of attention on small business development, women entrepreneurs and the like—although that was more in USAID's ballpark.

Let me turn to one of the strangest programs I worked on. Folks may recall the Oil for Food program, which was set up after the first Gulf War to support the Iraqi people. Saddam's Iraq was under heavy sanctions after that war, and the result was a serious shortage of food and medicine. The UN brokered a deal to allow Iraq to export a limited amount of oil, with the revenues to be used only for food and medicine. I can't recall how long this program lasted, and obviously it was no longer relevant after the invasion. But to my great surprise, one of the things I inherited as economic counselor was the keys to a set of locked rooms in a small building adjacent to the palace that contained all the records of the Oil for Food program. These were several hundred dusty paper binders detailing who got the contracts and where the money went—surely of interest to scholars and perhaps prosecutors. I have no idea how these came into our hands. But as part of our effort to give the Iraqis back their country, we clearly had to transfer these documents. The problem was that the officials at the justice and oil ministries didn't want them. Or rather, wanted us to build them a secure and climate-controlled space to store them all. That never got done during my time, so I ceremonially passed the keys along to my successor. I have no idea what has happened since.

Interesting footnote, and a very Baghdad sort of story. The small building that housed the Oil for Food documents also housed a U.S.-run bar. I don't remember if this was the Marine bar at the old embassy or what. But on the few occasions I would go over to that building to access the documents, I had to pass through the bar. I think the bar was probably shut down by this time, with most everything like that having moved to the new compound. But there was no mistaking that it had been a bar. A couple times I took Iraqi officials in there to access the documents. It was weird.

Q: Okay. Interesting. You know, when you're talking about oil and aviation agreements and things like that it almost sounds like it was functioning as an ordinary embassy would. Did you find that to be the case?

DODMAN: I mean, we were getting there. And it was—it reminded me, as I said, a lot of the kind of stuff we were doing with Poland and Czechoslovakia after 1989 where we had to kind of start over on a legal basis or what we had to do with the Czechs and Slovaks when they split or that we had to do with the UK when they left the EU. You know, we had to establish all these foundational agreements that make the international system work. This is really the bread and butter of what the State Department does. So, normalizing this very strange U.S.-Iraq relationship was, yeah, a normal embassy thing to do.

Q: Were your counterparts in Iraq, whether in the government or private sector, pro-American, were they trying to cooperate with you?

DODMAN: I can't say they were pro-American. I'm sure some of the Kurds were more than others. The folks I dealt with in the ministries, I would say they were pragmatists. They had survived the Saddam regime, the invasion and occupation, and they just wanted to see their country be stable and successful. I don't recall any tirades from anyone saying, "You destroyed my country." Sadly, I can't say that I got to talk much at all with ordinary Iraqis. Maybe a few shopkeepers who would sell handicrafts in the Green Zone, but I wouldn't consider them average.

What I did see was plenty of Middle Eastern hospitality. Senior officials in Baghdad or in the provinces were always gracious in dealing with us. Lots of tea, and sometimes with ministers, lavish buffets. But I never felt anything I would call strongly pro-American sentiments. Now that may be because during my whole tour we continued to see periodic shelling of our compound, which made it clear there were plenty of Iraqis who hated us.

Q: Okay. You said you got out of the Green Zone from time to time. Was that also true for your staff and what did it take to get out of the Green Zone? I guess this segues us into security a little bit.

DODMAN: Getting out of the Green Zone—out of the bubble—was a big deal in two senses. First, it was really important. Even as limited as our engagements were, it always made me feel like a diplomat to get out and engage. But second, it was always a huge production. Every move had to be vetted and approved in advance. You had at least one RSO involved, perhaps several; at this time there were probably a hundred RSOs at the embassy. Everyone was kitted out in full PPE (personal protection equipment): helmet, flak jacket, and the like. We used armored Suburbans in Baghdad, which was better than riding in a Humvee as we did outside of town. But you always had at least two accompanying cars, and perhaps more, so always a convoy and never inconspicuous. There was often a helicopter running surveillance. Which gets to the question about staff going out. Every move cost a huge amount of money. Amazingly, I was never given a quota or told that I need to prioritize moves for me and my section. Anyone who needed to travel outside the Zone could do so, as long as the security situation allowed. Surreal.

Q: Mm-hm. You know, in most countries one of the most important things political, economic officers do is to build relationships and get to know people and they're expected to be out meeting people all the time. But it didn't seem like they could do that in this kind of circumstance. Did it make sense to have sections that big under the circumstance?

DODMAN: Well, no, and surely that's one of the reasons we don't have them anymore. So, in hindsight it is clear, but I think I appreciated this at the time: we were there in large numbers to make a statement. We were going to fix the mess created by this stupid invasion. We were going to find a way to get our troops out of there and stop losing

American lives. We were going to do our damnedest to make Iraq as democratic and prosperous as possible.

To be charitable, I will say that the department and diplomatic security, together with the military, were doing their best to make sure that we diplomats could get out as much as possible and engage. It's not hard to envision a scenario where we were literally just sitting in the Green Zone and forcing everyone to come to us. At least we didn't do that.

We did a lot of relationship building. Although I probably wasn't unique in the fact that the relationships I built were more with my military colleagues, other diplomats, the UN, and people like that. Some of my staff, and certainly folks in the pol section, did develop good contacts with members of parliament. Also with some of the government officials who were based in the Green Zone.

By the way, I should emphasize that the convoys and elaborate security I talked about did not apply inside the Green Zone. In fact, we had a fleet of motor pool cars available to us. At least prior to turning over control of the Green Zone to the Iraqis in January, I could hop in a car and travel where I wanted in the Green Zone—whether for work or for fun. The British Embassy, for instance, had a great pub we used to go to often.

Q: So, one of your management challenges it sounded like was keeping your big section of folks usefully employed.

DODMAN: Sort of. I had a section of folks who all wanted to be there. Some, like me, were primarily motivated by family reasons. But no matter why they were there, everyone was ready to get the job done and do good work. It wasn't hard keeping people occupied.

Morale in my section was good. We had an OIG (office of inspector general) inspection when I was there. It would have been fascinating to see this strange embassy through their eyes. But I recall the guy who was looking at econ being impressed with the work we were doing and the high morale. As we'll surely talk about when we get to my other assignments in high-threat, high-hardship posts, this doesn't happen automatically. I spent a lot of time talking with and taking care of people. Hosting parties to build camaraderie. Being attentive to brewing personality clashes. And making sure people took their R&R breaks. Econ did well that year.

Q: Were you normally working a seven-day week there?

DODMAN: I mean, it was a five-day, Sunday to Thursday work week. But when you live and work on the same compound, and there isn't all that much to do with your free time, it's natural to work more. I tried to set a good example and not do that. But often there was no choice. We had lots of visitors, and those often included weekends. I mentioned that briefing for the ambassador every Sunday morning. It wasn't unusual to be in the office on Friday and Saturday. But at least in my section, it was never expected.

Q: Back to security for just a moment. Did you personally ever feel that you were in danger? Any incidents that affected you more than others?

DODMAN: I mentioned before that we suffered from a fair amount of incoming fire, mortars or other objects that were fired into the Green Zone. We had systems designed to detect incoming fire. The C-RAM was a counter rocket system that gave a very insistent warning—"incoming, incoming, incoming"—and gave you a few seconds to seek cover. There were concrete bunkers all around the compound that you could run into. That happened a few times when I was out. Nothing ever exploded in my presence. But our buildings were definitely hit with some minor damage. No one was killed or even injured by any of these during that year, best I can recall. We had plenty of the more traditional duck and cover alarms—they seemed to go off frequently in the middle of the night. Over time I definitely responded to those less quickly, and sometimes would even curl up in bed and ignore them.

But yeah, I'll mention two incidents that impacted me. The first was the killing of a good friend. This was a contractor who worked in another section, but who I developed a really good relationship with. Super nice and decent guy. He and his Arab American translator were outside of town visiting some stupid assistance project—the sort of white elephant that never should have been started—and ran over an IED (improvised explosive device). This was the spring of 2009. I recall I was just coming back to the embassy from a trip out of town and was walking to my apartment with my PPE when a friend stopped me and told me. That was one case where I'm embarrassed to say I wasn't there for my team to help them grieve. It was the weekend and I stayed in my apartment and worked through my grief on my own.

The other story is less dramatic. Sandstorms were a big thing. We would get huge storms rolling into Baghdad that would drop visibility to nothing. I remember the Fourth of July 2009 was a day like that. But the one that got to me was when I was travelling somewhere in the north—I can't even remember the city—visiting a PRT when a storm came in and grounded us. Now we were fine, on a military base with plenty of food and a comfortable enough bed. But I remember being a little scared of the uncertainty of the whole thing: how long will we be stuck here; what if there is some attack and we need to move quickly; that sort of thing. Anyway, we obviously lived to tell the tale. It was probably only a day or two we were stuck. But it made an impression on me.

Q: Yeah. Wow. You were there during the transition of administrations from Bush to Obama. Did that make any difference to either U.S. policy or how you were working there?

DODMAN: So, let me start by talking about election day. Or the day after election day. I remember waking up early to see the election being called. Watching President-elect Obama and Michelle as they greeted the crowd in Chicago. And just thinking, Wow, I never thought this would happen in my lifetime. I also remember wanting to sound the right tone for my staff that day since some of the contractors who had been there for many years might be pretty nervous about what the new administration would bring.

In terms of policy, during the six months that I served in Iraq under Obama, I don't feel like there was any significant shift. Moving towards Iraqi sovereignty and self-sufficiency were good things. I recall an upswing in the pace of visitors from the new administration and Congress, as they came out to make their own assessment. For some reason a visit of Nancy Pelosi stands out in my mind. Otherwise, they were pretty much a blur.

The one shift we had was not directly related to the new administration, at least I don't think it was. Ryan Crocker left in the spring or summer of 2009. His health had not been good, and it was clear to all of us that he was still in Baghdad only because he was determined to see the SOFA through to the end. At some point in the summer of 2009 he was replaced by Chris Hill. Hill was also a career Foreign Service officer and experienced former ambassador. But unlike Crocker, Hill had absolutely no experience in the Middle East.

As you may recall from a few postings prior, I had worked for Hill when he was ambassador in Warsaw. In fact, I'd known him since my early days in the department. So as these things go, I was in a good position knowing the incoming ambassador, especially given that he was so unknown to the many NEA (near eastern affairs) hands in the mission. I was in touch with him before he arrived to offer assistance and insights. But I have to say that things didn't go all that well. Hill came in with a chip on his shoulder and nothing good to say about his predecessor. Who, as I said, was a legend in the Foreign Service, in the way that Hill never would be. He wanted to restructure the embassy. He fired or forced to resign a bunch of staff, and sidelined some real experts, which was a shame. Not the firings—those were mostly for the better. But sidelining real Arabists and replacing them with folks Hill had worked with in Europe or Asia. It wasn't a recipe for success.

And since I was one of those who had worked with him in Europe, I was part of the inner circle. Which put me in an uncomfortable position, since I didn't like the way Hill was approaching embassy management, and definitely thought the sidelining of people with talent was short-sighted. But I'm ashamed to say I didn't do much, if anything, to stop it. This was the summer and my tour was winding down, and, well, you know how it goes. I did end up with a job promotion out of this. As I said earlier, Hill took the top econ and assistance job—the one Charlie Ries had had—and moved it up to a second DCM position. He brought in Pat Haslach to fill that job. I ended up moving into what I guess we called the econ minister-counselor position, and for the last weeks of my tour I had agriculture, commerce and treasury reporting to me, in addition to econ.

Q: Okay. You had mentioned that Petraeus transferred out about the same time and did that affect you at all?

DODMAN: Petraeus left very early on. One of the first things I did that was kind of fun and interesting: I was invited to attend the handover ceremony between him and Odierno. That was probably within a month of my arrival. I don't think I ever sat in a meeting with

Petraeus. I did a few with Odierno, although much more often I dealt with the one- and two-star level. So, no, the shift from Petraeus to Odierno, to me, didn't have any significant impact.

Q: Okay, well why don't we break here and if you have anything more to add on Iraq we can do that at the top of the next session.

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Q: Today is July 18, 2023, and this is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Mike Dodman. I should note for the record that Mike is now back in Washington, DC. When we left off last time you were talking about your assignment in Baghdad as economic counselor from 2008 through the summer of 2009 and we had almost wrapped up but I think you have a few more things you want to add.

DODMAN: Right. There's one program we worked on that I think is important to highlight for posterity's sake. This involved supporting Iraqi scientists with expertise in nuclear and other sensitive fields that could eventually be used for weapons production—whether in a future Iraq or more immediately in a rogue state. As I recall the program basically revolved around a house—think of a club house—where activities were organized, and I assume the payment of some sort of stipend to these scientists. I'm afraid I don't recall too many details of the program, since I wasn't too involved in the details of running it. In typical fashion, I got much more involved in the bureaucratic tussles over how the program was managed. It was run in the department by the ISN (international security and nonproliferation) bureau. They had an American contractor who split his time between the embassy and this house. And then we had our science and technology officer in the embassy who had this program as part of his portfolio.

Q: So this was run out of the economic section?

DODMAN: Right. Our S&T officer was former military, relatively junior but very astute, very skilled for the portfolio he was doing. I think he had an advanced scientific degree of some sort. So, he turned out to be a great fit. But perhaps his strong background also exacerbated some of the differences of opinion that developed with the ISN bureau over how to run the program. Sadly for this interview, but I'd say happily for my wellbeing, I've forgotten all the details of what this conflict involved. I just remember many phone calls and cables that got pretty heated. And at the end of the day—the end of my year in Iraq—the program was still up and running, so we must have worked something out. And I certainly have no idea how much longer the program continued or what happened to the scientists—most of whom were pretty old fifteen years ago, so that may be a moot point. Anyway, I wanted to bring it up since this is one of those things that floats below the radar, as it should—we wouldn't have wanted any significant publicity for this. But like the oil-for-food documents, it's part of the historical record.

Q; Since you raised the subject of scientists, by the time you were there, had we given up the search for the weapons of mass destruction?

DODMAN: Yes, we had. That had been a bust. I think there were some folks within the embassy and the U.S. government, particularly up until the end of the Bush administration, who thought that there still might be something there. This wouldn't have been anything my section would have led on. But for sure this wasn't an embassy preoccupation during my time.

Another thing I wanted to mention that I took away from this tour—and particularly from my close engagement with the military—was a real appreciation for the first time of how poorly the State Department does strategic planning. Ambassador Crocker had stood up a strategic planning office within the embassy. I can't say if that's because he was trying to set a precedent for the department and other embassies to emulate, or if he just felt he needed some in-house talent to stand toe-to-toe with all the planners the military had in-country. It was a small office of maybe a half dozen people, located right next to my office, so I got to know these guys pretty well. They worked on longer-term initiatives and plans, and even if their tours were not that long, they were by definition taking a longer-term approach to embassy work than any of us who spent our days putting out fires and responding to taskers could afford to do. Anyway, seeing that office in action—and seeing close up what military strategic planners do—drove home for me that it's something we just don't do. But we need to.

Q: Before you move on, do you recall if that was a separate section with Foreign Service officers who bid on positions in the strategic planning office?

DODMAN: No, it was more of a boutique solution. It was staffed mainly by contractors—which the embassy could still hire fairly freely in those days. I think the guy running it was former military, as were several of the staff, probably. I seem to recall one Foreign Service officer in there, but I'm not sure now.

Let me add a couple other things on life in the Green Zone. Even after it transitioned to full Iraqi control during my time there, the Green Zone was still a protected enclave and we moved around pretty freely. That's where most of the embassies and UN compounds were located. Like us, all of them had their own security or military elements, alongside diplomats and development professionals. Like us, everyone was there without family. So, it was party central. One of my strongest memories of Iraq is the social network built around embassy and UN parties. The Italians had probably the best parties with excellent pizzas. The British had a terrific poolside pub and they also had a great cafeteria, much better than ours. The Germans and the Japanese were located outside the Green Zone so it wasn't quite so easy to get there but they also, you know, did their share of hosting events that we were often able to get to. There were also a few private restaurants within the Green Zone that we would frequent and where you could often get a beer, although we usually brought our own drinks.

Speaking of beer leads to one other story that belongs in the history books. Of course, all this talk about parties and alcohol did not involve the American military. They were under General Order Number One which said you will not drink while you're in this war

zone. When I would have parties and invite some of the military colleagues we worked closely with, they would come but would never drink. But the Pentagon makes one exception to this rule, and that is for Super Bowl Sunday when folks in uniform are able to enjoy one or I think two beers while they watch the game. In anticipation of that the military stocks up lots and lots of beer. I should add here that the military supply chain always included beer and other liquor, despite General Order One. Civilians were able to buy alcohol in the PX (post exchange), just not uniformed military. Anyway, Super Bowl came and went and soon afterwards a message went around the embassy saying, basically, "Help; there's too much beer; come to this trailer and take it." So, I went and loaded up a handcart trolley full of, it must have been seven or eight cases of canned beer, and took it back to my apartment. As I said, I entertained a lot so it all went to good use. But a really "you can't make this shit up" sort of tale.

Sorry for running on, but two other points I wanted to get in. First to give some sense of how I connected with my family during this year of professional bachelorhood. As I mentioned, one of the incentives was three R&R breaks during the one-year tour, so a trip out roughly every three months. For me, every one of those was a trip back to Prague. Every trip out was a repeat of what I'd described with my arrival: day one involved a helo to the airport and a night in a trailer, day two was waiting around for the military flight to be called, then arrive in Amman and get a taxi to a hotel where you would spend another night. You could never be assured of what time you would get to Amman, so that overnight was important, and it was always a nice hotel, which was welcome. I had friends assigned to the embassy, so I usually joined them for dinner, which was even nicer. Flights to Europe all left early in the morning, so by the middle of the third day I'd be back in Prague. Reverse on the return. Long journeys, but it worked so long as there was no sandstorm or threat that shut down milair (military aviation).

Those trips back were great to both unwind and reconnect with family and friends, of which there were still plenty at the embassy and connected to the school. I was back around Christmas, around Easter, and in early summer for my daughter's graduation and to help pack up the house. These frequent visits, plus good telecom links even in the pre-WhatsApp era, made staying connected to family pretty easy.

As we'll talk about when we get to Pakistan, I overall enjoyed the tour, and particularly was happy that it kept my family in a great place, so I was open to doing it again. But the one thing I took away from Baghdad was knowing that I didn't want to do a one-year job like that again. I found it really unsatisfying not to be able to see more things through to completion. I know that the rapid rotation in leadership positions was not good for the long-term health of the section and the broader mission. I took that conviction with me not just to Pakistan, but to the DCM/PO (deputy chief of mission/principal officer) Committee that I served on later, and where I was always pushing the bureaus to increase the pressure on candidates for leadership positions at hardship posts to commit upfront to two years.

And finally, last point. I wanted to say something about the invasion and its legacy, and my part in it all. As I said, I'm proud of the work I did in Baghdad. It was a year of

transition and I'm confident I moved things in an overall positive direction. But I say that all in the context of the glaringly obvious fact that the whole invasion and particularly the absence of coherent planning for the day-after was a complete fiasco. Yes, much had improved in the six years since. And thank God we had people like Ryan Crocker now engaging in a way that, of course, they should have been from the start. But that doesn't forgive the sin of the lies that were the basis for the invasion, the many, many mistakes that were made, the lives that were lost on all sides, and the insane financial cost. So, I don't want to give the impression that my discussion of what happened in 2008-09 means I thought the invasion was justified or well executed. It was a black mark on our history and we're continuing to pay the price for it.

Q: Okay. Well, that is a good way to wrap up and you know, you obviously weren't the only person who felt that way. Crocker is well-known for having written the Perfect Storm paper but then, he was in there, trying to make the best of what resulted.

DODMAN: It's a sign of what professional Foreign Service and military can do.

Q: Exactly.

DODMAN: If they can't stomach the policy at the time they're there they resign honorably and leave. Otherwise, they stay and try to make the best of it. And that's definitely what we were doing in 2008-2009.

Q: Yeah. Well, the way the Foreign Service system works, about the time you got to Iraq you must have been looking for your next assignment already or did you have a linked assignment?

DODMAN: Actually, I started looking for my follow-on assignment well before I got to Iraq, partly because I had that long period in Washington and I knew I was going to have to bid, as you said, as soon as I got there. We also had certain bidding privileges as part of the incentive package. So, while I didn't have a linked assignment, I could get an early handshake [a commitment from a bureau for an onward assignment]. The other important incentive in this area was the ability to bid up one grade. I was an FS-01 at this point, which in theory meant all OC (grade of counselor) jobs should be open to me. Sadly, that's not how it worked.

I focused initially on DCM jobs and principal officer ships at the OC level. Let's just say the process was very sobering. I did a bunch of interviews when back in DC that summer of 2008. I was essentially laughed out of every office. Nobody much cared that I was going to do this hardship and stretch tour; the novelty of these tours had definitely worn off. The most frustrating thing is that I got this not only from bureaus where I hadn't worked before, but even from my so-called home bureau, EUR. Sobering, and really frustrating. But that's the way the building works.

I pretty quickly realized I wasn't going to get a senior-level DCM or PO job. As always, I felt compelled to nail down an assignment early on and not wait to see how the cycle

played out, since my two younger kids were anxious to know where they would finish high school. So, I turned back to 01 jobs where I would be more competitive. I remember honing in on the economic counselor job in Rabat. I thought that at least the fact that I was doing the NEA bureau a favor in going to Baghdad would help me. But again, no love—actually a fair bit of disdain—from the north Africa office. I recall some unkind words about my French score, but also a clear understanding that a year in Iraq wasn't going to make me part of the "NEA family."

So, sorry, this is a long wind-up to say I ended up starting a conversation with a mentor and friend, Peter Chase, who had been my boss in the under secretary's office. He was at this point the minister counselor for economic affairs in Brussels at our mission to the EU. Peter welcomed me with open arms. Brussels ticked all the boxes from the family perspective: great schools and easy to get back to Prague to maintain the kids' and our friendships there. It would be my first time serving in western Europe, which made it a little more interesting to me. Professionally I liked the idea of adding to my EU knowledge. And Peter was a known commodity, someone I respected and could easily work for and with. But it had a lot of downsides. First, not only wouldn't I be DCM, I wouldn't even be running a section, since the economic counselor at USEU is deputy to the minister counselor. This made it at best a lateral move for me, and in many ways a downward move compared to the work in Baghdad and Prague. Plus, I was back in EUR, which at this point was a bureau and continent I was really ready to move on from. But in the end, I took it. I was able to get the early handshake. While the EUR bureau hadn't wanted to expend any capital to get me into a senior job, they had no objection to this assignment. It all went through very quickly, and within weeks of getting to Baghdad the assignment was done. And I ended up spending three years in western Europe.

Q: And that would have been from summer of 2009 to the summer of 2012?

DODMAN: That's right.

Q: And I presume the family was reasonably happy with Brussels as a follow-on to Prague.

DODMAN: The family was thrilled. And the family remained thrilled. As we'll talk about, I was never thrilled. But it was perfect for the family, so I have no regrets about doing it. And again, repeating a constant theme, I learned a hell of a lot, both about the EU and also about management and various other things. I definitely grew as a result of that assignment. I was just never particularly enamored with the assignment or the European Union or Brussels. And part of it was being in western Europe. Travel opportunities were great, but I missed the camaraderie of a smaller embassy or a hardship post. The school was fantastic, but we never had the intimate connections that we had with the school in Prague. So, anyway, it was—I don't want to say it was my worst tour because I don't consider that there was a worst tour. But I don't look back on this as fondly as I do other tours. As we'll talk about, I actually tried to curtail at least once to move on to do other things.

Anyway, there is of course much to say about Brussels that's positive. I'll just put that negative vibe out there and we can go on to talk about what actually happened and the good sides of Brussels.

Q: Well, and as so many of us found, you know, as our kids grew up in the Foreign Service you just had to limit the scope of your searches to places that had good schools.

DODMAN: Yeah. And that's really the main reason we spent my first twenty-plus years of my career—everything except that Iraq tour—in Europe. Now, I'll jump ahead. When I got to Africa as chief of mission, I became very well acquainted with the small American school we had. Tiny and poorly resourced compared to the schools my kids experienced in Europe. But the kids loved it. Parents loved it. I realized I had been very shortsighted in assuming only a big and well-resourced school could give my kids the education I wanted them to have. Again, I don't want to say I regret the decisions we made—the schools they attended were great, and I had mostly fantastic assignments. But I've passed this revelation on to new officers and folks I mentor: don't assume a small school is not going to be a good school, particularly for younger kids.

Q: Okay. Well, off to Brussels in the summer of 2009. And maybe we can start as we usually do, describe the—I guess a mission rather than embassy structure and where you fit in.

DODMAN: First of all, let me quickly tell the tale of getting to Brussels, which was interesting.

First, Mission Iraq at the time had an overlap policy. You couldn't depart post until your replacement arrived, and ideally the two of you had a few days of overlap. Very much not the usual Foreign Service pattern, but important to keep the place going with the frequent staff turnover. I had arrived in late August 2008, which had given me lots of flexibility that summer for training, leave, and life. In fact, I was able to get our oldest settled for his first year at George Mason University before I had to head out to post. But this all didn't work out quite so well on the back end. I left the Green Zone I think on August 30. That created two family challenges: our second child was starting college in Virginia in late August, and the school year in Brussels also started in late August. Joan couldn't be in two places at once, and I couldn't be in either. This generated a little drama, but it worked in the end. Joan and the kids did home leave that summer, and she left the two older kids with my parents, who took them to Virginia to get both in college. Brussels showed great flexibility and let Joan arrive at post and move into our house several weeks ahead of me. Everyone got to start school on time.

The second weirdness in this PCS was that, because I was on TDY orders from Prague to Baghdad, I had to travel back to Prague one last time—even though my family had left there months before. This was actually kind of fun. Since we no longer had a house, I got to spend my one night in Prague at this fantastic hotel down the street from the embassy where I had housed countless official visitors, but never stayed at myself. Lovely place. Joan flew in from Brussels for that night, and also to help with the next stage of the

journey. We had left our car in the embassy lot, our dog in a kennel, and some miscellaneous stuff in a friend's garage. So, after I turned in my dip ID and completed whatever other formalities at the embassy, we got the car, the dog and everything else and drove to Brussels. The trip had a bit of drama as we ran into car trouble around Frankfurt, but we made it to the new house that same day.

Now I can't remember exactly what status I was in once I arrived in Brussels, since I didn't actually start working at that point. I stayed for a few days to help set up the house that Joan had been in for two weeks already, and spent some time with my new office. Probably saw the school and things. But after three or four days I flew to the States to start my home leave. The department was very strict at that point that everyone had to take their home leave after a hardship tour like Baghdad, and in fact I had to have a sit-down session with someone at FSI to make sure I had no mental scarring from the tour. I took the minimum ten days of home leave, got to check up on the two kids at their colleges in Virginia, and did a couple days of consultations on EU matters. Then was back in Brussels and formally started work in the last week of September.

Q: And your family was there that entire time? I seem to remember cases in which families were not allowed to PCS before the officer.

DODMAN: I have to give credit where it's due. The admin team at the Brussels tri-missions really made this part easy. They welcomed Joan and the kids there ahead of me. We were assigned a great townhouse with some embassy neighbors who really helped Joan get settled. I don't recall having to ask for any special treatment.

It was a great feeling arriving and seeing that things were already well established. The two younger kids were happy with the new school. Joan was lined up for a nursing job at the embassy. Everyone was content. It really made the transition out of a war zone and back to a more normal life much less stressful—certainly compared to some of our other PCSes.

Q: Okay. Well, that's great.

DODMAN: Right. So on to USEU. Very different from a normal embassy. Obviously it's a mission to an organization that we are not a part of. So, neither a bilateral embassy to a country, nor a mission at a multilateral organization where we have a vote, like the UN or NATO. Somewhere between those two. And because we were part of the Brussels tri-missions, we didn't have a lot of normal embassy functions. All the management functions were under the bilateral embassy but served all three missions. Same with the RSO. No consular section. It was absolutely the most policy-heavy place I ever served.

We had a large economic section, probably fifteen-plus officers. Political may have been just a little smaller, but was growing. We had our own public affairs section. Then there were many other agencies. USTR and Treasury were both housed within econ and reported to the econ minister counselor, which created some issues I'm sure we'll get to. Both Commerce and Agriculture had huge—in relative terms--sections, with three to five

American officers in each. Customs had a few people there. Both the Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security had a senior representative in the mission. Eventually we also got a lawyer from the State Department.

But the most distinctive feature of the USEU country team was not the high number of other agencies or the absence of admin and security folks. It was that almost everyone—and certainly all the other agency reps—were very senior folks in their respective services. Certainly for Ag and Commerce, serving at USEU was the pinnacle of their career. Having a lot of senior folks in one mission brought some serious talent. But also some serious egos and seasoned turf warriors. As we'll talk about, this could be difficult terrain to navigate.

At the other end of the spectrum, USEU had almost no junior officers. Frankly very few 03 officers. It was very top heavy.

One word on the physical layout. USEU had its own building downtown, and we fit into it fairly well. It sat in the middle of three buildings, with the bilateral embassy on one side, and the huge joint administrative team on the other. Very close to a major metro stop and a relatively easy walk to the European institutions where I would spend a lot of time. A pretty nice set up.

Q: Mm-hm. And within the economic section was it the minister counselor and then you and then everybody else? Or did you have your own half of the section carved out for you?

DODMAN: A little of both. There were two State 01 officers, and the rest of the State FSO staff reported through the two of us. The other 01 led the energy and environment team, and I looked after everything else. But I had the designated economic counselor slot and was acknowledged as the number two and deputy to the minister counselor. I had maybe five or six officers under me, plus most of the FSNs. I did all the overall section admin and management. Peter Chase, the minister counselor, was a real expert on EU affairs. He'd served multiple tours working on EU issues, knew the place very well, and unlike me he loved Brussels and loved everything about the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of the EU. He definitely had the vision and the contacts, and so was naturally focused on external things. He knew he wanted and needed someone to run the section, and that was fine with me.

Let me just say, I also quickly developed outside contacts, even before I had to fill in for Peter for a while. Despite my lack of love for the EU, I worked very well with the various offices of the commission and the council and the foreign affairs office and the other stakeholders we had, in particular the business community. I made a lot of friends out of that process.

Q: Okay. And the division between the political and economic section? The EU by this time was much more than an economic organization, right? So, was there a clear division between the political and the economic side here?

DODMAN: That relationship worked quite well. The econ issues had traditionally been the dominant ones in the relationship, but that changed as the EU's competencies grew. And that change really accelerated after 9/11. There may have been some difficulties when pol started expanding, but that would have all been in the rear-view mirror by 2009. No, the problems and overlap all came on the econ side of the house, with the econ section and the other econ-focused agencies squabbling over turf and contacts.

Q: So, this was the Obama administration still. How were relations with the EU?

DODMAN: Obama was president throughout my time there. But really, more important for my section and the mission as a whole was that we were very much in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. I had been fairly lucky to avoid dealing with this while I was in Iraq. But it was front and center in the U.S.-EU relationship. There were plenty of European banks that were impacted by the subprime lending crisis and the freezing up of money markets. We all knew that transatlantic cooperation and coordination were needed to get global markets back on track.

So that was the immediate backdrop. Obviously that created some tensions, since there were certain things Washington wanted the Europeans to do, and vice versa. But that's the way it always works. I'd say overall relations under Obama were quite positive. We didn't have the tensions we had earlier over the Iraq invasion. Nor the existential questions that came up later under Trump. Even though Obama and Secretary Clinton launched the so-called pivot to Asia, they understood we absolutely needed to work together with our European partners, whether bilaterally or through the EU or NATO. So, at the thirty-thousand-foot level, the relationship was focused and moving forward. Closer to earth, there was of course plenty of churn and a perpetual lack of understanding on either side of the Atlantic. Neither fully understood how the other's system worked. The Europeans, in particular, needed constant reassurances that the United States remained committed to the partnership. That's where we came in. USEU spent a lot of time explaining to Washington how the EU worked and how to best get our way, and then also publicly and privately talking with Europeans about the enduring relevance of the transatlantic bonds.

I will say: we always had great access. I and the rest of the mission could get in to see anyone we wanted or needed to at any of the European institutions. I think that's probably the clearest indication that folks on the European side gave a very high priority to this partnership. As a general rule, we had to do more arm twisting with certain folks in Washington to ensure a reciprocal level of interest. I'm sure we'll talk later about the one bilateral summit I worked on. I get it: the EU can be exhausting. Frustrating. Confusing. But when push came to shove, we generally got what the situation needed.

There was no ambassador in place when I arrived. Obama's first appointee arrived maybe six months into my time there. Bill Kennard was a former FCC (Federal Communications Commission) commissioner and a businessman, so obviously a political appointee. But he was a great appointment. First, a super decent guy. As important, with his prior

government experience he understood how Washington worked. And as a former regulator, he was comfortable with the technical matters that made up a lot of our agenda. I loved working for Kennard. And the Europeans loved him as well because we do not always appoint the savviest ambassadors in Europe and we have not always had pro-transatlantic ambassadors at the EU. Some have really been skeptics about the importance of the relationship. Kennard was not.

So, despite the rhetoric of our "pivot to Asia" and the tensions coming out of the financial crisis, I'd say relations during my time were very positive. And while I came to learn during this tour that I didn't really love the EU, this was still a good time to be working on EU issues and at USEU.

Q: The vaunted EU bureaucracy, was it as bad as its reputation to deal with?

DODMAN: On the whole, yes. Since I'm going to end up doing a fair bit of EU bashing, let me start out emphasizing two things. First, I should have said before: I really do believe in the importance of the transatlantic relationship. I believed everything I said in cables, briefings and speeches while I was at the mission, and I still believe it. Just because it is painful, doesn't mean it's not important. Second, I really respect a lot of the folks working in the European institutions. I made some good friends, and had a lot of enjoyable meetings, lunches, conversations over drinks and the like.

All that said, dealing with the EU could be such a pain in the ass. Part of that comes from the compromises that were made setting up and expanding the union. Balancing the interests and prerogatives of the member states against the centralized institutions. In that sense it is not completely different from the messiness that comes from our own split between the federal government and the states. I'm sure European diplomats working in the United States express some of the same frustrations. But the EU bureaucracy was just so bureaucratic. And I'm a bureaucrat: I know how and why these things can get so big and unwieldy.

This may sound petty, but part of what drove me crazy about the EU was the physical laydown. There's a huge section of the city known as the European district. It is a series of massive and mostly ugly buildings. Hard to get into, and hard to navigate once you get in. The opposite of transparent and open. Again, you can say the exact same thing about Washington, especially post-9/11. I just found the EU quarter especially oppressive. In part it was the fact that this was what I was accredited to—I had a mass of ugly buildings filled with mostly nice but very bureaucratic and process-obsessed officials. This was what I had to work with. Happily, there were a few decent pubs and wine bars, and a nice park close to the European district. But it was mostly just depressing. Especially when it rained. Which it did. A lot.

This bureaucracy was also changing during my time there. The Lisbon Treaty took effect and really shook up the power dynamics in Brussels, as seemed to happen every few years. The European Parliament got stronger. The EU's foreign relations arm was strengthened and made a separate institution. Plus a whole lot of other changes. For those

who love the minutiae of the EU, this was a fascinating time. I guess the best I can say is that this made my job as an explainer of the EU back to confused officials in DC even more important. But on the other hand, it made all the people I was dealing with in the EU institutions even more neurotic about their bureaucratic turf. So, yeah, the legendary EU bureaucracy definitely lived up to its reputation.

Q: Yeah. And did you find yourself dealing exclusively with the European bureaucracy or were you also dealing separately with the British representative and the French representative and the German representative and so forth?

DODMAN: Right. So, first of all, let me mention another reason why I found my tour in Brussels so weird. Even more so than in the Green Zone in Baghdad, the EU institutions formed a bubble in Brussels. I had no interest in what was actually happening in the country I lived in, other than whether the metro system would go on strike or when a slow-moving road repair near my house would finish. Now don't get me wrong: Belgium is a weird country, and I don't think I would have enjoyed becoming an expert in its idiosyncrasies. But if I had been forced to, I imagine I would have found living in Brussels more rewarding than I did. Because in truth, I'm one of the few people I know who just didn't love living there. But that's another story.

So the answer to your question is, yes, we dealt a lot with the member states through their permanent representatives. Our job was to influence decisions taken in the EU. The EU Commission—the most visible part of the EU bureaucratic machine—was not the ultimate authority on many issues. The member states would get together as the EU Council and make the key decisions. That's why we spent so much time in Prague building the partnership with them on EU matters, and why USEU worked with the Czech, Polish, British and other missions. We definitely worked more closely with some than others. It's no secret the Brits were our strongest partner, which was another tragedy of Brexit. Today we work with the Brits as outsiders, the same way we did with the Canadian mission during my time.

Before the Lisbon Treaty took full effect, the presidency of the EU rotated every six months from one country to another. Well technically it still rotates, but since Lisbon the rotating presidency has a lot less influence. For most of my time we would go all-out building ties with the country that was taking over that presidency. And by extension, USEU developed strong ties with the U.S. embassy in the country that had the presidency. One of the niches I developed within the mission was working on those rotating partnerships, both solidifying the links with the folks in the Brussels perm rep that would be responsible for transatlantic relations, and separately becoming a resource for our embassy back in the capital. I got some nice trips out of that every six months.

Q: Did we have some kind of official observer status in the EU?

DODMAN: No. We were partners, but outsiders. Some of the other Europeans who weren't EU members had special relations, mainly to facilitate trade. Switzerland, for example. But we were outsiders. On some issues—particularly foreign policy and

terrorism-related things—we worked very closely together. On others—think trade negotiations—we definitely sat across the table from them and negotiated hard. We had a constant stream of visitors from Washington, which attested to how close and important the partnership was. As I said earlier, I found our level of access to nearly anyone in the EU institutions to be pretty extraordinary. Sometimes our ambassador would be invited to address a session of the EU Council or Parliament. But whenever it got to decision-making time, the doors were shut and we were on the outside trying to read the smoke signals to interpret the decision.

Q: Okay. Well, maybe we should talk a little bit about the actual issues you were dealing with. Let's start with regulatory. I don't know if you want to get into nuts and bolts about that but were there any major things that dominated your stay there?

DODMAN: Sure. Let's start with the financial crisis. This started with the subprime mortgage crisis in 2008, but then morphed into a eurozone crisis as the Greeks and others proved unable to meet the rules for state debt and other limits imposed on countries using the euro. In the States, we had a year-plus of pain as we worked through the banking failures and other structural pressures. But in Europe these twin crises persisted for years, since they exposed some real fundamental problems with the euro experiment—having a unified monetary policy across the zone, but no harmony of national fiscal policies, and not very effective carrots and sticks to get sovereign nations to abide by common rules. Given how important Europe was to the global economy—and European banks to international financial markets—we had a strong interest in how this all played out. We wanted to share the benefit of our experience. We also wanted to shape evolving regulatory measures in ways that we thought would make them most effective. But also—let's be honest—be the most favorable to U.S. banks and our broader interests. This effort was led by the Treasury Department, and as I mentioned, we had a Treasury attaché in the mission. I also had a very strong 02 officer following macro and finance issues, and happily he and the Treasury attaché worked very well together. So, I have to say that I personally didn't spend a lot of time following this, since the issues got very technical very fast.

One area I did spend a ton of time on, particularly in my first year, was data privacy. Compared to Americans, Europeans are much more focused on protecting their personal information, whether it's on the internet or through their banking operations. Every EU country has a commissioner for data privacy issues who looks at the national policies in place and the procedures that banks, police and other public and private institutions use. The EU has a strong set of laws that need to be followed. This was explained to me many times as a legacy of the Nazi and fascist era when many governments were incredibly intrusive. Of course, we also care about personal privacy in the United States, and we have protections in place for personal data. But two things: first, we don't treat it as sacrosanct as the Europeans do. And second, even if we did, our legal system is naturally different from Europe's. So since so many American companies operate in Europe and store European consumers' data, the national data privacy commissars wanted proof that the American companies complied with European law. Which often came down to this: if a European's data stored on a server in the States is somehow compromised, can that

citizen get the same redress from American institutions or courts that he or she could get in Europe? We devoted years to negotiating agreements with the EU that would provide the legal certainty that both American companies and European courts and regulators required. The process continues today. Every few years a European court rules that whatever agreement we have in place falls short of European standards, and we all have to scramble again to avoid a critical piece of the transatlantic marketplace completely breaking down. I spent a lot of time on this, particularly on managing the internal process of coordinating among ourselves in the mission—between econ, DOJ, PD, the front office—and with posts in the member states. And this tortured tale will come up again when I get to my return to E.

While the commercial side of data privacy was a huge issue, the really critical data privacy issue I worked on in 2009-10 dealt with government access to European data. In the years following 9/11, we had to work out a whole raft of new protocols that let American counter-terrorism investigators gain access to data from around the world to look for and prevent possible future attacks. I had worked on these issues in both Poland and the under secretary's office—particularly on the question of data related to individuals flying into the United States. One of the key programs we put in place involved getting the USG access to financial data collected by SWIFT, which is the privately-run clearinghouse that banks use for all cross-border financial flows; SWIFT happens to be headquartered in Belgium. The terrorist finance tracking program let American investigators examine SWIFT data to identify suspect transactions. This apparently worked well and under the radar for several years, but in 2010 the European Court of Justice ruled the program violated Europeans' data privacy protections. The U.S. response was—pardon the pun—swift and effective. Within days we had a Treasury-led team in place and they hammered out a new agreement in record time. We had nearly constant contact back to the top levels of Treasury, State and the NSC to knock down any roadblocks. My team's role was to support the negotiators, but also to supply the insights needed on how to deal with the sensitivities of the various EU institutions involved. In particular the EU Parliament, which had a number of influential members who were strongly pro-privacy and very wary of U.S. overreach post-9/11. I had an 03 officer working for me who was on this full time. She was easily one of the most talented officers I've ever worked with. She put together amazing cables, came up with compromises that she passed back to the negotiating team. I mean, it was truly a stellar performance and she got all kinds of kudos and accolades from very senior folks in DC. Honestly, I didn't have to do much other than manage her and coach her, because she was really running with this on her own.

Within a couple months we had an agreement in place. Then one of those other weird twists of fate: the day that we were scheduled to sign the new agreement ended up being the one day during my entire tour that I was chargé at USEU. So it was little ol' me sitting together with the Spanish minister of justice and the EU commissioner in charge of justice matters, facing the press and putting my John Hancock on this agreement to save a critical piece of our war on terror. I won't lie: I was thrilled it worked out this way. But I'll also acknowledge the Europeans were pissed. They had moved heaven and earth on their side too, and not only couldn't we get anyone to come from DC to sign, but the

U.S. ambassador couldn't even stay in town for the day. As I said before, this was the sort of stuff that drove our counterparts crazy. Anyway, the agreement was signed, and then together with our European partners we managed to get the parliament to pass it soon after. Crisis averted. As far as I know, the program still chugs away behind the scenes, and hopefully it has actually saved some lives.

Q: Okay, that's great. I'm sure the scope of the issues your section worked on was vast. Anything else you want to highlight in terms of policy?

DODMAN: You're right. We did pretty much everything. To keep this short, let me just give one other example: sanctions. Sanctions had definitely become one of Washington's favorite policy tools, and were used increasingly after 9/11. We learned quickly that for sanctions to be effective, they can't just be imposed by us. Happily, the EU also loves sanctions, and this was an area ripe for collaboration. Over my three years there we only saw the pace of engagement grow. For some reason Burma stands out in my memory as someplace where we spent a lot of time at the working level calibrating sanctions with the EU. I'd go so far as to say that the folks at Treasury and State who worked on sanctions policy were probably some of the most active supporters of robust U.S.-EU policy coordination. Which was helpful, since we had so many policy folks back in Washington who just found the EU too confusing or frustrating. You remember when Toria Nuland was running EUR and the Russians released a recording of a phone call of her discussing Ukraine policy, where she told whomever she was talking to that we should "F the EU" because, I presume, she found them either ineffectual or too much trouble. We were constantly confronting that knee jerk reaction back in Washington. But not with people like the sanctions folks.

Q: Did you find yourself dealing also with U.S. businesses? I mean, we're constantly reading in the paper about the EU butting heads with Apple and Google and others. There are also genetically modified foods and so many other issues which come up. Does the mission get involved in those things?

DODMAN: Very, very much. The list of regulatory issues is practically endless, which is a sign of both how big and important the transatlantic marketplace is, but also how much both Washington and Brussels like to regulate. We did a lot of facilitating dialogues between U.S. regulators to try to find ways that each side could recognize the other's regulations as essentially equivalent—that was the gold standard and the best way to prevent conflicts. But of course, those are the success stories you don't hear about. The ones that get messy and end up in court, or at the World Trade Organization, make the headlines and devoured much of our time. And that was where we dealt most often with U.S. companies. The American Chamber of Commerce to the EU was a very influential group and our closest partner. But the major U.S. firms or industries all had their own lobbyists in Brussels. Just like the K Street crowd in Washington, these guys lobbied all the EU institutions to get laws and regulations that suited their interests. They also came to lobby us—although of course we would never use that term. But they were very effective. You even saw these guys in the member states. I remember when I was in Prague as chargé recently the Apple team from Brussels came to call on me.

Q: Any instances in which U.S. policy clashed with U.S. company goals?

DODMAN: Absolutely. In some sense that's inevitable, since American companies often aren't even pursuing the same goal among themselves. I can go back to the example I gave in Iraq, where American oil firms wanted to cut deals directly with the Kurdish authorities, while our policy was to empower the national oil ministry. This is one reason we always like to deal with the AmCham as a voice for U.S. business interests. That forces someone else to reconcile the competing objectives of the American companies. But the bigger the firm, and the more that was at stake for them, the more likely we would hear from the firm themselves. So yeah, I got to know the Google, Apple and Facebook folks fairly well during that tour. But all that said, in the end our talking points for engaging EU officials came from Washington, not from the industry or from a particular company. The good thing in Brussels was that you were dealing with very professional and experienced folks on the industry side. They knew how the game was played, and that the only place to change U.S. policy was in Washington. That made dealing with these lobbyists a much more positive experience than I would have expected.

Q: I imagine you had endless visits. I wonder if you sometimes felt like maybe you were a second wheel to people visiting NATO and then stopping in on the EU?

DODMAN: There were people who did that and the same thing with the bilateral mission. Sometimes you had CODELs that would do meetings at both NATO and the EU and that worked. And frankly, I was a good example of that. When I was in Mauritania as chief of mission I went to Brussels for consultations and did one day at NATO and one at the EU because both institutions were engaged there. It was an extremely effective trip. For control officers at the two missions, or at the bilateral embassy, this required some extra coordination. But there were, as you said, so many visitors to Brussels that we were all pretty expert at making these work. Now that said, I happily did not have to serve as control officer myself for too many visits. I mainly made sure the machinery worked smoothly, and it generally did.

The other thing that I ended up doing a lot of was engaging with student groups who would come through, both European and American. I worked really closely with public affairs on that sort of outreach. I also did a lot of briefings for CODELs and the like, particularly when I was running the section and acting as DCM. I guess I really enjoyed this part of the job because I have fond memories of explaining to these mostly American audiences what the EU is and why transatlantic relations were important.

Q: Mm-hm. Any notable tensions among the tri-mission or did that all work smoothly?

DODMAN: Um, I'll say yes and no to that. At the working level, as I just talked about, I think things generally worked well. Certainly on routine things like visits. But it was a different story at the top. Look, tri-missions are hard. While I've never served at them, I know that in Rome, Paris, and Vienna you get a lot of tensions. But there's one big

difference between those three and Brussels: in each of them, you have a very large bilateral embassy in a prominent European country; there's no question which of the three missions takes the lead. That's not the case in Brussels. The bilateral relationship isn't that important and, if you strip out the shared admin and security teams, the bilateral embassy is probably the smallest of the three. And then between the two arguably more important missions, there is some serious rivalry about which is more important to U.S. interests. Suffice it to say, at the chief of mission level you had some massive egos and a lot of tensions.

I got to see that most clearly when I was acting DCM in the summer of 2010. Squabbling over a joint Fourth of July party reached epic proportions. Happily, the DCMs at the other two missions were both excellent. They had their hands full managing up, but also made sure the three of us were coordinated and settled most things at our level. I had it easiest, since everyone acknowledged that my ambassador was the most easygoing and certainly had the least fragile ego. So, anyway, I'd like to say that professional FSOs kept these ego-driven clashes from impacting the broader missions and working-level cooperation. That's not completely true. Especially between USEU and USNATO there was a good deal of rivalry. That reflected rivalry between the EU and NATO, as the EU expanded their role in foreign affairs and pol-mil issues. This impacted the pol section at USEU much more than me. But it made cross-town relations between those two missions more difficult than needed. By comparison, I found working level cooperation with the bilateral mission very productive. I'm sure it helped that we were located right next to each other. But it also helped that, other than the ambassador, everyone at Embassy Brussels knew that the relationship with Belgium wasn't that important to Washington, and frankly I think the staff—at least in their econ section—was glad to have the chance to engage with USEU and on EU issues in ways that other bilateral embassies in Europe couldn't.

Q: Yeah. And I can recall in Geneva sometimes it even devolved to spats over which ambassador was going to greet the secretary at the foot of the plane.

DODMAN: Oh, definitely. But at least that specific situation was fairly clear. When Secretary Clinton came to town, it was always the bilateral mission that took precedence and the bilateral ambassador had the honor. I mean, that made sense since it was Belgian authorities who handled protocol for a visit like that. But I don't recall any big visit like that during the few months I was Acting DCM, so I was happily spared most of the squabbling over visits and the like.

Q: How about EU expansion? Was that an issue while you were there?

DODMAN: Not a major issue during my time. At least not in econ. The big expansion was in 2004. There were talks underway with some of the Balkans. Probably Croatia. But it wasn't nearly as big a deal as the 2004 expansion. And frankly the real focus this whole time was the Lisbon Treaty and EU reform. Expansion was definitely on the back burner during that period.

Q: Did you use your French a lot?

DODMAN: No, hardly at all. I mean, so there are two things. One, you know, was Belgium and particularly the capital: you never know who you're talking to, whether they're a French-speaker or a Flemish-speaker. But everyone in Brussels speaks English, including the hordes of expats. It was just easier to speak English all the time. There were certainly restaurants we ended up going to in our neighborhood where it was clear they were French-speaking, so once in a while I would try and order in French. But that's the second point: my French by then was pretty much non-existent. I really had never used it professionally. So, on those rare occasions when I tried to speak in French, it usually ended badly.

Q: Within the European institutions everybody spoke English I presume.

DODMAN: English was a requirement, as well as at least one other European language. In formal internal meetings, everyone would speak in their own language and there was always a boatload of interpreters on hand to make it all function. But we weren't in those meetings. At the working level and certainly in any meeting involving Americans, everyone spoke English. It was simpler. Particularly after all the new members came in in 2004, I think it became much rarer that French was the preferred common language among European officials. I never detected any anxiety about this from French officials—not like I saw later working in Francophone Africa. Everyone just seemed to accept it. Certainly made my life a lot easier.

Q: Sounds like a lot of your role was management, as I guess it justly would be in a section like that where you were overseeing things and making things happen and making sure everything went smoothly rather than being quite as hands-on as you were in some of the previous posts you've talked about.

DODMAN: Yeah. And that was by design. I did take on a few mission-wide issues, but these were again more managerial and administrative. I worked a lot on the institutional side of the bilateral relationship—managing summits and the like. I mentioned earlier the rotating presidencies of the EU and working with our embassies in those countries. I also recall working closely on joint conferences that USEU and USNATO would do bringing all our ambassadors across Europe to Brussels for a two-day session—basically one day focused on each of the two institutions. These were all good in building up contacts at the two missions and with our ambassadors and senior staff across the continent. I can tell you, I learned there were several ambassadors I would never want to work for, and a few posts I would never go to as a result of this. Now that I think of it, since I never worked in EUR again after this tour, I guess those negative vibes were even stronger than I remember.

Anyway, for being in such a policy-focused mission, I guess in hindsight it's a little surprising how little policy I actually managed during those three years.

Q: Well, that's what a management role is about.

DODMAN: Yeah. Now, I should mention a little about how my position evolved. As I said, I arrived in September of 2009, coming to work for Peter Chase, a friend and somebody I really respected. We were due to spend two years together, as I recall. Soon after I arrived, Peter announced that he was going to retire in the spring, meaning I would be acting minister counselor for a while. And while I was sad to see Peter go, I was very ready and willing to move into the more senior slot. Especially since I would have several months to pick Peter's brain before he left. So, it was an easy transition to move up that spring, even though we were in the thick of this terrorist agreement negotiations at the time. I knew the country team and ambassador well, and got along with everyone. As I've mentioned, the ambassador asked me to be Acting DCM for that summer, even though there were more senior FSOs in the mission.

So, it's no surprise that I made the case to the mission front office and to the bureau that they should assign me to that position permanently. This was at some point in the winter, perhaps before I had actually even started the acting job, but I think I had already made clear to everyone that I was qualified for the job, even if I wasn't yet at grade. I think the ambassador wanted me to have it, although he was still fairly new, so I'm not sure how much of a role he played. I don't know what the outgoing DCM thought—he was a hard one to get a straight answer out of. But in the end the DCM told me that I was not getting the job. He blamed it on the bureau, I'm sure. I think he used that horrible line: "you are too important in the job as counselor." Or too good as counselor. Something unhelpful.

So come the end of the summer I had to not only leave the front office—which I was very happy to give up—but go back to number two in econ and worse, break in a new boss. And as so often happens, the bureau's pick to replace Peter as minister counselor was pretty much a disaster. Even though he was coming from a similar job in another European capital, he didn't bring great depth of knowledge on the EU. Worse, he didn't have the confidence to stand up to the big egos and personalities within USEU. This was when the internal tensions among the various economic agencies I talked about earlier really came home to roost. For the next two years, my main job was soothing egos behind the scenes and working things out with other deputies. Basically playing the same role the three DCMs in the tri-mission played to manage their political appointee bosses. That, and also protecting my direct staff and the rest of the section from this guy's erratic management style. In other words, my main job became chief welfare and morale officer. And I'm glad to say I did that well. I also maintained my close relationship with the ambassador, and developed a good one with the new DCM. So I had an overall fulfilling and tolerable remainder of the tour. But not nearly as good as if they had just given me the senior job and avoided all the drama that my new boss brought with him. Anyway, not an unusual Foreign Service tale, sadly.

Q: True, true. Sounds like you made the best of it. Anything else on Brussels you want to talk about before we close for the day?

DODMAN: For sure. Let me talk a bit about our FSNs. The four econ local staff in the mission to the European Union were, as a group, far and away the best I've seen. And I

say the following not to disparage the Belgians at all, but one sign of how good they were is that not a single one of them was Belgian. They had each come to Brussels to work on EU issues, and ended up drawn to USEU because we had a reputation as a strong local player. When you think about it, we were drawing from a talent pool that stretched over the whole continent. These guys were awesome. I had to fill one vacancy during my time, and the caliber of applicants was something else. I consider it my crowning achievement on the management side that I got each of the four staff upgraded by two grades to better reflect the highly skilled work they were doing. Obviously that won me a lot of goodwill from these folks, which felt good and hopefully served the mission well. I'd had some prior success with regrading FSNs in Prague, but not two steps and not for a whole section at once. I have to say, it made me feel good getting the system to work and do the right thing.

Let me close with one last story. This gets back to my working on summits and getting Washington to take the EU seriously. Based on an agreement we had negotiated with the EU at some point, we were supposed to have a presidential-level summit with the EU every year, in addition to a bunch of senior-level dialogues. Those dialogues did good work—I talked a bit about that during my time with Under Secretary Larson. But the summits were tricky. We hadn't had one in years. Basically, White House staff saw them as a waste of the president's time. You would have not only the EU leaders—which meant the heads of both the commission and the council—but also the 27 or however many heads of member states. Each of whom wanted to say something. No wonder we avoided them.

But somehow, we got both sides to agree to hold a summit in 2011. Obama understood the importance of diplomacy with the Europeans. But the only way the White House would agree was to schedule it on the margins of the annual NATO summit, which was in Lisbon that year. And to strictly limit the agenda and time, which meant limited speechifying from the Europeans. The EU side hated the idea of being an add-on to the NATO event. But this was right after the Lisbon Treaty took effect, and they wanted the visuals of a summit, plus they wanted Obama's star power, so they swallowed their pride.

I was the point person in the mission for putting this together. I was in Lisbon to make sure it all worked. I'll skip most of the gory details, except one. As is always the case, the most contentious fight was over who would be in the room. Of course we were fighting to keep the number of Europeans down, so we couldn't let in too many Americans. There was one senior U.S. official—I honestly have spaced on the name, but he was senior advisor for something—who did not need to be there, but Secretary Clinton's staff insisted. I expect someone important—like a notetaker—had to drop to make way for this guy. The allotted time arrives for the event, we get everyone in the room, talks start, and I'm feeling good. I'm not in the room, but that was fine by me. The summit was scheduled for two hours, if I'm remembering correctly. But less than an hour into the meeting, Secretary Clinton and her staff leave—including this senior advisor who absolutely had to be part of the discussions. I guess the Portuguese had told her that if her plane didn't leave pronto, she would be in the queue behind all the heads of state and might not get home for a long time. So, two things: first—and these things shouldn't have

surprised me by this point—it was so galling to waste a seat on this senior advisor fool whose only aim was not to advance US-EU relations but to suck up to the secretary. And second, what a horrible signal to our closest partners: not only do we force them to take a short meeting in a NATO side room, but our number two official can't even be bothered to give two hours of her time. I found the whole incident really distasteful. Anyway, it all ended well enough. There was a very useful press conference after between Obama and the presidents of the council and the commission. The press reporting in Europe was positive. The Euros were happy. And I survived. Best I can recall, this was my only summit experience. Happily.

And so that was Brussels. A challenging post in many ways, but overall I left with enough good memories and good friends. Although that said, I did try to bail after two years. I had my ambassador's agreement to curtail to fill a vacant DCM slot at another European embassy. The timing would have worked well for my family because my one kid graduated high school at that point, and the youngest had two more years to go. Anyway, I ended up as runner-up for that job, so I finished out the three years at USEU as planned. A fine tour, but far from my favorite post.

Q: Okay. Well, that's great. Let's leave it here for today.

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Q: Today is July 28, 2023. This is Peter Eicher beginning a new session of the oral history interview of Mike Dodman. Mike, last session we covered your assignment to the U.S. Mission to the EU in Brussels from 2009 to 2012. Anything more you wanted to add about Brussels before we move on?

DODMAN: Just to bring it full circle to the discussion about getting this job and how I was a little worried about it being a lateral move: with the exception of the few months where I was acting minister counselor and acting DCM, that was pretty much the case. And as we'll talk about when we get to bidding in a minute, it definitely delayed my promotion into the senior service. But I have no regrets. The family all loved the tour, and frankly none of them can understand why I say so many negative things about Brussels. I worked for an ambassador I deeply respected, and that was critical. And all the internal challenges I confronted made me a better leader and manager. Of course, I also learned a hell of a lot about the EU. Including the fact that I don't particularly like the EU, even though I appreciate its importance. All good things to take away from a tour.

Q: Well, it's arguably our most important relationship so it's a good one to know about and be able to work in and with.

DODMAN: Yeah. So, it was all worth doing. But suffice it to say: I was very ready to leave when the time came.

Q: Okay. So, after your curtailment didn't work, it would have been about a year before you ended your three-year tour that you started looking for an actual scheduled next assignment.

DODMAN: Yeah. So, the decision-making on the onward assignment after Brussels was very similar to after Prague. Our youngest child would finish her junior year of high school when those three years were up. When I failed to curtail after the second year and get her into a school at a new post where she could do her last two years in one place, I knew that I was most likely to be seeking another job that would let me leave my family in Brussels for one more year. So back to Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iraq.

The other thing that was going on at this time was that I was, as I mentioned, not getting promoted. I had opened my window for promotion to the Senior Service when I was leaving Prague, so five years after getting promoted to 01. Since I was heading into a double stretch position in Baghdad, and had a very strong record coming out of Prague, I was confident I would get promoted pretty quickly. But I got passed over on my first two looks while in Brussels—came close, but not promoted. Up to this point my promotions had come quickly and easily, so this was frustrating and a little perplexing. Especially since I was getting glowing evaluations out of USEU. So, by the time the summer of 2011 came around and I had to get serious about bidding, I was not a particularly happy camper. That was also the year I turned 50, which prompted a lot of soul searching about whether this all was a sign that it was time to retire and move to something else.

One step I took that summer helped me work through this and ended up keeping me in. I realized I didn't know enough about the promotion process. So I volunteered to serve on a promotion board. It was an eye-opening experience. I can't say that it made me an advocate for the Foreign Service promotion system. But I definitely understood it much better, and in particular the way the promotion numbers are calculated. That helped ease some of my frustration with being stuck at 01.

So anyway, I decided to stay and focused on the onward. But was bidding as an 01. Obviously, in addition to keeping the family in Brussels, I wanted a job that was going to finally get me promoted. Among the three options that would let me keep my family at post, I pretty quickly zeroed in on Pakistan. I didn't want to go back to Iraq, and Afghanistan seemed very similar to Iraq in many ways. Whereas Pakistan felt very different: more traditional diplomacy, and a fascinating country with a lot of economic potential. And I won't lie, I was also influenced by the fact that the ambassador in Islamabad at the time was Cameron Munter, who had been my DCM in Prague and with whom I'd worked on and off over basically my whole career. Not only did I hope that Cameron could be helpful in getting me the job I wanted, I knew that he would also be honest in steering me towards a position that would be good for me and good for the mission. And happily, that's just how it worked. We quickly decided that the consul general job in Karachi would be the best fit. The only problem: this was an OC job, so a stretch. But unlike the situation I faced in getting the stretch job in Brussels, in this case the ambassador strongly supported me with the bureau. And I would imagine the competition was less intense. Of course, principal officers are actually assigned by the

DCM/PO committee, so the bureau must have been really convincing in putting me forward. It worked. I got the job. And to make things even sweeter, that fall I did get the promotion to OC. So all of this made my last year in Brussels a lot easier: I knew I was staying in the service, didn't have to stress about promotion, and could focus on learning about a fascinating new part of the world.

Q: So, Brussels worked.

DODMAN: I wouldn't give too much credit to the USEU work for getting me promoted. I mean my best work there was in my first year, and I got passed over on that EER (employee evaluation report). The truth is that the number of slots for econ officers to get over the threshold in 2011 just worked in my favor. Anyway, this whole experience with the promotion board and deep dive into understanding the system all proved useful when I later took a job in HR, and even more after that when I worked a lot more on econ officer career development. So as with the EU expertise, this knowledge was all worth acquiring.

Q: Okay, good. So, this would have been—you would have headed off to Karachi in the middle of 2012?

DODMAN: Right.

Q: For what was initially slated as a one-year assignment or—

DODMAN: No, it was a two-year assignment. As I said in talking about the Baghdad tour, I knew I didn't want to do another one-year job. So, even though I only needed one year to get my family through Brussels, and post certainly would have taken me for just one year, I committed to two years from the get-go. With the plan that Joan would join me there for the second year after getting our daughter through her last year in Brussels.

Q: Okay. Well, before we get to Karachi let's talk about what happened between Brussels and Karachi. As CG they put you in the DCM course?

DODMAN: Yes. I left Brussels in the summer of 2012, and as was the case before the Baghdad tour, spent a fairly long period in the States that summer. The DCM/Principal Officer course was three weeks. That was mostly useful, although a bit redundant on some of the leadership stuff because I had done the SETS class—the mandatory leadership class for new senior officers—in January that year. But the DCM class definitely filled in some of the knowledge gaps that I knew I was missing from my many stints as an acting DCM. Being new to Pakistan I did a lot of consultations to get up to speed. Actually, I'd made good use of that last year in Brussels to jumpstart the area familiarization. Besides reading many books on the country and region, I did consultations in both Brussels and London before I left post. So, by the time I got to Karachi in July, I felt well prepared.

Q: Let's just stick with the DCM/PO course for a minute. There are a lot of reporting officers who have never led a large section when they get tapped to be DCM or consul general. Of course, you had. But did you think the course was good enough to prepare others for the challenges these positions present?

DODMAN: You know, I've got some mixed views about the DCM/PO course. First off, the parts that covered the nuts and bolts of being a DCM or PO were adequate to the task. That was about two-thirds of the class. Lots of talking heads telling you what you need to know about legal issues, family advocacy, security, personnel, and so on. The quality of these things was certainly uneven, but it met the need.

My real concern was exactly the area you identified. About a third of the class was designed to build leadership skills. This is admittedly a tough task, since you have people in the class ranging from 02 to MC officers, so a broad range of experiences. So, let me not focus on the DCM/PO class per se, but the way FSI teaches leadership. Since if someone hasn't demonstrated some leadership skills by this point, a week of FSI training before becoming a DCM or PO isn't going to cut it. I'm grateful Colin Powell brought leadership training to the department and made it mandatory. We'd be in much worse shape than we are if he hadn't forced this on the bureaucracy. And I've taken all the mandatory classes since the 02 level, as well as the chief of mission class and some that weren't mandatory. I think I'm a very good manager and leader. Some of that is probably due to things I learned in these classes. But I feel very confident I was able to benefit from the classes because I already had an aptitude for this stuff. I don't believe the classes FSI offers can make a strong leader out of someone who doesn't have some innate leadership ability. Sadly, the large number of people who fail at being DCM or PO or section chief or ambassador are proof of that.

I don't know what's more important to fix this: doing a better job of teaching leadership, or doing a better job of hiring FSOs to ensure we are getting those who will be successful as leaders. Neither is easy. But we also definitely need to do a better job of vetting FSOs for DCMships and other senior leadership jobs. I'm sure we'll get to this in later discussions about my service on the DCM/PO committee. But for now, let me just say the answer to your question is No: I don't believe the DCM/PO class does what we think it does in terms of creating strong leaders.

Q: Thanks, Mike. Before we finish with training, I wanted to ask whether you got a refresher consular course as you headed off to what was probably quite a busy consulate or any other language training perhaps.

DODMAN: You're right. Karachi had a very significant consular operation. And in the post-9/11 era, this created a lot of headaches for me as CG. I didn't take any consular training per se. I recall the CA (consular affairs bureau) presentations in the DCM/PO class were very helpful. And I had several meetings with senior folks in CA to get up to speed on Pakistan-specific issues. Policy and operations. But no, there was no need to go back and repeat con-gen or anything like that.

And no, unfortunately there was no time for any Urdu training. Being an Anglophone country, the language definitely wasn't essential. But it would have been very nice to have. I did start taking Urdu classes when I got to post, but for reasons we'll talk about, those didn't last long. It's a regret. I didn't have Arabic in Iraq, but I felt the lack of Urdu more, since I dealt with so many more Pakistanis than I did Iraqis. But it was never a significant impediment since nearly every contact at my level spoke English just fine.

Q: Okay. So, off you went. Anything else that we want to talk about before you actually set foot on the ground?

DODMAN: Yeah, one big snafu had to be overcome. Again, another typical Foreign Service saga. As I said, Joan and I had made the decision that I would do my first year alone while she stayed in Brussels with our daughter. And then she would join me for the second year and work for the mission. I had the ambassador's and the bureau's support for that. And full support in Brussels, where my wife worked and they were thrilled to keep her for the extra year. Unfortunately, the assignments people did their best to thwart these carefully laid plans. The problem was that my first year I would have to be TDY from Brussels. But then the second year I would need to be assigned directly to Karachi. And apparently in a decade of creative solutions to meet urgent staffing needs in Iraq and the others, no one had ever had the temerity to try to do this. Which I find very hard to believe. So, HR insisted I had to either go TDY for two years—which meant my wife couldn't join me the second year—or be assigned to Karachi for two years—which meant my family couldn't get that additional year in Brussels. No amount of persuasion from me would convince HR that while what I proposed may create some additional paperwork, there was absolutely no reason I could see that it was not feasible. In the end I had to go to Ambassador Munter, who directed his management counselor to make it happen. Which of course it did, since it was obviously both family-friendly and fiscally more responsible than sending me TDY for two years. Honestly, the things we wasted time on never cease to amaze. Anyway, it got done just as I had set it up. And I headed to Karachi as planned.

Q: Okay. Well, set the scene in Karachi. Describe the consulate general.

DODMAN: Right. So, CG Karachi was a large platform. Put it this way: I had more staff at the consulate in Karachi than I did at the embassy in Nouakchott. We had a big pol-econ section of five or six Americans, plus four or five FSNs. PD (public diplomacy) was also very large with five Americans and many FSNs. As I said, a large consular section with six or seven American staff. The RSO (regional security officer) shop was understandably large. I believe we had four RSOs. In terms of other agencies, we had no permanent DOD presence other than a full Marine detachment. We had a large USAID operation, with three or four Americans most of the time and a lot of FSNs. As we'll likely talk about later, one of those Americans eventually included my wife. We had a rotating FBI presence when I arrived, but we got that changed to a permanent officer.

So, yes, it was a large staff. But of course, very limited on the family side. No kids, and no spouses unless they had a job pre-arranged. We had several tandem couples, and

maybe a half dozen EFMs (eligible family members) with jobs, one of whom was my wife for the second year.

The consulate had moved into a new compound the year before I arrived, which made me happy because my predecessor got to work out all the kinks. It was very secure and built on the model of all the new secure compounds. It had a lot of similarities to the new embassy building in Baghdad and the new compound I would inaugurate in Nouakchott. But that's not a criticism. I actually found the design very effective—something I learned to appreciate even more after I went back to Prague as chargé and really came to appreciate how dysfunctional working in an old palace could be. The new compound was very much needed in Karachi because the old consulate had been attacked repeatedly. Before they moved into the new compound in 2011, consulate staff were basically working in a very small part, essentially a bunker, in what had been the consulate—actually, what was originally the embassy—because the front part was too close to the street. Horrible working conditions, and the housing wasn't fully secure either. So, getting that new compound open was a big deal.

Security was by far our biggest challenge. Karachi is a dangerous city in the best of circumstances. Political and ethnic violence are very common. There are plenty of Taliban in the city, both Pakistani and Afghani. Most of the violence was between Pakistani groups. But there was a significant element of anti-American sentiment, which had resulted in the attacks on our consulate and some assassinations. Suffice it to say, I was very happy to have a purpose-built, secure, and really quite comfortable compound to move right into when I arrived in 2012.

Q: Were all the staff living on the compound?

DODMAN: Almost all. Some staff continued to live in our old compound, which we continued to operate during my time there. The truth is, when it opened in 2011, the new consulate compound was already too small. Staffing was up quite a bit in Pakistan during the period I was there for a couple reasons. This was after President Obama's surge in Afghanistan and we were now getting ready to draw down in Afghanistan. In order to get Pakistani support for our activities in Afghanistan we had really increased our assistance levels and just generally our engagement. Recall that the Obama Administration was when we really started talking about Afghanistan and Pakistan as practically one unit, and we had set up the office of the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) to manage the two. The increased funding for both programs and personnel led to a staffing surge across Mission Pakistan after 2009, and that new consulate in Karachi had clearly been designed based on staffing levels before that.

So, there was not enough housing nor enough office space. Right after I arrived one of the first things that happened was a long-planned project to replace all the cubicles where most of the unclassified work took place. Every cubicle was removed and replaced with something about a third smaller so that you could fit more desks into the same space. USAID was paying for this because USAID was the one that was really increasing its presence the most. But this also impacted management, public affairs, and all the FNSs.

I'll admit that I was nervous about walking in and overseeing a project I had had no role in designing, but I'm happy to report it went very smoothly and I don't recall any significant complaints. On the housing side things weren't as rough because we had the old compound that we could use for some of the more expeditionary elements of my staff. Happily, there was plenty of room for expansion on the new compound, and after I left they built a new wing on the residential building and, I believe, a new annex building.

Q; So, it certainly wasn't a Green Zone kind of thing, was it, where you had to have special plans and security to go off the compound?

DODMAN: Well, it wasn't a Green Zone in the sense that our compound was self-contained and not part of a larger secure area. But it was similar to Baghdad in that movements off the consulate compound were very restricted. I had my own security detail and always travelled with a group of armed guards and a follow car—similar to what I had in Nouakchott. But every other American also had to travel with an armed guard and in a fully-armored vehicle when they went off the compound, whether for work or pleasure. It was not a place where I or anyone else could live spontaneously.

But your mention of the Green Zone reminds me of the rather strange location that had been chosen for the new compound. In fact, we were pretty centrally located considering how much space we needed. It was close to the port of Karachi, which is maybe why this large plot was available. We were surrounded on three sides by major roads. But literally over our back wall was a neighborhood that presented a few security headaches. Someone looking at it with an American eye might have called in a slum, but in fact it was a typical, densely packed Karachi neighborhood. Most neighborhoods there were not ethnically mixed. This one happened to be heavily Pashtun, which meant it was likely there would be some Taliban there. And when I say it was close, I mean there were houses built right up to our wall. Some of them looked over our wall. A real headache.

During my time there was a lot of focus on doing anything possible to mitigate any potential risk but also trying to build a positive relationship so at the very least the elders of the community had a somewhat positive opinion of the consulate. We had no security problems from that direction during my time there, so I guess we did something right.

Q: Can you remember what specifically you did to win the goodwill of the neighborhood?

DODMAN: I visited a few times. Ramadan occurred soon after I arrived, and we hosted an iftar dinner for the community leaders in a school there. We tried to include the neighborhood in some of our community-based, USAID projects. I remember a visit where we provided some sports equipment to the school. So, nothing huge or particularly innovative. I was just always looking to make sure that neighborhood didn't get overlooked.

Q: And in the larger picture, clearly there was a terrorist issue but how were relations between the United States and Pakistan at the time?

DODMAN: Strained. Very strained. 2012 may have been a low point. In the year before I arrived you had had a couple major incidents. In Lahore there was a U.S. government contractor who shot and killed a Pakistani during a traffic incident; the contractor was hustled out of country, and that left a lot of bad feelings. After that, U.S. forces in Afghanistan mistakenly bombed a Pakistani military base on the Pakistani side of the border. It was obviously a mistake but of course, in an incredibly conspiracy-minded country, you know, there are no mistakes. A year or two before there had been the Abbottabad raid where we got bin Laden but again, it was done without Pakistani coordination so that left a sour taste. But overriding all of that was the drone campaign that frequently targeted sites in Pakistan where we suspected Afghan or Pakistani Taliban were operating. There was, and I'm sorry to use this term, a lot of collateral damage in those attacks. Many civilian deaths.

So, I would say that certainly in terms of public opinion, the United States was not well liked. I can't talk too authoritatively about formal government relations, both because I happily didn't deal with these as often as the embassy did, and because I didn't have a previous tour there to compare this period to.

As I mentioned earlier, to try to improve the relationship, we were massively expanding assistance and engagement with Pakistan. The Kerry-Lugar-Berman bill in 2009 had given us a huge boost in funding, which was coming online in a big way when I was there. So, the good news for me is that I had a lot of opportunities to engage with civil society in the mega city of Karachi and the surrounding Sindh province, and do my best to try to turn around these negative impressions.

Q: So, what issues did you find yourself dealing with? I mean, you said security obviously was always a concern, but beyond that?

DODMAN: In terms of internal management, security was the number one issue. Second was maintaining morale and making sure that people were not burning out. Externally I tried to focus as much as possible on business. Karachi is the business capital of the country: the major port, home of the central bank and all the biggest firms. There were a lot of American businesses in Pakistan, but all of them were headed by Pakistanis. I can think of only two or three expat businessmen who lived in Karachi at the time, and none were American. I became very involved with the American Chamber of Commerce. I wish I could point to new American investment that I brought to the city or country. But I can't. Not for lack of trying though. But even if I wasn't successful in getting in new investment, I still think the business focus was important because it was all very public and helped to dilute the impression that all we cared about in Pakistan was security and the Taliban.

The business stuff was actually just a subset of a broader public diplomacy push. I will say, this was where I found my true public diplomacy inner-self. I was constantly giving speeches, doing press interviews, meeting school kids. Basically anything to get me out of the consulate and in front of people or a camera. Because we had such a large assistance program during that period, we were always starting a project or completing a

project, so a lot of ribbon cuttings and press attached to that. While I did get out a lot, the security realities meant I couldn't go everywhere. So we had a very active Facebook presence and my public diplomacy folks came up with all sorts of ways to amplify my message through that. Really, I had a great PD team, and they put the very large budget they had to very creative use. I did a lot of youth engagement, a lot of English language instruction for underprivileged kids, a lot of sports diplomacy. We did a cricket match for kids during Ramadan. We had a surprising number of American musical groups that came to Karachi and so we'd host concerts and things. The PD side was just downright fun.

There was also a lot of politics. Two of the biggest political parties in the country were headquartered in Karachi. The president at the time was Benazir Bhutto's husband. Bhutto herself had already been assassinated by this point. But the family, including her husband, Zardari, remained based in Karachi, so we had a lot of political work to be done there in very close coordination with the embassy. The ambassador was regularly down for many reasons, including to engage the political leadership there.

We had active law enforcement cooperation, which is how we got the FBI to establish a permanent presence there. Karachi is the home to the Pakistani Navy, although I didn't engage them that much. We did host the chief of naval operations, the head of the U.S. Navy, at one point. But on the civilian side of the port, we were very engaged. This was where most goods came in or out of the country. On the export side, we were moving tons of equipment out of Afghanistan through this port. Plus huge amounts still coming in to sustain not just our presence in Afghanistan, but to keep the embassy commissary stocked. A large part of the consulate's GSO (general service office) kept the relationship with the port stable.

Q: You must have covered a big chunk of the country. What, there were maybe two other consulates, Lahore and Peshawar or were there more than that?

DODMAN: That's right. Three consulates total. So, there are four provinces in Pakistan. Punjab is probably the largest and the most prominent. That was Lahore, the capital of Punjab. Peshawar handled what used to be called the Northwest Territories, which is largely the tribal areas very connected to Afghanistan. Peshawar was a very small consulate with even more rigorous security than we had in Karachi. Karachi was by far the largest consulate and the largest consular district. The southern two provinces of Pakistan, Sindh and Balochistan, were covered out of Karachi. You know, Sindh Province itself had somewhere north of 50 million people, with 20 million in Karachi alone. It's a big province, heavily agricultural. The Indus River flows through the province and is the lifeblood of the economy. Some of the devastating floods that swamped Pakistan in 2022 were in places in Sindh that I had seen and traveled in and done a lot of reporting on.

Balochistan Province to the west was not as populated. Balochistan borders Iran and Afghanistan, and also has coastline on the Persian Gulf. The Baloch are a separate ethnic group. One of many in Pakistan, including Sindhis and Punjabis. But the Baloch are notable because some of them have talked about and even fought for independence over

the years. I'd like to be able to say more about Balochistan but unfortunately I can't because during my two years I was never once able to step foot in the province. That despite the fact that the closest coastal city in Balochistan was only an hour drive from Karachi. The reason I couldn't travel is not because my security wouldn't allow it, but because of the paranoia of Pakistani authorities. We needed to get permission to travel anytime we left the city. This was almost never a problem in Sindh. But every one of several requests for me or my staff to visit Balochistan got denied. Allegedly due to security concerns. But the real reason was the conspiracy mindset of the government, and specifically of the military intelligence, the ISI. Best I could tell, they were convinced that the Americans and Indians were together trying to promote Baloch independence as a way to weaken Pakistan. And that I was somehow a major player in this. All of my protestations that we support the territorial integrity of Pakistan, that we want a strong, secure Pakistan as a partner and a bulwark against all these other regional problems, none of it ever made an impression on the folks who really called the shots. So, yes, it was a very big consular district, but I never got to see half of it.

Q: Yeah. And generally, I presume you had a security detail as you wandered around?

DODMAN: Always. I was lucky to have great RSO support during my tour. My protective detail was made up of Sindh provincial police who had been seconded to the consulate and provided with specialized training. So they weren't USG employees, but I think we provided them with a stipend in addition to their training. They were very good. I felt very well protected. Really, I saw no difference between them and the bodyguards I had in Nouakchott, who were USG employees. These guys made sure I could go wherever I needed to go. And as I said, I did get out a lot, considering the not-very-permissive environment.

For others in the consulate, as I said they had to have an armed bodyguard with them anytime they left the compound. For work or pleasure. And let me say here: there were some lovely parts of Karachi. Some excellent upscale restaurants. There was a shopping mall that people would go to. Arts and other culture. I really encouraged people to get off the compound on the weekend if they wanted to. Some didn't, but most people did. It was a hassle for them having to deal with motor pool and being tailed by a guard. But people adjusted. Frankly our biggest problems were with TDY visitors. Especially coming from the embassy, where life was much freer.

Q: You mentioned in passing a few minutes ago that you did some reporting. Were you actually reporting yourself or would this have been your staff that was reporting on your behalf?

DODMAN: As I said, we had a big reporting section, several political and econ officers. But it's more accurate to say we were part of the massive reporting sections of Mission Pakistan. There were a lot of cables that came out of CG Karachi. I wrote a few myself, but not many. Certainly not as many as I ended up doing in Nouakchott. I took an active role in editing. The pol-econ chief, and actually all my section heads, were 02 officers and most were first-time section heads. It was a pretty junior staff. Which was one of the

reasons I wanted to be in Karachi—to have a staff that needed mentoring and support. So, I certainly helped with getting our reporting to a level where, you know, I thought it should be. But that was as much being done by Islamabad, which set the standards for reporting. Dick Hoagland was the DCM when I arrived. Dick was famous for being a real stickler, and I meant that mostly in a positive sense, for reporting. He had a style guide that he insisted all reporting follow.

For myself, I ended up writing up some of the meetings I went to, since not all my interlocutors felt comfortable having a notetaker in the room. Some of this would have been with senior political folks on country-wide issues, but much of it touched on security issues closer to home—stuff that in the immediate aftermath of the Benghazi attacks was of intense interest in DC. Another area where we would have done reporting and I would have had a heavy hand was on consular issues. Not case-specific things but trying to make the broader argument that our policies on visa issuance were self-defeating. We had multiple cases involving particularly businesspeople but also scholars and other cultural contacts who waited years, literally years, for a response to their visa application. In most cases the response was positive, but not always. But by that point does it really matter? This whole process ran completely contrary to all my efforts to build up business and cultural ties. So I definitely wanted to go on record that our post-9/11 security policies were overdue for a serious review.

Q; And was Karachi one of these consulates with a line of applicants around the block or was there a better system for dealing with it?

DODMAN: I mean, there was a better system. Certainly compared to my 1988 experience in Warsaw. Happily, you know, technology and CA's management had improved quite a bit. We had an appointment system; we had a contractor who managed our appointments and got people in and out of the consulate. I do not recall the wait to get into the consulate ever being something people complained to me about. As I mentioned, I tried to get out and be seen as much as possible, and that meant accepting a lot of invitations to social events. It was a very rare evening when I was not asked about a visa case. That was not just a matter of those long interagency reviews of certain applicants who happened to have the wrong name. It was also a local phenomenon, you know, powerful people feel they need to put in a word with the consul general to get a favorable decision. Which of course was nonsense, and I never—or almost never—intervened in routine cases or denials. But those long, long pending interagency reviews were another matter.

Q: Did you have success when you tried to appeal individual cases?

DODMAN: We did. It seems to me some of them had actually fallen through the cracks and it took a high-level push to get the bureaucracy to find them. The bigger problem was a systemic one, and we actually got some movement there as well. The interagency rolled out a new automated system that I don't recall the name of, but it had an interface that included red and green stoplight signals. Obviously it was what was behind those two colors that mattered, but I only remember the stoplights. And that system did reduce the

number of cases that needed Washington review, which made my life easier. And I think I played a small role in making that happen: I was meeting with Pat Kennedy, the under secretary for management, during a trip home, and he casually asked if there was anything he could do, and I told him about these visa horror stories; I guess he was on his way to an NSC meeting to discuss this new stoplight system, and that helped him make the case and get it over the finish line.

Q: Great. So, this was your first experience working in a consulate rather than an embassy, where you had always been, you know, in the midst of the big issues of the moment. How did it feel to be away from the embassy? How did that work? Were you satisfied with that?

DODMAN: I was very satisfied. I went to Islamabad at least once a month. Rick Olson came in as ambassador about six months into my time there and he put in a requirement that the three consuls general attend one country team meeting each month in person. The others we beamed into. I felt very connected to the embassy, and got to know folks there very well. We had a lot of visits down from the embassy as well. So, that connection really helped.

That said, every time I went to Islamabad, I was happy to leave. As much as I liked and respected many folks there, I did not enjoy that massive embassy and all of the intrigue and the interagency problems that were there. I mean, it was just too big. I was always happy to go back to our large but very much simpler-to-run consulate. We had several agencies in the consulate, so there was always the potential for those interagency conflicts to manifest themselves on our compound. Honestly, I think everyone in Karachi was just happy they weren't working in the embassy—that helped bring us together.

The other thing I loved was that I could avoid most of the military issues. As I said, I did a lot of interviews. Inevitably the question of drones would come up. My answer was something along the lines of, "I am here in Karachi to focus on the business community and people-to-people ties; that's the embassy's responsibility," and that was the truth. I was very happy not to have to deal with that.

To me, being a principal officer is the best job in the Foreign Service. Since this assignment I regularly tell people I'm mentoring that they should go for a principal officer job over DCM when they get to that point in their career. It's a far better experience. I'm aware that my experience is limited to this one very unique post. But I'm confident in that assessment.

Q: That's great. That's good to know. Now, you had mentioned the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Would you in Karachi have had anything to do with that person?

DODMAN: Oh, yeah. Holbrooke was gone by that point and I think Marc Grossman was the SRAP for much of my time there. I had worked for Grossman in Turkey so that was a good connection. By this point SRAP was essentially a small bureau running everything

related to these two countries, so when I had to deal with Washington, someone in SRAP was usually the starting point. Not normally Grossman himself, but his deputies.

A lot of SRAP folks came through Karachi, of course. One in particular is worth mentioning. Ambassador Robin Raphel was a senior advisor in SRAP and someone with a long history in the country. Her ex-husband was Arnie Raphel, who had been killed in a helicopter explosion when he was ambassador there and out traveling with the Pakistani president. Robin was far and away our most frequent visitor from Washington—certainly that was the case for Karachi; I can't be sure for Islamabad. I know that some folks in the embassy may have found her visits to be perhaps more trouble than they were worth. That was not the case for me in Karachi. First off, Robin had deep and long-standing connections across Pakistan and very much so in Karachi. She opened doors to me that needed to be opened, and introduced me to folks I may not have met on my own. And even people I did consider good contacts opened up with Robin in ways they didn't with me as a newcomer. Sure, much of the discussion was gossip about current and past events. But that stuff is important currency in a place like Pakistan. Well truthfully in most of the places we operate. But beyond expanding my circle, Robin's visits were important because they were a visible affirmation to social and political leaders in Karachi that someone in Washington cared about what they had to say. And I guess third, these visits were always a good chance for me to get some insights on what was happening back at HST (the Truman building). So, yeah, I always welcomed Robin to Karachi with open arms.

But let me circle back to your original question. Yes, despite being in a consulate, I did have a lot of direct engagement with SRAP and Washington generally. Of course, the embassy was in much more frequent contact with them, but I had the freedom to engage on my own. Copying or back briefing the mother ship as necessary, to be sure. And I guess this is a good example of why I had such a successful tour and I enjoyed being in the consulate as much as I did. I really felt—I knew—that I had the trust and support of the front office in Islamabad. I mentioned earlier that a significant factor in going to Karachi was that Cameron Munter was the ambassador. As luck would have it, Munter left post literally the day after I arrived. So I definitely had to prove myself to the chargé, Dick Hoagland, and Rick Olson when he arrived—both of whom had significant experience in South Asia and the Gulf, and would have been very aware that I had none. Initially maybe that connection with Munter gave me some positive standing in the front office. But I'd like to think that it was the way I managed the first serious trial by fire I had early in my tenure that really cemented my reputation in Islamabad and DC.

Q: Okay. Well, why don't we turn now to that incident?

DODMAN: Sure. So, the backdrop is the Benghazi attacks in September of 2012. I'd been at post for six weeks or so when that consulate was overrun and our ambassador and others killed. To put it mildly, Washington went into overdrive looking for other posts that might be susceptible to copycat attacks. Happily, our compound in Karachi was nothing like the converted villa in Benghazi, but otherwise a lot of our daily realities in

Karachi ticked boxes that nervous analysts and policy makers in Washington were looking at. Or looking for.

If you recall all the hype around Benghazi and the hearings that ensued, there was an anti-Islamic video circulating on YouTube at the time that kept coming up. And in fact, that video was already riling up a lot of the religious right in Pakistan. Anything rumored to be desecrating the Prophet Mohammed or Islam generally was fair game for any number of Pakistani religious leaders to mobilize their supporters. And so it was with this video. Best I can remember, the video itself had not been made by an American. But the fact that it was hosted on YouTube, which was owned by Google, was all the connection the radicals needed to make the US of A the focus of their fury. There were protests against the video across the country, but the epicenter was Karachi, with the consulate of course becoming the physical target for their fury.

Before we get into specifics, a word about how the Pakistani authorities manage these sorts of protests. For a lot of reasons, including that some of the religious leaders stirring the pot are politically powerful, the preferred response is to let them run their course. They know the fury will eventually play out and attention will move to some other conspiracy or alleged heresy. Of course, people will likely die and property be destroyed in the process—that's an acceptable cost in their calculation. Happily, for us, they do generally take seriously their obligations to protect diplomatic property and staff. And to give away the punch line to this story, that's what they did here.

To boil it down, what we had in Karachi were protests on the three Fridays after the Benghazi attacks. The first was large but—not to be too blasé about it—nothing we couldn't handle. Police shut down the roads leading to the consulate, we hunkered down, and nobody got close enough to do anything. I kept Islamabad and DC informed throughout, and spent a lot of time making sure everyone sheltering in the consulate was fine. They were. This wasn't the first lockdown they or I had been through. Just another crazy Friday in Karachi. Except for two things. First, that really pissed the radicals off, and they redoubled efforts to whip their followers for a much larger protest to defend the Prophet the following week. And second, Washington didn't quite have the same blasé reaction that we did, particularly when they saw the calls for much bigger and more violent action the following week.

And this is where things really took a turn. As we started coordination with police and local officials for how we would keep an estimated 100,000 protestors away from the consulate—admittedly several times more than we had previously seen—Washington made a unilateral decision to draw down my consulate. This was done without any discussion with me. I was simply told that all non-essential personnel would be sent to Dubai for the weekend.

Q: You had no consultation or prior indication that they were thinking of doing this?

DODMAN: None. From either Washington or the embassy. Obviously those two were talking, since the call to me came from Islamabad. From the acting DCM. It was probably

that Tuesday. I remember I was in a car going to or from some meeting—probably with the police chief or governor to coordinate plans for Friday—and was told sympathetically but emphatically that the under secretary for management had determined that there will be a drawdown. Oh, and by the way, he's also decided who will be allowed to stay behind. So much for the essential personnel list in our emergency action plan. I don't recall if it was put this way in that initial call, but the chargé repeatedly referred to this as a "weekend in Dubai" implying somewhat condescendingly that my staff should be happy to get an all-expenses-paid break from the grind of Karachi. And here's another spoiler: of course, it lasted much longer than a weekend.

As I recall it now, I got over the frustration of not being consulted fairly quickly. I mean, it was not business as usual in the immediate aftermath of Benghazi. [Parenthetical note: of course, not being consulted is, in fact, business as usual.] My immediate concern was how to tell my staff. Because here's the context that Pat Kennedy and Secretary Clinton didn't likely understand or care about: my team in Karachi were there because they wanted to be there. They knew what they had signed up for. I'm sure that if the department had offered a voluntary short regional drawdown, several of them would have raised their hand, both happy to avoid a long lockdown and possible violence, as well as the chance for a short R&R. But I know most would not. And they would particularly hate the stigma of being called non-essential. I also knew word would spread quickly as the admin folks in Islamabad started telling my team to begin booking flights pronto. I don't recall all the next steps, but I probably typed out an all-hands email on my Blackberry to begin managing the message. Because honestly, despite all the security- and policy-related stuff that would come, managing the team was my biggest concern from the get-go.

Anyway, I'll try to move more quickly through this. Yes, there was a lot of drama and hurt feelings among the staff. I led town halls and smaller group meetings to talk through it. Obviously the town halls were important not just to talk about the drawdown, but also to pass information on what we were expecting on Friday. I had one small success when I managed to get a single name removed from the list—an eligible family member who had been a Marine and had recent weapons training and so could demonstrably help our Marine detachment. Other requests for reconsideration of folks who I thought had equally important skills were denied.

So about two-thirds of Karachi's Americans left I guess on Thursday, planning to be back in a few days. And then the rest of us hunkered down in the consulate for a long Friday afternoon. It was massive. I don't know if the hundred thousand estimate was correct or not, but I saw damage all over the city the next day. And this time the defenses the police had put up to prevent protesters from getting close to our property didn't do the trick. Fun fact: the defenses were shipping containers they took from the port, but in fact they relied on the consulate's forklifts and staff to get them into place. I don't know if the breaching of those defense was willful on the part of authorities—another part of their effort to let the protests play out and blow off steam—or unintentional. But protestors made it past those containers and marched up to the consulate's main entrance. Police lined the perimeter of our walls, and there was some gunfire between police and protestors. One

protester was killed. The bullet definitely didn't come from us. The Marines never had to fire a shot, although they were prepared to do so. The mob didn't breach the compound. And other than one piece of cracked ballistic glass at one of our checkpoints, there was no damage to the compound.

I watched all this from Post One with a couple Marines and the RSO. The top FSN from the RSO section was in constant contact with the head of the security forces outside our gates. So, between those updates and the many camera feeds, we had real time visibility on what was happening. I didn't get involved in directing security; if we had had to make a decision about whether to shoot at someone coming over the wall or otherwise defend the compound, I would have made that decision. But I trusted the RSO and the team outside to execute the plan we'd been discussing all week. My focus was on communication, both to the embassy and Washington, and to the team sheltering in the building. Over the several hours this played out, the RSO gave frequent and reassuring updates over the PA system. I got out every half hour or so to walk through some part of the building to check on people and answer questions. Even made it up to the roof to check on the Marines posted there. I was proud of everyone. I can't recall if I called Washington during this period or just sent updates to the embassy.

Now there was one decision I did make, and I'm pretty certain I made it myself without conferring with anyone other than the RSO. We let it be known through the police that the consulate was always open to receiving petitions, and that if they thought that would calm the crowd and bring this to an end, they could tell the protestors. They did. And that worked. One of the RSOs went out to the main gate and received a document that he brought back to me. And really, things calmed down from there.

A couple notes to round out the Karachi side of this incident. That night I recall doing a bunch of things. There was a walk through the full consulate to thank everyone, particularly the few local staff who had had to stay to respond in case anything happened to our buildings or power system; a detailed email to the embassy and SRAP to give all the facts, particularly in case anyone tried to spin things another way—like alleging we had shot at protestors; a note to the team in Dubai—more on that in a second; a visit with the RSO to the leadership of the police team outside the gates to offer sincere thanks. And finally an open house and open bar at my residence for everyone to unwind.

I had a meeting the following morning on something completely unrelated, and I really wanted to keep it. In part, again, my way of showing people that I was out there promoting American interests no matter the obstacles. But again, the visuals were amazing. Once our forklifts got the containers moved so I could get out, there were burned out cars and tires everywhere. Sadly, not an uncommon site in Karachi. But seeing it so close to home and in such large numbers was wild. And made me appreciate more those police who were the last line of defense.

Okay, so now back to Dubai and the real challenges. And I'll speed this up a little. I've already said the promise of a "weekend" wasn't kept. Washington was pleased—I guess that's the best word—with how things went with the big protest. But the radicals said

they had to do still more to defend the Prophet, so there was a chance we would see something the following Friday. Better safe than sorry was of course the Washington mantra, so again without any coordination they decided to keep everyone in Dubai for the week and make a decision after they assessed how things went the next Friday. And for good measure, they decided that consulate Lahore should draw down as well, so sent most of their team off to Dubai.

So, now managing the team really became job number one. The several dozen members of Team Karachi in Dubai were not happy campers. Those who never wanted to leave were really pissed. Everyone, including those who may have been happy to miss the fireworks on Friday, was angry about the bait and switch and that they now faced an open-ended stay. They had all packed for a weekend. The consulate in Dubai wasn't providing much support. They didn't feel listened to. And honestly, once the folks from Lahore arrived mid-week, the frustrations of the two groups just fed off each other.

I responded with a couple things. We eventually got the consulate there to set up a video conference so the two teams could talk directly with the chargé in a town hall setting. That helped, but frankly no one believed his assurances that their stay would be shorter rather than longer. But also that week I really ramped up my communication with my team. I sent nightly emails, letting them know what I was doing to assure Washington that Karachi was safe for all of my team. And just briefing them on everything the consulate was doing. I wanted them to feel a part of what was happening. The pol-econ chief, who was still in Karachi, was able to use her folks in Dubai to work on some reporting and engage remotely with their contacts. But for others, and particularly our eager junior officers in consular, there wasn't any substance to fill their days. Anyway, I was told after that those emails helped. I had gotten everyone's personal email before they left, so I violated department protocols and sent my updates that way, which I hoped would make them seem more personal and candid. Stupidly I didn't tell my counterpart in Lahore I was doing this, so she had to play catch-up when inevitably her folks complained that the information flow from Lahore didn't match that from Karachi.

The other place I was devoting my energies that week was on the political side trying to defuse the tensions. The very savvy provincial governor apparently decided there had been enough venting of religious emotions and it was time to bring this all to a face-saving conclusion. He called a meeting of every top religious leader in the city with every diplomatic representative in the city. This removed the spotlight from the radicals who were stirring up the protests, and from me as the target of the protests. And again, it worked. Many religious leaders spoke and were able to be heard—whether they were defending the Prophet or calling for peace. As I recall it now, I was the only diplomat to take the floor. I don't have the exact words, but it would have been heavy on respect for all religions and openness to dialogue, things like that. I got a lot of positive feedback from the governor.

So to wrap this up. There was a protest on that third Friday, but it was very mild. Washington gave the all-clear and my team was back at work on Monday. We had a town hall, and I spent a lot of time with the folks who were most angry about the whole

incident. The consulate made religious dialogue our top priority, which gave some of those who were most frustrated by this something solid to sink their teeth into. And I think we made some good inroads with both the Sunni and Shia communities. We never had any protests of nearly that size during the remainder of my two years. And, getting back to where we started this long story, I'd say consulate Karachi acquitted itself very well in the eyes of the embassy front office and Washington. We participated constructively in an after action with the crisis management people in Washington. And as we'll probably talk about if you can bear any more of these stories—I feel like Washington really did give me more flexibility and even respect than I expected when future security incidents arose.

Q: I guess on the heels of Benghazi it wasn't too surprising that the department took a strong line on security.

DODMAN: It wasn't. The frustrating thing at the time was the lack of coordination. But certainly, looking at it today, it's hard to be surprised. The reality is, we survived. The team stayed strong. We did some useful outreach work. We eventually repaired that cracked ballistic window and life just went on.

Q: Yeah. You mentioned the other diplomats at the meeting. Was there a large diplomatic presence in Karachi and did you deal with them?

DODMAN: Yes. The British were the other big player. Among the other Euros I recall France, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland. Most of the Gulf states were there. Iran. I honestly can't remember now if the Russians and Chinese were there. If so, I didn't deal with them much. Oh, the Turks—Turkey was very active. Malaysia and maybe a couple other Muslim-majority Asian countries. So maybe a couple dozen. It was a good-sized group, and we'd see each other often. Along with the many honorary consuls, some of whom were quite engaged and effective. But setting aside the socializing, I worked very closely with the British deputy high commissioner on policy and security issues—in part because a very important Karachi-based politico was living in exile in London—and only rarely with the others. Most of them were focused almost exclusively on commercial or assistance portfolios.

Q: You mentioned visits from the embassy and from Robin Raphel. There must have been a million high-level visitors to Islamabad during your time there. Did many come to Karachi?

DODMAN: Many did. We had one CODEL in the form of Senator Corker plus a couple staff for twenty-four hours. I mentioned the chief of naval operations. The head of OPIC, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, Elizabeth Littlefield I think was her name, came through. Those were some of the big names I recall.

I should have mentioned upfront that one of the distinguishing things about Karachi was that we had two CG residences. There was the relatively comfortable, very secure, modern residence on the compound. A little sterile but, you know, it worked. I could do

events there, but honestly used it more for staff parties and in-house events. Because we also had at our disposal one of the real gems of Foreign Service housing in the old CG's residence. This was over by the old consulate in the center of the city. A gorgeous villa on a big property. We still owned it and used it regularly. So I didn't need to entertain on the sterile new compound. Everyone wanted to come to the old place. In fact, my residence staff all worked out of the old residence and only came over a few times a week to clean the new place. I bring this up because when we had real VIPs like the ones I mentioned, we would put them up at the old residence. The ambassador too when he came. It was just easier since these visits always had a lot of representation events, which would take place there. We'd have to add more security to the compound, but it was more efficient and pleasant for everyone.

Talk of the old CGR leads to another headache that ran through my two years. There was heavy pressure from Washington, and from Pat Kennedy specifically, to sell the old chancery building, which was now vacant. Some also wanted to sell the old CGR, but Pat was thankfully resistant to that since it was part of the security for the secondary housing compound where we still had some staff. And frankly, I suspect Pat was enough of an old school FSO to appreciate the historical importance of the residence. But for me and the embassy, having VIPs stay in the old CGR was all part of our effort to keep it in our hands. I'm happy to report we did eventually sell the old chancery. I won't get into all the back and forth with historic review boards and others who hoped to avoid seeing it turned into yet another ugly high rise. But I did get thanks from Pat Kennedy when it was finally done.

So, I know I've been rambling a lot, but let me talk about one other major incident before we wrap for today. This keys off your question of TDY visitors coming down from Islamabad. This story is probably the best example of how some were a little more trouble than they were worth. This particular guy worked for one of the federal law enforcement agencies, which I'll protect by not using its acronym. This guy was based in the States at one of his agency's field offices and had come TDY, spending some time in the capital and eventually a few days in Karachi. He wasn't high ranking and may have been doing some training or something—if I knew the details, I have long forgotten them. We had a lot of TDY visitors, and unlike in Nouakchott where I would see just about everyone who came through, that was impossible in Karachi. He probably never would have made it onto my radar if there hadn't been an incident on his way back to Islamabad. At the Karachi airport, the x-ray machine detected a casing in his luggage. Not an actual bullet, just the casing. And that was enough to get him arrested and the story begins from there.

You can guess the reaction in Washington. American law enforcement agent arrested in Karachi, Pakistan. Happily, this was the spring of 2014. So removed from the Benghazi trauma and the stuff I mentioned earlier about the other tensions before I arrived. But still, this raised a lot of concerns. So, it took about a week, but let me cut to the chase: we did get him released and safely home. We had a great local attorney who we used mainly for property-related stuff, but he was extremely well connected and very savvy, and he was really the hero of the story. By this point I had very strong relations with the local

government, the police, basically everyone that mattered. Again, a lot of confidence from the front office and Washington. So, this lawyer and I basically worked together over the week and got the deal done. I honestly don't remember all the details. But the lawyer must have convinced some judge that this was a mistake, the guy would be leaving the country, you know, no harm, no foul.

As is so often the case, managing policy and local authorities was less of a problem than managing Washington. We had full access to the guy in prison so we were able to provide him with changes of clothes and other necessities. He was well taken care of. I was confident from the start that we would be able to get him out. I can't remember what was going on at the time, but I have a strong sense that the government wasn't looking to pick a fight with the Americans the way they would have been a few years earlier. So my real job was just constantly feeding the beast in Washington. My basic message was: he's fine; we've got this; don't screw it up; don't have the president say something; keep this under the radar and give the Pakistanis time to go through their internal machinations so that everyone saves face. And it worked. This is one of those instances where I think that strong reputation I built during the 2012 protests served me well.

I finally met the guy. He was in our club having his first meal after he was released and I came by to say hello. He was very appreciative of all the efforts on his behalf, and very contrite about the oversight that left the casing in the bag. He gave me a challenge coin from his field office. And then he was out of my consular district.

Q: Quite a deal. Let's end here for today and we can finish up with Karachi next week.

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Q: Good morning. Today is August 2, 2023, and this is Peter Eicher starting a new interview session with Mike Dodman. When we left off you were in Karachi, where you were consul general from 2012 to 2014. We had gone through a few high-profile incidents that you managed there. I want to ask a bit about family and community life, but anything else from the policy side first?

DODMAN: Yeah, thanks Peter. Definitely a few more things worth getting on the record. I talked about some of the crisis periods. Of course, Karachi wasn't just managing security threats. One of the real highlights of that two-year period was the national election in the spring of 2013 which marked the first time that a democratically elected government completed a full parliamentary term and was replaced by another elected government. So basically, the first peaceful transfer of power. So often governments were overthrown by coups or assassinations. It was great to be there for this milestone. In Karachi we were able to follow the election the way it's supposed to be done. Despite security concerns we had election monitoring teams from the consulate in several Karachi neighborhoods and I think in one other city. I remember this took weeks of planning to set up, but everyone—and I think especially our local staff—was so happy when it was over that it had gone smoothly and we had helped in some small way.

The other piece of the election I remember well is that the entire mission made an effort to lower our public profile during the months of campaigning. We didn't want to give any candidate the chance to make us somehow the center of their campaign. For maybe three months I gave no speeches or interviews, cut no ribbons, and basically made no news. I'll admit it was a refreshing break. And it worked. The candidates debated local issues. And then when it was over we took up public events alongside engagement with the new provincial and national leaders.

Q: From a reporting point of view did you have good access to all the different political parties and candidates?

DODMAN: We did. Election reporting was obviously coordinated out of the embassy. Our input focused on the two parties based in Karachi, although only one of them—Benazir Bhutto's PPP—was active on a national scale. That was the party that went out of power in 2013 and was replaced by a Punjab-based national party.

Moving on, I wanted to talk a bit about internal consulate management. Today it is not uncommon for a big consulate like Karachi to have a designated deputy principal officer. But ten years ago, that was not common. I think Jerusalem was the only consulate who had one, although Istanbul may have gotten one by that point. But I didn't have a deputy during my time in Karachi and, honestly, I think that suited me well. One of the reasons I loved being a CG was that I had the leadership and the public profile, which I enjoyed. But I also directly managed the consulate and senior team, which I also enjoyed. For me, it was the best of both worlds. I made a conscious decision to rotate acting CG responsibilities around my section heads, who were mostly 02 officers. I thought this was the right thing to do from a professional development perspective. I would be out of country every few months, so there were a lot of acting CGs, and I would guess the embassy and my staff might have preferred the continuity of one person filling that role. But I think that by rotating I was able to prevent burnout for that one officer and maximize the experience for all the section heads. Anyway, I'm glad I didn't have a full-time or designated deputy. This worked better for me.

Another point on internal management. As I've touched on throughout this discussion, I focused heavily on staff morale. In particular for our FSNs. For many of them, working for the Americans was risky. Some even tried to hide from their family where they worked. And while we Americans could hunker down when political violence in the city erupted, they had to live with it. So, one of the things I was proud of was the events I did for the team. We hosted a mini carnival inside the consulate compound to which local staff could bring their families so they could see and experience the nice work conditions their loved ones enjoyed. In the fall of 2013, I organized an even bigger party for all the staff, sprang for a band, catering and a big sign saying "Thanks Team" or something like that. People really liked that. I focused a lot on awards, and not just the twice-annual awards ceremonies for all staff. I always tried to do something special for our massive local guard force, which was contracted so outside of our normal awards process. I'd meet with them whenever the opportunity arose, since they were on the front lines in very difficult conditions.

Speaking of those award ceremonies, this was my first time doing all the gripping and grinning those things require. I saw how much the local staff, in particular, appreciated not just the certificate and the cash, but also the photo they could put up in their cubicle. So I was happy to do it. But I'll admit it was getting a little boring after the first three ceremonies and I wanted to change things up for my final go-around. My admin and HR folks were not the most creative bunch, so I turned to our large group of junior officers and asked them to basically take over the ceremony and make it more interesting. The core part was there, of course—too many long citations and lots of gripping and grinning—but they wove in some gag awards that were culturally appropriate. The only one I can remember is some little trinket that my wife was awarded for being the best, I don't know, party hostess or something. People loved it, and she still has that bauble on her desk.

Q: Well, that's a great touch. And just for the record, of course, you could not use representational funds to fund events for embassy people, so any of the catering and what not for these events you had to pay for that yourself.

DODMAN: Right. That's something I learned early on in DCM/PO training, and have strongly passed on to others: a good leader has to be prepared to go out of pocket for stuff like this. Happily, I was now a senior FSO and received performance pay during both of those years. So I was more than happy to take some of my "bonus" and spend it on the people who contributed to mission success.

And this is a good segue to the last point on my list. So, certainly I'd say my time in Karachi was eventful. I grew a lot professionally. But I also had a hell of a good time. The icing on the cake was winning the department's 2014 Ryan Crocker Award for Outstanding Leadership in Expeditionary Diplomacy. The front office nominated me, and while I may have done the first draft of the award—I honestly don't recall now—the ambassador and DCM both strongly supported me and I'm sure made the nomination even stronger. I found out I had won just before I left post, which helped ensure that I left on a high note. Of course, it wasn't announced until the big ceremony on the eighth floor that fall. Which was also a very cool event, since I was working back in DC by that time.

Q; Well, that's great. Congratulations on the award. Had you ever considered yourself as involved in expeditionary diplomacy?

DODMAN: Yes, to be honest. I'll admit I wasn't a huge fan of the term when Condoleeza Rice added it to our lexicon. But it grew on me. Between Iraq and Pakistan, I really did feel like I was developing a niche specialization in expeditionary diplomacy—a trend I continued with the Nouakchott assignment. As you'll recall, I worked for Ryan Crocker in Baghdad. He is one of the FSOs I respect the most. So, winning a high-profile award like that, and having his name on it to boot—it was really just perfect.

One of the positive things to come out of the award was that the AFSA (American Foreign Service Association) *Foreign Service Journal* reached out in early 2015 and

asked me to write a piece about my time in Karachi. The article ran under the title of "Diplomacy in the Post-Benghazi Era," or something like that. I talked a lot about what worked for us, how to manage Washington, tips for successful engagement with your RSO, stuff like that. Several pictures of me running around Karachi and Sindh doing fun engagements. I got some great feedback from folks in similar posts and from DS and others. Very satisfying. And nice to get my name in print.

Q: Quite an honor. You also wanted to talk a little bit more about your wife's experience and family life in Karachi. How did that all work?

DODMAN: So, Joan stayed in Brussels for my first year. That all worked as we'd set it up, and I got back there for several trips, including our youngest's graduation. I joined them in the States for home leave that summer of 2013. On my way back to post I had to go through another of these crazy routings: from Dulles to Brussels where I formally went to the embassy and turned in my diplomatic ID, then immediately went back to the airport and got on a flight to the Gulf en route back to Karachi. My year on TDY was over and I was now on PCS orders. Which meant I had lost my per diem but could bring my wife to work for the mission.

Joan arrived at the end of the summer. As was required, she already had a full-time position. She worked for USAID on public health programs, based in Karachi, but reporting to Islamabad so there were no nepotism issues. The whole thing worked great. AID had some big maternal and child health programs in Sindh, but only one or maybe two FSNs working these issues out of the consulate, so they were happy to have an American on the ground. This was a new role for Joan but one she took to right away. She got to travel to some fascinating places in Karachi and around the province. It really worked great.

Having Joan there for the second year really helped advance our public diplomacy goals. As I said, one of my personal aims, which fit very much with mission goals, was to make clear to Pakistani citizens in Karachi and beyond that my team and I were getting out of our secure buildings every day to engage with people. Beyond all the speeches and ribbon cuttings that I did during working hours, I also jumped into Karachi's very active social circuit, since that was where the journalists, opinion makers, gossip mongers and the like were to be found. And to be fair, also the businesspeople that I really wanted to be engaging. Joan joined me for most of these events that second year, and that had an even bigger impact than just my showing up. No one could remember when the spouse of an American consul general had last lived in Karachi, nor been so active around town. I won't lie: keeping up this active evening pace alongside the full-time day jobs was draining for both of us. I remember that my record was thirteen straight evenings in a row, often with more than one event per evening. Anyway, we survived and actually made some good friends in the process. We hope to get back there one day to visit and catch up.

Q: Okay. That's great. Other Karachi issues you want to touch on?

DODMAN: Okay, yes, just one last thing I'd like to get out there, and then I promise we can move on. One of many new aspects of the Karachi job was dealing with U.S. assistance in ways that I hadn't before. I'd worked alongside USAID in Iraq, and engaged them extensively on central Europe in the '90s. The difference here was that I was now the public face of U.S. assistance, whether through USAID, State, or many others. I was constantly cutting ribbons. Always meeting with provincial officials to overcome obstacles to projects. Touting statistics on what we were providing in press interviews. I was deeply engaged.

Here's just one example. We had a hospital project in northern Sindh province, a place called Jacobabad, if I remember. And for whatever reason this was a personal priority of Secretary Clinton. This was very similar to a hospital project in Basra, Iraq, that was the pet project of Laura Bush. That place was a huge pain in the ass that was almost certainly never going to fly. Well, sadly, history was repeating itself here. The Jacobabad project was the source of non-stop problems. My USAID chief and I were constantly having to go to political authorities to find work-arounds to health ministry obstacles. There was never an agreed upon and credible sustainability plan. USAID's heart wasn't in the project. But they knew they couldn't kill it. Anyway, somehow we moved the thing forward to groundbreaking, and I have pictures of me and the ambassador and a bunch of AID brass in hardhats. But was it worth all the time, all the money?

And that's my point. My thinking on international aid really evolved while I was in Pakistan. We were just throwing money at the Pakistanis in those years. Sure, we got nice talking points and some bright shiny objects, and as I said, I played those up to the max to get positive headlines and try to improve our public image. But at the same time, I just felt used. For a bunch of reasons but the main one was that we were just playing right into the hands of corrupt Pakistanis. A huge part of Pakistan's problem is, like in so many places, public corruption. One sign of that is that the country's political and business elite make it a point never to pay taxes. So public finances are always bankrupt. Which is why there is so much need for foreign aid to build hospitals, schools, power plants, and the like. Our opening up the aid taps just made it easier for this broken system to continue. Corrupt officials just kept telling us we need to provide more, more, more. And the divide between rich and poor just kept growing.

I and pretty much everyone working for AID or on other projects in Pakistan at the time knew that this was all politically-driven. It was by design. I just couldn't stand the fact that we were spending massive amounts of American taxpayer money on a system whose main outcome appeared to be making sure rich Pakistanis never became taxpayers.

Anyway, I just wanted to put this out there. I continue to struggle with the long-term impact of foreign assistance. I get the short-term political benefits, and certainly fought for aid programs as ambassador in Mauritania for those reasons. But I do not think this is a good dynamic for the long term.

Q: Did you not feel like it was building goodwill at least at the local level?

DODMAN: It was, although was that just a flash-in-the-pan effect? But it also built this "what have you done for me lately" approach that I found really repugnant.

Anyway, I can see both sides. And publicly I was out there squeezing these programs for every bit of goodwill I could. But later in the rare quiet moments at home or in the office, I was really conflicted about what we were doing. Having my wife working for USAID just made it all the more complicated.

I didn't vocalize any of this while I was in Karachi. At least I don't remember doing so. And let me be clear: this is nothing against USAID per se. I'm talking about foreign assistance broadly. So, I played the game but, yeah, in my heart of hearts I was not and still am not convinced that it's the right thing to do. So, I wanted to get that out for the record.

Q: Well, interesting reflections. Thanks. Okay, well as usual, about a year before your transfer out of Karachi you must have been thinking about what was next on the horizon.

DODMAN: I knew it was time to go home. The two years in Karachi took me to ten years straight that I had been out: Prague, Baghdad, Brussels, Karachi. No regrets on that. It was a good ten years. We got all our kids through two strong high schools, Joan and I shared a lot of great experiences, I learned a lot and got promoted. But both personally and professionally, we were ready to come home. I ended up in human resources as the director of entry-level career development and assignments, CDA entry-level.

Q: Is that something you had wanted to do?

DODMAN: Yeah, I did. It was my top choice. Because I was bidding out of Pakistan, I was able to get an early handshake and get it locked in early. I wanted—actually I guess it's easier to say what I didn't want. I didn't want to go back and do an economic job. I really didn't want anything that was policy focused. I wanted something focused on the institution. The department itself. As is probably obviously from these conversations, I'd come to really enjoy the mentoring and leadership side of things. Running a big office like entry-level seemed to scratch both those itches, plus give me some deep exposure to the HR world, something I'd been intrigued by since doing that promotion board a few years early. The other thing that felt very right was having a nine-to-five job. I absolutely knew I needed to slow down and detox a little from all the adrenaline of Karachi. CDA/EL seemed like the right fit all around.

Q: Just go get it on the record right at the beginning here, this would have been the summer of 2014 that you began this new position.

DODMAN: The summer of 2014 was when I began so it was really the spring of 2013 when I was working through this thought process. And by a nice stroke of coincidence, Hans Klemm, the PDAS (principal deputy assistant secretary) in HR, or maybe even the acting director general, visited Pakistan that spring. In addition to Islamabad, he wanted to come to Karachi to take the pulse. I knew Hans a little bit. He was an economic officer

and our paths had crossed somewhere. Now I'd like to think that all of our senior visitors to Karachi were well taken care of, but I definitely made sure Hans had a good program. The last day I hosted him for breakfast to get an out brief on his visit, which I recall was complimentary about what we were doing in the consulate. I used that moment to make my pitch to come work for him and why I would be perfect for entry-level. He was non-committal at the time but within a couple of weeks I had a message from him basically offering the early handshake. So, it was another easy bidding process.

We left in early August of 2014 after about a week of overlap with my replacement. Given the social life that I just described, it's no surprise we had a crazy number of farewell invitations. Stupidly, we said yes to too many—a mistake we were careful not to repeat when we left Nouakchott. But I insisted that our last evening be spent at the consulate with the team. The Marines hosted a party at their bar, back when the Marines could still use their bars for their intended purpose. It was a great time, but we made another mistake staying too long, given that we had to depart for the airport at 3:00 a.m. I will never forget the moment that Turkish Airlines flight was airborne: the intense sense of relief that I had no more responsibility for security or protocol or any of the rest of it. It was a really intense feeling.

At the risk of oversharing, let me say a bit more about that trip. I don't know if this was the result of the Marine party, or the intense emotions we were feeling, or what, but Joan and I both got violently ill on that flight. Rushing repeatedly to the bathroom. Happily, we were in business class so that made getting back and forth a little easier. Mine passed quickly and by the time we got to Istanbul, I was fine. But Joan was not. It got so bad that I asked the business lounge staff to call a doctor. Happily, the Istanbul airport has an in-house clinic, and also happily we had a long layover. They took her away and hooked her up to an IV which stabilized her and did the trick. We were able to make the next leg of the trip to Frankfurt, and then the two beyond that to complete the long trek to my parents' house. Needless to say, this was one case when I was very happy to have paid extra to upgrade our seats.

So that was it. We sort of literally got Karachi out of our system and moved on. Short home leave, then moved to Washington into a house we had bought earlier that year. We now really began our life as empty nesters, and I took up my role as a cog in the great HR machine.

Q: Okay. Well, that's great. It might help if you start by describing for us where the director of HR entry-level fits into the HR establishment in State and what your office looked like.

DODMAN: Yep. So, CDA, the office of career development and assignments, is I think the biggest piece of HR. HR as a bureau is headed by the director general. When I arrived, the DG was Arnie Chacón. I think Hans Klemm was still there as PDAS when I arrived, but Carol Perez took over as PDAS early in my tenure. CDA reported directly to the PDAS.

As I said, CDA is pretty massive and made up of several pieces. While the name includes both career development and assignments, every FSO knows to expect precious little from CDA in terms of career development. Actually, that is less true for the entry-level piece I ran, but very true for everyone else. So, what this big office really does is oversee the reshuffling of FSOs that happens every two or three years. The director of CDA is traditionally a former ambassador, which helps because this reshuffling also includes the very top FSOs going off to serve as chiefs of mission. Geeta Pasi was the CDA director during my time there. Under the director and deputy there are four major divisions and a few smaller units. Entry-level was one of those divisions, alongside mid-level, senior-level and the assignments team.

So, I technically wasn't an office director, but a division director. But honestly, these divisions were big enough, and the work that each did was sufficiently distinct from the others, that it pretty much felt like an office.

Entry-level handled the bidding and assignments for every entry-level Foreign Service officer and specialist. That normally meant their first two tours. As was the case when I had come in twenty-five years earlier, those assignments were directed by the team in CDA/EL. At the mid- and senior-levels, FSOs go out and find their own jobs working directly with the various bureaus and embassies. So EL was unique. And the fact that my team actually did get to focus on career development to some extent is what made this job the most interesting one for me.

In EL we had a team of twenty or so people divided into two units, one for specialists and one for generalists. I supervised the two deputy directors, but then they ran their teams of the actual CDOs (career development officers). We sat at the time in SA-6. At least I think that was the name. It was the annex on Virginia Avenue opposite the D Street HST entrance. This was my first and only time working in an annex, which had plusses and minuses. It was nice to be separate from the hubbub of the department and helped to reinforce the nine-to-five nature of things. It was nice that we were very close to HST, but still a pain to get to meetings in the HR front office.

Q: D Street was closed for over a decade, right? Was it still closed when you were doing that?

DODMAN: It was. Using that entrance would have made things a little easier, but the Twenty-third and Twenty-first Street entrances were both convenient enough.

So drilling down a bit on your question, the key point for me about the structure of EL was the sharp division between specialists and generalists. I was the only person in the division whose job responsibilities included thinking about both groups. It was not surprising given the way we were staffed—the entire leadership of CDA and the heads of the four divisions were all FS generalists—that the specialist unit in EL had always felt that it was at the short end of the stick in terms of resources and attention from the director. So, one of my main initiatives going in there—and hopefully a legacy of my tenure—was to make sure that first of all, both sides of the Foreign Service, generalists

and specialists, felt equally loved by me and then by the leadership of HR. And then to make sure that as much as possible, we were applying the same procedures and standards to specialists as generalists. Now that can only go so far, given that specialists are hired to fill one specific job function, whereas generalists are expected to be able to fill any generalist job, even if they are hired into a specific cone. But reading back through my EERs it sounds like this effort to make sure that I gave as much time and attention to specialists' issues as I did generalists' was something the CDA front office and the HR front office both noticed and appreciated.

Q: You've talked a lot about mentoring in different posts and how this was one thing you might have hoped to do here. Did it turn out that you were able to do that?

DODMAN: Not in the way that I thought. Certainly with some of the staff in EL, and I'd say even more broadly with staff throughout the full CDA office, since I made it a point to get to know not just the directors of the other divisions but as many of the individual CDOs and others as possible. But what I didn't get to do was engage much with the EL clients: the hundreds of first- and second-tour officers. I did talk to them: I was one of the early speakers at every A-100 and specialist orientation class. And the new folks all got to see me at the end too, since I was the one who handed them their flag on Flag Day, when they learned their first assignment. But I can't say I directly engaged with any of them. That was the job of the EL CDOs. I also wasn't directly involved in the assignments—a process run by my two deputies. Really, my only engagement on any individual EL client's assignment came when there was some real problem. And happily, those were few and far between.

Mine was very much a management position. I made sure the trains were running smoothly. I did a lot of managing up and laterally, and focused on policies. So, in the end I didn't get to do as much mentoring as I'd hoped, but still benefited from the rest of the job.

Q: Can you remember some of the main issues you were dealing with?

DODMAN: Okay, yeah. So, the one issue that really was constant throughout was consular staffing. The Obama Administration had imposed limits on how long anyone around the world should have to wait to get an appointment for a visa interview. This coincided with a massive spike in visa demand in places like China and Brazil. Which meant huge demand for consular officers in those countries, as well as at our perennials like Mexican border posts. I recall just an endless stream of meetings and brainstorming about how to do this. Part of the answer was the increased generalist hiring already underway from Secretary Clinton's staffing surge. But there were also non-consular needs to be filled, not least the continued large embassies in Afghanistan and other hot spots. Where we ended up was ramping up this program called Consular Associates, bringing in people on five-year, limited non-career appointments hired specifically to do visa adjudication. At the time I was there every one of these associates had to already be fluent in Chinese, Portuguese or Spanish. We worked out with the consular bureau that my EL team would direct the assignments of these non-career hires alongside the FSO

generalists—in other words, there wouldn't be one pool of visa adjudicator jobs for Consular Associates and another for FSO generalists. FSI (the Foreign Service Institute) also got involved and set up an orientation class for the associates. Basically, we were trying to give them an experience as close as possible to what their generalist colleagues were getting to promote cohesion on the visa lines. While there have been some changes over the last decade, and while the Trump administration quickly deemphasized the push for short waits for visa interview, the system pretty much continues as we set it up.

I worked on a few efforts to modernize what was a fairly antiquated operation. But I can't say I made any significant progress during my short tenure. The one piece of the CDA machinery that really needed a shakeup was one I had zero impact on. That's the vaunted "panel process" that every Foreign Service assignment needs to go through. The "panel" is technically a meeting of several dozen people in a huge CDA conference room where every single assignment gets blessed by senior officials like me. But actually, it's a long kabuki process between the bureaus and CDOs and assignments officers—and sometimes the clients themselves—where deals are cut in the shadows and rule checkers look to make sure arcane procedures have all been followed. And all of this done in a manner that ensures that the bureaus get at least 95 percent of what they want. And if that backstage process all works—as it usually does—then the thirty-page agenda before the panel can be blessed in a few minutes. Which is one reason why I say that there is no career development in most of CDA. If there were, at some point one of these senior Foreign Service officers would stop the proceedings and ask, "Why are we sending X to Y; that's a terrible job for her." But that never happened. Instead—and I'm not kidding—the most common discussion at the panel meetings I attended was whether or not someone curtailing from a job had to repay the cost of their last R&R. In so many ways the "panel process" was a joke and a waste of time, and it's unfortunately a great example of why our HR process is such a mess.

Q: Well, how did this relate to the entry-level officers? Obviously, the bureaus were not campaigning for them, I suspect.

DODMAN: You're right. The process I just described is largely related to mid-level officers, which make up the majority of Foreign Service assignments. Entry-level and senior-level assignments also went to panel—actually on a separate day from mid-level assignments. There was the least amount of discussion about EL assignments. Which made sense, since everyone understood that there actually was a process that went into determining them. Which I'll describe in a minute. Some might also have described ours as a kabuki dance. But it all took place inside EL, with zero input from the bureaus. Everyone involved at panel knew there had been an actual discussion of each assignment by the EL team, and sort of gave my guys the benefit of the doubt. Really, the only time I remember discussion on an EL assignment was if it was a tandem assignment involving a spouse who was mid-level. And if there was a curtailment requested—those always generated questions and a lot of concerns about ensuring consistent standards were being followed.

Q: Great. So, please, tell us how the CDOs working for you made the decisions on who would go where.

DODMAN: Yeah. So, some things are still very similar to when I came in, and likely when you did, Peter. For new staff—generalist or specialist—people receive a list of available jobs during their first week of A-100 or specialist orientation. Everyone had to rank order every single job on that list—not just come up with your top five or ten requests as I recall doing. For generalists if you are in a class of eighty new officers then you have eighty jobs to rank as high, medium or low. Specialists will have many fewer jobs to choose from. There may be only one doctor in a particular intake class, and he or she would be given a list of potentially only one, but more likely two or three jobs. The specialist CDOs make those lists in close contact with the bureau—in this case, with MED (the medical bureau). And the generalist CDOs would do the same, particularly with the consular bureau. That's because there are nearly always more jobs to be filled than bodies available, and in most situations it's not HR's job to do the triaging of which jobs are most important. The bureaus identify the jobs that must be filled, and we determine which bodies will fill them. I'm sure I'll come back to how this works from an embassy perspective when we talk about my challenges filling jobs in Nouakchott.

Okay, so new staff go off and do their research on the posts they have to choose from and submit their prioritized wish lists. They meet individually with the CDOs to talk about their lists and their personal situation, everything from family issues to medical restrictions to their career ambitions.

The CDOs then go through a matching process of trying to slot everyone into a job that matches their goals and any personal restrictions, but also makes sure the highest priority jobs all get filled. This is where the "needs of the Service" come into play. Hopefully everyone gets a post they ranked high. Usually there will be some mediums. Only very rarely a low rank, but it does happen. This sorting process works a little differently for generalists and specialists. All the generalist CDOs are doing this as a group in a conference room, where everyone can comment on the appropriateness of the various assignments, since they've gotten to know the class pretty well. The sort of discussion that I wish took place in a "panel" session, but doesn't. Specialist assignments are largely decided by the CDO handling that specialty. Although for the big cohort of diplomatic security special agents there is more of the group approach I described for generalists.

And that's basically how the various flags assigned on Flag Day got decided for first tours. I'll get to second tours in a second. But first one observation: this is one of those areas where I was frustrated there wasn't more of a modern approach. This is clearly ripe for some computer-based sorting where a candidate's CV and statement of their goals and limitations gets matched up against a summary that the bureau provides of the ideal candidate for a particular job or post. That could at least give us an initial sorting that the team could quickly tweak. I know I'm far from the first to suggest this, and it's something I know people are looking at. And frankly they probably will be for a long time. We're just not good with change, are we?

Okay, so a couple principles that guided entry-level's work that I hope were clear from the above. First is "needs of the Service." Filling the highest priority jobs and making sure that our front-line consular jobs are filled. Second is some focus on career development, with the CDO team trying to make sure that people get a job that is right for them. Third, fairness: making sure everyone has the same opportunity to compete for jobs, with no favoritism. I'll explain how we dealt with hardship when we get to second tours. But one real problem right here is dealing with tandems. Does aiming to keep families together mean that tandems are treated differently than non-tandems? Should avoiding family separation trump "needs of the Service?" Lots of tough issues. I could go on and on, but I'll just say this: there was and I'm sure there continues to be a constant debate within HR about how hard and fast entry-level needed to be in adhering to its standard operating procedures in order to ensure fairness.

Okay, let me run through second-tour bidding quickly. The key factor here was one that I think worked fairly well and that, honestly, I heard few complaints about. That is, how to balance hardship and non-hardship tours. Every job was assigned a score based on the level of hardship and/or danger. That was easy to calculate based on the salary differentials. The people who ended up at the most difficult posts—those with the highest score—in their first tour got assigned first for their second tour. Which meant their chances of getting a more popular post in, let's say, Vancouver or Paris, were very high. And vice versa: someone who got to enjoy Vancouver for their first two years would be in the group that was given their second assignment last, and which meant there was a high likelihood they were going somewhere not so nice. The system worked smoothly, people understood it, and the outcomes were seen as fair. Otherwise, the second-tour process worked pretty much as I described before. I could go into a lot more detail, but let me stop there.

Q: Gives you some perspective. Did you find generally that staffing numbers were enough in the generalist intake or were you having the same problem with lots of unfilled posts?

DODMAN: So, we were in a bit of a privileged position in entry-level, since as I said we had the bureaus decide which jobs needed to be filled. In other words, we always had as many jobs to fill as we had bodies, among either generalists or specialists. We knew there were jobs going unfilled, and we would often be part of brainstorming teams on how to address these gaps, as I described earlier on consular jobs. But—and apologies for sounding like the consummate bureaucrat here—it wasn't our, meaning entry-level's, problem. Frankly our problem arose when the reverse occurred: when we had a funding surge and were bringing in more new officers than we had entry-level positions for. Then we would have to get very creative, for instance working with the bureaus to move some mid-level jobs to entry-level, as was done during the Powell hiring surge. But that was not a problem I faced in my time in EL.

As a rule, based on my experience in EL but much more as a chief of mission in Africa, our problems were less on generalist hiring and more on specialists. We definitely needed more generalists, and a better way of getting them to hardship posts like mine. But it was

dire in technical specialties like IT. At root this was a recruitment and retention problem which, again, wasn't what CDA did. But it was and is a real impediment to having an embassy—hell, having a department—that functions reliably.

Q: Right. Were you also trying to make a priority of ensuring that people would get their functional specialty in their first two tours of being, you know, econ or political or whatever?

DODMAN: For sure. That would fall under both "needs of the Service" and career development. We had a mandate to staff consular jobs, so that was a given. But we did everything possible to make sure generalists spent at least one year during their first two tours in their cone. Basically, we wanted to set everyone up for success when they were bidding for their first time as a mid-level. Happily, we still had a lot of rotational assignments like what I did in my first tour, where you had a year in consular and a year somewhere else, which let us give junior officers not only the chance at time in their cone, but perhaps in yet another cone. To this day I am a big proponent of those rotational positions. I don't think we have enough of them, honestly. And again, that's less something that HR controls and more something that is in the purview of the bureaus themselves, consular and EUR, consular and AF. Most posts would rather have someone do the same job for two years—it makes life easier for managers. So, it's a constant struggle.

I remember we got a lot of pressure from Pat Kennedy who felt that some management generalists weren't getting sufficient management-cone experience in their first two tours, which was making them uncompetitive when they first bid as a mid-level. I don't recall if we or he had the data to back that assertion up—maybe he was just reflecting a few anecdotes he'd heard in the field. But the claim sticks in my mind, so I'm sure my generalist team was working with the bureaus to make sure EL had enough management positions to go around.

Q: There were a few specialist categories that could compete with jobs for generalists. Did that ever present a problem, you know, financial officers, HR officers, GSOs? Did you give priority to the specialists to fill those specialist positions?

DODMAN: Yes, thanks for reminding me, that was definitely part of the equation. Obviously, specialists *had* to be given positions in their first two tours within their specialty. So the specialist side of the house had to have enough GSO, HR and financial management jobs to match the numbers of first and second tours needing assignment. Many GSO jobs, in particular, are filled by management-coned generalists. Some of the bureaus liked to rotate these entry-level GSO jobs: a specialist for two years, followed by a generalist. That works great, but we needed to have the flexibility to adjust in EL. I recall that GSO jobs, in particular, would go back and forth between the specialist and generalist side. So, say we were planning to get five GSO specialists in an intake class, the specialist side would make sure it had five GSO jobs that fit the timing of that class. Sometimes a new hire drops out or doesn't show up. It was easy enough to move one slot

from specialist to the next generalist class. That flexibility was nice to have. We could do a little of that with HR and finance jobs, but not with anything else.

Q: Okay. Did you find there was a higher-than-expected rate of resignations among junior officers or do you remember what the rate was?

DODMAN: That was an issue we debated a lot. Anecdotally, when morale is down in the department, everyone talks about how many people are resigning. The truth is, the data don't show a significant change in resignations over the years. Even during the Trump administration there was no really big jump. I can't recall the attrition rate any longer. But I do recall it was below what experts would predict for a big organization like the State Department.

My real beef on this was that we did a lousy job of trying to figure out *why* people were leaving, and make or try to make appropriate corrections based on that data. Entry-level staff resigning would fill out a form and their CDO would give it to me to look at. But I don't think it went anywhere beyond me. If there were trends on items that EL controlled—like how we managed the hardship bidding process—we could make adjustments. But many of the issues were way beyond our purview: complaints about toxic work environments, spousal employment, and stifling bureaucratic culture. I'm not suggesting we don't want anyone to leave. A certain percentage are only going to realize what "needs of the Service" means after they've been in for a while, and it's better to get out at two or five years than to suffer for ten or twenty.

Anyway, I'm very happy to see that HR is now taking this more seriously. I think there's even something called the retention unit now. I know when I retired two years ago, I was given the option to have someone interview me about my experiences. So that's progress.

Q: Yeah. Did you find that the general profile of entry-level officers had changed since you entered, what, twenty years before?

DODMAN: Ah, that's a good question. I guess, I mean, what had clearly changed was generations, you know? The millennial generation is just very different from our generation—baby boomers—and Gen X or whatever came between baby boomers and millennials. The expectations of what the system, what the department would do for people, the sense of entitlement that people have, that's the biggest difference I can point to. Actually, let me try to put that a different way. It seems to me that the core principle of "needs of the Service" has been seriously eroded. When I came in, I feel like that was drummed into our heads as *the* factor that trumped all others in assignments and the like. Today it feels like that is just one of many competing principles that need to be balanced, alongside things like work-life balance, equity, family-friendly policies. Whether that shift was driven by millennials' different approach to the workplace or by lawsuits that required us to do things differently or maybe just by a general softening of leadership of the Foreign Service, I don't know. But I will admit that I was a little surprised at how much we bent over backwards to make assignments work. Actually, probably better to say, I was appalled at how much staff time was wasted by having to tend to the

complaints of a few very squeaky wheels and feeling like I couldn't just report up my chain of command that "needs of the Service" required X, Y and Z to happen.

I guess I'm starting to sound like a crank. So let me be clear: I'm not saying that this evolution is necessarily bad. Obviously, we want to be a family-friendly organization. My value judgment comes from the fact that what I found to be policies that were generally friendly enough for me and my family over twenty-five plus years just didn't seem to cut it for the younger generations. And to jump ahead to the final discussion we'll have in this series, that's one reason I chose to retire when I did. Not so much because I couldn't stomach the erosion of Service discipline—which definitely did cause me some heartache—but more because this all made it clear to me that younger leaders more in tune with the millennial and post-millennial generations than I was should be calling the shots.

Sorry, that went off on a tangent. Let me answer your actual question directly. No, in terms of the individuals themselves, level of education, age and different things like that, no, I didn't see a significant difference from my class in 1987. Except for a very welcome increase in diversity. More of that is still needed, but we have to give credit where credit is due: there is more diversity. Now we just need to be sure that not only are we recruiting more diverse FSOs, but we are retaining them. Which takes me back full circle to why "needs of the Service" as an organizing paradigm probably isn't going to cut it. Anyway, let's move on.

Q: Okay. Did you overall find the job to be satisfying in the way you hoped? Do you feel like you accomplished some important things?

DODMAN: Yes. I would say I did. And you know, I'll caveat that a little bit when we get to talking, which will probably be next time, about my next assignment and how I left HR. Even though I knew full well I was going into a job that was a cog in a very large bureaucracy, I still found myself more frustrated than I expected with that bureaucracy. Exhibit number one being the crazy panel process I described. Okay, but let's put that frustration aside. I do feel like I and my team were doing good things. The vast majority of our clients were content and successfully launched into their new career. Even if we spent way too much time managing the small percentage who were not content, it's still always important to be able to say that the wheels kept turning. And that we made some changes for the better, like the new consular program and closer integration with FSI.

Actually, I probably should have mentioned that more, since working with FSI really was one of the most satisfying aspects of my time in EL. The orientation division at FSI was obviously a very close partner, and I felt like we had a very common vision of what needed to be done to launch new staff successfully. Including a common desire to do a better job for new specialists. I think it was during this period that FSI first scheduled A-100 and specialist orientations so they could do a joint offsite. From that first step, ten years later they have now combined the two classes, which I think is the way it should be.

And my engagement with FSI that year went beyond orientation. Thanks in large part to that award I had gotten in the fall, and then the article for the *Foreign Service Journal* in the spring, I received a bunch of other invitations from FSI. I was a mentor for both the DCM/Principal Officer class and a senior leadership class in 2015. I also addressed one or two offerings of a new seminar on leadership in high threat posts. And I got invitations from elsewhere in the department. I had a few brown bags with staff in the conflict and stabilization bureau, for instance. All great experiences and a good validation of my decision to come back to DC at this point.

So, yes. The experience was mostly satisfying. Certainly very educational, as it always is when you are in the belly of the beast. And I got to mostly live that nine-to-five life I was seeking.

Ah, which reminds me of a crisis period I did have to manage. In January of 2015, we very sadly lost one of our CDA colleagues. This was the head of the assignments division, so one of my three peers, who happened to have been an old friend as well. It was one of those things that was completely unexpected. A relatively young guy, healthy and happy one day, gone the next. Shocking. I mentioned we were old friends, and I also knew his tandem FSO wife quite well. As I recall she was out of country when this happened. So, anyway, a lot of things needed to happen right away. By coincidence, right around this time the deputy director of CDA, my direct boss, retired and I moved into that position temporarily. So as both a friend and colleague, and then as supervisor, I put on my crisis management hat and got to work. A spontaneous town hall, support to this guy's deputy and team to take the time to grieve, but please let's keep the assignments train running. Coordinating with the spouse and her bureau on condolences and the service. Anyway, it all worked itself out. I guess I bring this up as a reminder that even when you come back to a nice, quiet Washington assignment, the sort of realities that made a place like Karachi so stimulating can still find you.

Q: Okay. Well, this was a two-year job. Did it remain a two-year assignment for you?

DODMAN: No. And explaining how and why I left will probably take longer than the five minutes we have left today, so I suggest we break and pick this up next week.

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Q: Today is August 8, 2023, and this is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Mike Dodman. When we left off last time it was the summer of 2015 and you were just finishing up in entry-level and you were about to tell us the process by which your next incarnation developed.

DODMAN: Okay, so, when I left Karachi, I was very focused on coming back to the department for a few years and the HR job suited me well. But I was also finally doing something I had done very little of during my career: thinking beyond the next two years and trying to figure out what my dream job was and how to line myself up for that. In part because I thought that next assignment could well be my last, or at least my last

overseas posting. I was not at all focused on ambassadorial posts. I never thought my network of friends and allies in the department was sufficient to make a COM (chief of mission) job happen. Since I had had such a great time as consul general, that's where I focused. And that led me to CG Istanbul as the perfect fit. A lot of similarities to Karachi in terms of the commercial work and the like. A country I knew and enjoyed. And a great residence, which I'd had the pleasure to visit a few times, including during the Karachi years when the CG there was my good friend and former boss Scott Kilner. I thought it would be perfect for me, and that I would be highly competitive for the job given all the kudos I'd gotten in Karachi. And the fact that I would be bidding as an HR insider couldn't hurt. The job was going to be competed in 2014 via language, which I already had, with arrival in 2016, so a perfect fit with the two years in HR.

And obviously it didn't work out as planned. But it was the way it fell apart that led me to curtail from HR and head to the seventh floor. Now let me just say before I launch into the next part: I'm not naïve. I know the games that get played with senior assignments. I know that even if my qualifications were, in my humble opinion, impeccable, I could easily get trumped by someone with good-enough qualifications but better political connections. That wouldn't have bothered me. But that's not quite how it played out.

The first sign that something was weird was that this job didn't get decided by the DCM/PO committee when it should have. Big and popular jobs like Istanbul go to the top of the list, so this should have been decided in September or October. It wasn't. I finally learned the reason. Alongside several strong and qualified candidates—which happily included me—there was one who really wasn't qualified but had a very powerful seventh-floor backer. And to their credit, the DCM/PO committee was refusing to succumb to seventh-floor pressure and rubber stamp that person into the job.

This stalemate went on for several months. I was laying low and just working through my CDO for updates, but everyone involved up to the DG knew of my strong interest in the job. Which was why I was more than a little surprised when one day in February or March an email appeared informing senior FSOs that, "The CG Istanbul job has been assigned." Now, I remember that language and the use of the passive voice since out of hundreds of emails I've seen like that over the years, this was the only one that did not say that, "The DCM/PO Committee has chosen candidates for X and Y positions"—in other words, letting bidders know that if they hadn't heard that they'd gotten the job, it was time to move on. Obviously, I didn't get the job, but also obviously the DCM/PO committee had been overruled and someone—I can only assume it was M, Pat Kennedy—had directed that the job be given to this unqualified person. Or maybe better to say underqualified person.

This pissed me off for two reasons. Of course, it's painful to see politics completely trump qualifications in our system. But second, I was a fairly senior official in HR and none of the top brass in the bureau who would have known the announcement was coming had the courtesy to give me a heads up. In fact, I found out that the decision had been made while having dinner with a friend who was back in DC on TDY and as I was

telling him how much I was hoping to get Istanbul he said, “Um, Mike, haven’t you seen the email that came out today—"

Well, right after that—like when I got home that night—I did a couple things. The first was to send a few messages to folks in my chain of command asking, essentially, WTF? You couldn’t have let me know this was coming? Certainly the most intemperate work emails I’ve ever sent, and I did apologize to folks the next day. But those emotional emails tied into the other message I sent that night, which was to the seventh floor. So, a quick detour here. The under secretary for economic affairs, or E, in the second half of the Obama administration was Cathy Novelli. You might remember her name from my discussion of my work in Europe in the ‘90s, when Cathy was at USTR. We had worked together often and liked each other. Cathy had done very well for herself, spending about a decade at Apple as head of global government affairs. Her chief of staff was also an old friend of mine. He had been nominated to a chief of mission position a few months before. At the time Cathy had reached out to ask if I was interested in filling that job. My response was “no thanks” because I was committed to the HR job and the hoped-for Istanbul assignment. Well, my message that night was to inform Cathy that my circumstances had changed, and I was ready and eager to interview for the chief of staff position. Which I ended up being selected for. And since it was a seventh-floor position, the curtailment from HR was pro forma. I finished out the year in HR—doing a lot of those engagements at FSI that I mentioned earlier during the spring and summer, but definitely still staying motivated and running my division—and moved over to E in August when my predecessor began his COM prep in earnest.

Q: Okay. That is frustrating. Given all the emphasis they put on getting people who are at-grade and qualified for leadership jobs it’s especially irritating when there is a clearly qualified candidate like yourself, but personal preferences come to dominate instead. That’s annoying. But okay, back to August of 2015, you became the—the position was the executive assistant to the under secretary for economic affairs?

DODMAN: Right. The terms executive assistant and chief of staff get used interchangeably. I think in the staffing pattern it is formally called executive assistant. Chief of staff was more broadly understood in the Washington context, so I tended to use that. But yes, the job is to serve as the under secretary’s right-hand and to supervise all the other staff in the under secretary’s office. Plus some side duties which we’ll get to.

Q: And so, this was the same office you had been in once before as a staffer. How had it changed? Describe the office to me and how it was set up.

DODMAN: Yeah. It honestly hadn’t changed that much since I had been there. Obviously the under secretary herself was new. She was a political appointee, but the fact that she had a long tenure in government made her I would say more effective than your average political appointee. The chief of staff is always a senior Foreign Service officer. Then there’s a mix of mid-level Foreign Service and Civil Service staff. There’s rotation among the staff, particularly on the Foreign Service side. The real difference from under

secretary to under secretary is the others—the Schedule C political appointees they bring in, which can vary in number, in mandate and, frankly, in effectiveness.

The office was a little bigger. I think we had between fifteen to twenty staff at any one time—there was some fluctuation. In 2015-16 that included four or five Schedule Cs. Their portfolios tended to mirror the under secretary's top priorities, which I'm sure we'll get to. Managing them was a mixed bag. Since all of them were in place already when I arrived, they mostly saw themselves as reporting directly to Novelli and didn't find too much use for me. But none of them were obnoxious about it. We all got along fine. It was Under Secretary Novelli's office, so I had to adjust to the way she wanted to run things.

The other thing I'll say is this ended up being a pretty good time to be on the seventh floor. John Kerry was secretary and Tony Blinken the deputy. I'm not suggesting they were outstanding in their particular roles. Just that things had calmed down from the drama that always seemed to surround Hillary Clinton. And this being the end of the administration, everyone knew each other and knew how things worked. Now all that said, I'm sure part of my nostalgia for this period is a reflection of the craziness that I saw in 2017.

Q; And was this a two-year assignment?

DODMAN: It was an open-ended assignment. I served at the pleasure of the under secretary, so there was no TED attached. I really didn't think too much about how long I would be there when I started. I think I knew going in that regardless of the outcome of the 2016 election, Novelli was not going to stick around. So, I probably figured I would be moving onto something else in 2017. But it was flexible and at this point in my life—no longer driven by kids' school calendars—I was fine with the ambiguity. You know, chances are good I probably started thinking about chief of mission opportunities soon after I arrived—okay, maybe even soon after I sent that initial email saying I was open to the job—but again, we'll talk more about that later.

Q: And your staff of fifteen, was this broken down regionally or by issue or how did you do it?

DODMAN: So, the six, I believe it was, mid-level Foreign Service special assistants divided the workload pretty much as had been done when I was doing that job fifteen years earlier. Each had coverage of a regional bureau, and that was largely the basis on which they were hired. And then on top of that they divided up the functional portfolios, with some of the other folks—the Civil Service and Schedule Cs—also taking various functional pieces. Very similar structure.

But while the office functioned in a similar way, the scope of functional issues under the under secretary had grown significantly. When I was there in 2002, the only bureau that reported to the under secretary was the economic bureau, EB. That changed with the reorganization that was done under Secretary Clinton's QDDR initiative, her first Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review. The most significant QDDR

reforms—in my opinion—were in the economic area. First, Clinton took what had been a mid-sized office of energy policy out of EB and created a stand-alone bureau of energy and natural resources. Recall that the shale gas revolution in the early 2010s really shook-up global energy and the United States once again became a major producer and exporter of oil and gas. I think the creation of ENR, the energy bureau, was really well timed.

Second, Clinton called for the change that was so clearly needed when I was in the office a decade earlier, namely bringing climate change—and all science policy—under E. In bureaucratic terms, taking the oceans, environment and science bureau, OES, away from the under secretary for global affairs and moving it to the under secretary for economic affairs. E also had the science advisor to the secretary, which was an office separate from OES that had been around for some time. Plus another new Clinton initiative: the department's first chief economist, which after much bureaucratic churn was created outside of EB, but reporting to E. So, whereas in the past you had just EB, now you had three full-sized bureaus plus two small offices creating one coherent economic team. All those structural changes were in place before I got to E, but a lot of the details were still being ironed out. QDDR implementation was a big part of my job.

Q: Okay. Did this new structure work well?

DODMAN: I would say more or less. The acting assistant secretary in OES at the time was a very strong Foreign Service officer named Judy Garber. She really helped to make things work. It was critical having someone who understood the dynamics of the building, plus understood the position and value of an under secretary. Going into the job I probably would have guessed that OES would be the primary source of grief, since the career staff there may not have been in favor of this move to E. Well, if there were such concerns, Judy made them go away. Instead, I had much bigger problems with EB and ENR, which were both run by high powered political appointees. I don't think either of them understood before they came in what the difference was between an assistant secretary and an under secretary. I don't think either of them realized that they would not be reporting directly to the secretary. The guy running ENR was Amos Hochstein who was very close to the vice president at the time, Joe Biden, so that added a whole other layer.

Oh, and I forgot to mention another weird bureaucratic reality we confronted. It was great that we got all climate and energy policy under one person, right? Except we didn't, since someone decided that to boost our influence in the UN climate negotiations, we needed a special envoy for climate. And that person couldn't be stuck within a bureau like OES. They needed freedom and direct access to the secretary. So that was derogation number one from this unified policy picture. Number two was that this special envoy needed staff, so basically the entire office in OES that handled climate policy was seconded to the special envoy. So now in fact you had the OES bureau in this unified E world, but with climate policy operating outside of E. It was a real mess. Two things made it work. First, Judy Garber again proved the worth of having a strong career person in her position, as she somehow made sure that her climate office served both the special envoy

and, to a more limited extent, OES and E. Second, Novelli accepted the reality of the situation, but also found ways to engage on climate—a subject she was passionate about—without stepping on the special envoy's toes.

So anyway, the usual bureaucratic muddle. We made the new structure that we got based in part on the QDDR and in part on the White House's political decision, we made it work.

Q: What a nightmare! Those special envoys always complicate the bureaucratic process. Tell me about the chief economist. That sounds like a redundant position that would have been a problem as well, potentially at least.

DODMAN: The first chief economist was an academic from Georgetown, Rod Ludema. He was someone Cathy Novelli knew and trusted, which helped. He didn't come in with a big ego and was very sensitive to the fact that some folks didn't think his office should exist. The idea was to have a real expert—not just a creature of the department—who could provide the under secretary and the secretary—and really anyone in the department—with hard core economic analysis and data to support policy matters. Someone with a quantitative background who understood how to use data to drive policy and where to find it. Also, someone with the links back to academia to strengthen those connections with the department. I think the rationale was sound. This sort of built on the model of the Council of Economic Advisors in the White House.

The chief economist, like the science advisor, had a very small staff of Schedule C experts, so there would be no permanent staff. We did put one Foreign Service officer in there, basically to serve as a chief of staff and make sure the chief economist and his advisors were able to navigate the building. And honestly, it was pretty much working by the time I came on board, so I really didn't have to spend too much time supporting that office, other than on a few resource requests. I'm afraid I can't even remember what the main areas were that he worked on. Climate, for sure. But I recall it all seemed to work well.

Q: Right. So, what were the main issues for the under secretary?

DODMAN: First off, I have to put oceans and fisheries. I'm pretty confident this was a genuine passion of Cathy's, but I hesitate slightly on that since this definitely was a passion of Secretary Kerry, so it's possible Cathy had just taken his cue and made it her priority before I arrived. Kerry really pushed for us to take the lead on ocean and fisheries policies globally. OES was thrilled to have two champions on the seventh floor.

The most visible manifestation of this seventh-floor push was the Our Ocean conference series. And that is meant to be "Our Ocean," singular, to emphasize that all the high seas are linked. Before I arrived, maybe in 2014, Novelli and Kerry hosted the first Our Ocean conference in the department. These were meant to be high-level events where countries came and made pledges of things that they were going to do over the coming five years, whether purely financial or something designed to improve the ocean habitat, you know,

maybe reduce illegal fishing, reduce pollution, improve marine habitats, somehow work to bring down the temperature of the ocean.

While the USG got the ball rolling, the plan was that others would share the leadership role. In 2015 Chile hosted the second conference. But in 2016 it came back to Washington—I'm sure because both Kerry and Novelli assumed this would be the last event while both were at State. This was the event I was most involved in. Let me just say, Peter, I don't think the department had ever seen an event like this, and maybe hasn't since. Given Kerry's personal interest, money was no obstacle. Novelli went big, taking over all the public spaces on the ground floor, plus that courtyard just beyond the C Street entrance which was completely covered and turned into a stunning area for displays and side meetings. We had multiple conference planners running things, video screens lining all the corridors, holograms of marine life projected onto the C Street façade. You really did not feel like you were in frumpy old HST. Anyway, sorry to run on about the superficial things—my point is that when Novelli put her mind to something, she overruled anyone who said "can't be done." She made it happen.

Happily, the volume of pledges that year matched the surroundings. Everyone was thrilled. Even better, somehow the initiative survived the change of administration and Kerry and Novelli's departure. These are still annual conferences. Although I'm not sure we have hosted one since 2016. So, oceans was the most prominent issue, but Novelli worked on a whole lot of other things.

Q: Before you leave oceans, can I just ask, was there a reason why the United States took the lead on this conference? Wouldn't it have made more sense for the United Nations or another international group already active in this space?

DODMAN: That's a great question. Part of the answer was probably the greater glory of John Kerry and maybe Cathy Novelli too. You know, if we do something ourselves, we shape it and don't risk it getting bogged down in some UN process that we don't control. And in fact, they *were* able to move quickly and convince other countries to make strong commitments. I don't know if a UN-led process would have been so successful.

One of the things that Novelli really wanted—and I have to assume Kerry did too—was to focus not just on governments but NGOs. I'm no expert in this area, but I would guess that all the major oceans-focused NGOs were at the conference in 2016, including some celebrities—I seem to recall rubbing elbows with Leonardo DiCaprio at a social event at the Kennedy Center. Now that I think of it, I imagine that's one reason that Novelli was so fixated on having the conference look and feel top notch—she was aiming to impress NGOs and celebrities, not just government fisheries ministers.

Q: Okay. So, oceans, that's one priority. What else?

DODMAN: Trade. Recall that Cathy had a USTR background. She was a successful trade negotiator. And if you'll remember, at the end of the Obama Administration we were actively negotiating several trade deals, most importantly the trans pacific

partnership, the TPP. Cathy was very careful never to step on USTR's toes, so she never tried to get involved in the actual negotiations. But she wanted to be a part of making the case for the TPP, selling it to both the American people and governments overseas. Cathy was born and raised in Ohio, so she particularly wanted to draw on her midwestern roots to help explain the agreement—and generally the importance of fair international trade—to the heartland. She did several domestic trips focused on that, and generally tried to guide a department-wide effort to support USTR and the White House.

We all know how the story ends: TPP didn't pass before the election, and Trump killed it. But as a side note, it's interesting that that wasn't the end of the story for Novelli. After she left government, she started her own NGO whose mission was to basically continue what she was doing in 2016: traveling around the country, largely in the midwest, talking with focus groups and citizens about trade. Not selling TPP, since that was dead, but selling the benefits of international trade. And taking the pulse of the country. She put together some reports, and I admit I lost track of the process at that point, so can't say how much of an impact she had in either the Trump or Biden administrations. But I mention this just to drive home how important this topic was for her.

And this leads directly to China. Novelli was a Europe expert. But she was part of the Obama administration and its pivot to Asia, so she devoted huge amounts of time to China. And she had some serious experience there, not from USTR but from her time at Apple. A lot of this was trying to find areas where we could work together with China, and for E that included wildlife conservation, which was a passion for Novelli and something the Chinese actually took seriously. But the point I want to emphasize here is that during the last year of the Obama administration, the internal debate on China changed significantly. I recall many more meetings focused on how we could maintain our technological superiority, how to protect our intellectual property and trade secrets, and how to avoid letting China lock up 5G technology. The tide was definitely already changing before the end of the Obama administration.

Q: How about sanctions? Were you involved or was that more of a Treasury issue?

DODMAN: In fact, that was next on my list. Sanctions was and is very much a State Department issue, handled in close coordination with Treasury. And others. There was an office in EB solely devoted to sanctions. I had talked about my work on this in Brussels, where it really was a growth area in our relations with the EU. Novelli took a serious interest in this. Although now that I've waded into the topic, I realize I can't put my finger on any specific areas of engagement. I think my problem is that Novelli—and by extension, me—got most involved when there was either a lack of leadership—which wasn't the case here—or strong differences of opinion either inside the department or in the interagency. Which again, wasn't usually the case on sanctions. So nothing particular comes to mind right now.

Let me use this to pivot to transatlantic relations. This was another area where Cathy had a lot of background, having been the assistant USTR for Europe. The top issue on E's agenda with the EU involved data protection and privacy. The same area I'd spent so

much of my time working when I was in Brussels five years earlier. And I'm sure folks working on EU economic issues would say the same today. The core problem is that in an increasingly integrated digital world, data is stored on servers everywhere. The EU is famous for having very tough rules and structures in place to protect the privacy of EU citizens, including the privacy of their electronic data. The United States also cares about and protects data—although it is safe to say we don't do it as rabidly as the EU, and we definitely have very different legal and regulatory systems. Meshing regulations across the Atlantic is the heart of what we and the EU do together, as I talked about previously. But when you have activists and politicians and courts across Europe who are just fanatical—and that's not an exaggeration—about this issue, achieving some sort of agreement that will give companies certainty that the massive transatlantic digital marketplace will keep humming is pretty near impossible.

So, that's the background. In 2015 an EU court ruled in favor of an Austrian citizen who complained that the agreement we had had in place on this issue, known as Safe Harbor, did not adequately protect his rights. The specific complaint was that Facebook's European subsidiary was harming him by transferring his data to Facebook's U.S. servers. The court said the Safe Harbor agreement—under which the EU had agreed that U.S. privacy rules, supplemented by a code of conduct that U.S. companies would adhere to, provided adequate privacy protections for EU citizens' data—was no longer valid. That created, it's fair to say, a panic on both sides of the Atlantic. Novelli helped rally the U.S. side into action. For bureaucratic reasons, the Commerce Department leads on this issue. Negotiations on a new agreement started and ended fairly quickly, since nobody—other than those fanatics—wanted to see this marketplace destroyed.

One thing the Europeans insisted they needed to comply with the court ruling was the appointment of a senior USG official to whom a European citizen could turn if they felt that their data had been compromised. I think we decided that this person would be called the data privacy ombudsperson. And somehow, it was decided that Cathy Novelli would become that person. I wasn't directly involved in the talks, so don't know how this came about, whether it was her personally that was going to be an assurance to the European courts, or the place that E occupied in the U.S. government. Honestly, none of this makes much sense as I'm retelling it. Anyway, for us in E, the challenge was putting together a website that any EU citizen could access to file a complaint. And so that's what we did. And with that in place, the new agreement came into force. Safe Harbor was gone. Welcome to the world of Privacy Shield—a name I thought was a joke at first, but I think the EU side thought it would help sell the whole package. Now here's the kicker: in the eighteen or twenty months between Privacy Shield coming into force and my leaving the office, not a single complaint was filed, as far as I know. But that didn't matter. For the EU, process is king. And by golly, we had a process. And a website.

Q: That's absolutely remarkable that that was open to any EU citizen and you never had a single complaint. (Laughs) They must not have heard about it or something.

DODMAN: You've got to love the EU. Especially because that's not the end of the story. In 2020 Privacy Shield was also invalidated by the top EU court. And I'll admit I've

stopped tracking it since then. But obviously data flows continue across the Atlantic. Facebook, Google, YouTube, et cetera, they all still operate in Europe. So, some new fix got put into place to satisfy judges and activists.

Q: Amazing. Did the under secretary have a constant stream of U.S. business leaders coming to her with problems?

DODMAN: Actually, no, not really. Some of course, but not as many as I would have expected. I'm not sure if that was her preference, or maybe a division of labor she worked out with the heads of EB and ENR, or just the business community's lack of familiarity with the position.

One big issue where she definitely did engage stakeholders involved U.S. airlines' complaints that the Gulf air carriers—Etihad, Emirates and Qatar Airways—were unfairly subsidized by their oil-rich patrons. This got very nasty. I remember being in the metro in 2016 and seeing all the advertising space filled with complaints about unfair trade competition. The case wasn't completely open and shut, since U.S. carriers also benefited from subsidies in various ways. But Novelli really took this one on and was happy to put on her negotiator hat to try to work out a deal. I recall this being one area where the chief economist also did a bunch of research. My recollection is that a deal was not final by the time of the 2016 elections. And you can be sure that the U.S. carriers thought they would get a better deal from the Trump administration. I didn't follow it closely after that, but I think a deal was struck during the Trump administration. Nothing seems to have changed significantly in terms of the Gulf carriers' operations in the States.

Q: Right. And international organizations such as, you know, the IMF, World Bank, OECD, G-7, G-20, was that all her purview as well?

DODMAN: Yes and no. She had a role to play in a lot of those, particularly the OECD. Novelli, I will say bluntly, didn't have the greatest love or the greatest tolerance for some of the international organizations. She was a doer and would get frustrated with the excessive talk that marked most multilateral fora. Here's the best example: the under secretary of State for economic affairs traditionally has a key role in the G-7 process, serving as what's called the foreign affairs sous-sherpa. G-7 economic work is coordinated in the White House by the so-called sherpa, but then divided between State and Treasury. The sous-sherpa at State coordinates basically any economic issue that isn't purely financial. It's been that way for years. I remember Al Larson spent a lot of time coordinating with his G-7 counterparts on development policy, sanctions, things like that.

The way I understand it, Novelli went to her first sous-sherpa meeting soon after coming on board and subsequently decided it was not a good use of her time. Part of this was probably the travel involved: Novelli didn't really enjoy international travel, so when she did go overseas—which she had to do often—she wanted to be absolutely certain the trip was worth it. Being a talking head around a conference table for three days didn't cut it for her. So she passed that role off to my predecessor, the previous chief of staff. And happily for me, that continued during my time. So, four times a year I flew off to

somewhere to represent the United States at these sous-sherpa meetings. Germany led the G-7 when I arrived in 2015, so I had one trip to Berlin. In 2016 four trips to Japan, and in 2017 I think three to Italy. I had no problem going off and being wined and dined by the host countries. I found the actual talks as boring and pointless as Novelli presumably had, but enjoyed seeing the process first-hand, and loved getting out of the office.

Q: So, did you have a deputy chief of staff that would fill for you in your absence or did you just appoint one of the other people?

DODMAN: There was a senior Civil Service employee who had been in E for many years. He filled in when I was gone. But honestly, other than these G-7 trips, I didn't have much official travel. I did accompany Cathy to UNGA (the UN General Assembly) in 2015, but that was mainly to understand her travel style. She always took two or three staff from the office with her on any trip, so I would have just been in the way.

Q: At something like UNGA, would she have been part of the secretary's meetings with foreign leaders or was she having her own separate engagements with economic officials who happened to be in town?

DODMAN: Both. Something like UNGA was first and foremost an opportunity for Novelli to do a bunch of bilateral meetings. I know she was a part of some of the secretary's meetings, but numbers for those were always limited so I don't recall fighting too often to get her into those.

Q: Okay. How about internal battles within the State Department? Were there still decision memos with different points of view—split memos—at that time?

DODMAN: Yes, split memos were not uncommon. But Novelli was not a fan. Again, this gets to her background as a negotiator. She always wanted us, her staff, to work with drafting bureaus to hammer out a consensus in a memo, whether it was going to her for approval or through her to the secretary.

But just because there were few split memos with her name on them doesn't mean there weren't a lot of internal battles. There were some doozies during this time. Let me try to summarize the one that sucked up the most time. This involved cyber policy and how the department would be structured to manage this issue. EB had an office that handled cyber affairs, which grew out of the longstanding international telecommunications office. But cyber policy is obviously bigger than the commercial piece. At some point a special envoy for cyber policy was created—that office reported directly to the deputy secretary. So right away you had some coordination issues to be sorted out between EB and this special envoy. The real issue—in my humble opinion—was that this particular envoy, a guy named Chris Painter, was seriously power hungry. Very much a creature of Washington who knew how to build and defend turf. He had good connections on the Hill, and never hesitated to get his friends there to try to put forward legislation essentially mandating that his office grow. Now there are a lot of good reasons that the department should have had a more robust cyber policy office—which we now have. The

problem was, (a) this guy only wanted something that enshrined and expanded his power, regardless of whether it made the most sense in terms of long-term effectiveness of the structure, and (b) he had no real interest in cooperating with anyone else on immediate policy matters. This caused no shortage of drama and frankly embarrassment in some of our international negotiations. Novelli tried to use her negotiating skills to come up with some short-term collaboration while also working on long-term structural reform to beef up cyber. Unfortunately, all with limited success. The problem is that cyber issues cut across the whole department, involving economic, security, political, IT—pretty much everyone. Which is why it still to this day sits with the deputy secretary and not one of the unders.

Q: Special envoys always seem to suck up a lot of bandwidth. Okay. To the extent you worked with John Kerry, what did you think of him?

DODMAN: One of the benefits of my position was if Novelli was not available, I attended the secretary's morning meeting, which he did, I think, twice a week with all of the under and assistant secretaries. So, I did have the pleasure of seeing John Kerry in action. Kerry was very smooth. He knew what he was doing. He really didn't have a whole lot of interest in the bureaucratic side of things, that was clear. It was clear from the questions he asked that he had his priority issues. The one that sticks with me the most was, believe it or not, Sudan and South Sudan. He was constantly asking the AF (African affairs bureau) assistant secretary, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, for updates on the two South Sudanese warlords. I never could figure out why he was so focused on that. Those meetings were very much like country team. Not a lot of business done or decisions made, but a chance for senior staff to get some facetime with the boss. Some of the political appointees were insufferable, insisting on talking at every meeting just for the sake of talk. Some of the career folks weren't much better.

Tony Blinken often ended up chairing those meetings. I remember he had a great sense of humor. I don't recall any issues that he fixated on, but it was clear that both he and Kerry had a very good sense of all the top issues.

Looking back, I have to say that my frequent attendance as a back bencher in those meetings did leave me wondering how the place was actually run. As I said, these weren't meetings necessarily designed to give direction. It wasn't clear to me what other meetings were happening where decisions were actually made. There wasn't another meeting that Under Secretary Novelli went to, other than periodic appointments to get guidance on discrete matters like the oceans conference. One of the proposals that came out of the Tillerson reform under Trump, if I'm remembering it correctly, was that the under secretaries together with the secretary and deputy form a steering group that really kind of ran the department. Because honestly, an under secretary can be an odd bureaucratic creature. Assistant secretaries have a bureau, they have heft, they do things. The under secretary has a title and staff and can create a role for themselves by force of nature. but on paper they don't have much of a role. That's the source of the tension we saw between Novelli and a couple of her assistant secretaries. So I was a strong proponent of this steering group idea, to give the under secretaries a more formal role in managing the

department. That said, I have no idea if it actually saw the light of day, and if so, how effective it has been.

Q: Okay, great. Did you have other policy areas you wanted to highlight? If not, we could move into the 2017 transition.

DODMAN: Yeah. Okay, let me see. Right, there are two things I've jotted down that I think worth mentioning. The first is to finish the story of the changes on the economic side of the department introduced by Clinton's QDDR. As I said, she had a very strong focus on improving the department's economic capabilities. Part of that was the new bureaus and the expanded domain of E. But then there were several initiatives on the HR side that I ended up championing.

One of these was the creation of a board that was meant to examine how the department recruits, retains and trains economic staff. My predecessor had started the process of establishing this "Economic Career Board," but I took it on and fleshed it out. This involved folks from the economic bureaus plus HR and FSI. I'll skip a lot of the gory details but focus on the one area that was really ripe for engagement. Promotion rates for economic-coned FSOs were quite low during this period, which—at least anecdotally—was making it harder to retain strong econ officers. We got the experts in the office in HR that does the number crunching and decides how many people in each cone get promoted every year to sit with us and really drill down into the data. Turns out there are a lot of jobs that are dual-hatted as pol-econ officers overseas, and those tended to be tallied up as pol jobs, not econ jobs, which was the crux of the numbers problem. We got the HR PDAS's acknowledgement that this was a real problem, and over time we got the formulas that this office used to change, which appeared to address the promotion problem.

Another truly painful challenge related to overseas assignments. All the top economic jobs overseas—in places like Brussels or London or Tokyo, positions that have a huge role in the design and implementation of economic policy—these were assigned like nearly all overseas jobs, in other words, solely by the regional bureau. The QDDR said the economic bureaus should have a role in these assignments. But gave no details. It became my job to try to find a way forward.

Q: Oh boy.

DODMAN: Yup. A real minefield. I had a few meetings with the PDASes from the regional bureaus, where I leaned heavily on the QDDR. Quoting the mandate Clinton had given us, emphasizing desire to find compromise, and that I understood the prerogatives of the regional bureaus. You can imagine the reaction. Somehow, we worked out a pretty loose compromise, which basically expanded on the existing—but honestly pretty ineffective—consultative staffing model. In other words, the regional bureaus remained fully in charge, but did have to seek input from the economic bureaus. Which I assume was mostly ignored. Disappointing, but not surprising.

Okay, enough on the QDDR, which I'm sure very few people even remember today. One last piece of my time in E that I look back on fondly. Somehow—and I am honestly not sure who nominated me for this—I ended up serving on the Policy Council of the Una Chapman Cox Foundation during these years. This group is comprised of mostly retired FSOs who guide the board on projects that will best support the department and the Service. But there are always two active-duty Foreign Service. I really enjoyed this—getting to know the foundation, seeing the way that they interact with HR and other parts of the department. Met a lot of good people.

And then by coincidence, one of the big projects Cox was funding at the time was a study of how the U.S. government as a whole does commercial diplomacy. The Association for American Diplomacy, the group of retired ambassadors that is closely linked to the Cox Foundation, was running this study, and I had been engaging with the authors even before I got on the Policy Council. Sadly, I'm sure that report is just sitting on a shelf somewhere. But getting to work with both Cox and AAD, like the G-7 work, was something that got me out of the bureaucratic turf wars in the department and made those two years a lot more enjoyable.

Q: That's great. I was a Cox Fellow and know it well. So, shall we move on to the transition? Maybe you could talk first about the preparations for the transition, which is a big thing in the State Department, of course, every four years or eight years, and then separately the new administration and how that contrasted, if it did, to the old.

DODMAN: Yeah. So, that's a good way to break it because the first part's pretty short, but there are lots of stories to tell in the second part.

Well, transition planning of course began in 2016, well before the election. I imagine this followed a tried-and-true playbook, although I hadn't seen a previous transition from a seventh-floor perspective. The Executive Secretariat ran the process and tasked out many, many papers. In my position I was largely overseeing the work done by the bureaus under us, but I recall drafting a few items about how E functioned and the status of the various QDDR initiatives. I do recall being impressed by the number of papers being prepared, which would definitely help the transition team hit the ground running right after the election. Like all of Washington, we assumed it would be a Clinton victory, but the papers were absolutely written without political bias or any effort to puff up Clinton's record as secretary. The bureaucracy is damned good at preparing anodyne but detailed papers.

Q: So, when did the Trump team send someone into the building—into E—to sit with you and begin working on the transition?

DODMAN: Well that definitely bridges into the second part of the story, which is how this transition differed from others. Let me get into those two months between the election and January 20, and then we can take up my year on the seventh floor of Trump's State Department next time.

First, let me clarify that Cathy Novelli stayed on the job until January 20. She was still the under secretary and we still had policy work to do. I'll get to some of that.

But to answer your question, the first big difference with previous administrations was that we didn't see a Trump transition team for many weeks. To put it bluntly, Trump was as surprised as everyone else that he won, and there was no team ready to descend on State and the other agencies to begin the transition. Obviously, the papers were all done and didn't need to be revised. So, for those initial weeks, there was just a lot of waiting and wondering how this was going to play out.

I think the first people we saw came in early December. A couple people came to interview Novelli. I recall at least one was a former FSO. But they were not called the transition team. And in fact, they didn't stick around. Honestly, it felt like they had gotten someone close to Trump to give them the green light to begin doing *something* at State, and in fact were using these interviews to decide what position they might want to grab in the new administration.

It was maybe the middle of December—pretty close to the holidays—when a small team finally arrived and declared themselves the transition team. Moved into the space set up for them on the first floor. Now to be clear, I had never seen a transition up close. So I have nothing to compare this to. But I expected someone tasked with looking at economic policy would read our papers and come talk with the under secretary or some experts about them. Whether policy or process or just bureaucratic structure. But I don't remember anything like that. There was a clear sense these guys didn't want to engage with the building much—not with the outgoing political folks, but also not with the career staff. So, I really can't tell you what they were doing.

Which meant that me, Novelli, the whole apparatus—we just kept on working. There was still some hope we could advance TPP before Trump came in, which was Novelli's top priority at this point. But beyond that, Novelli was just wrapping things up. And waiting to have conversations with the transition team that never happened.

For my part, the first meeting of the Italian G-7 presidency at the sous-sherpa level was the second week in January. So, I had to go off to a meeting with my counterparts with absolutely no guidance from the transition team. I was winging it. I remember one of the things on the agenda for that meeting was plastic bags: should the G-7 countries as a whole ban plastic bags because they're bad for the environment. This had come up before, and I'd had to explain how we don't do that at the national level, so it would be hard for us to support it. Well, at least at that January meeting I remember being confident enough to say that I strongly doubted the Trump administration would make this a priority. But otherwise, I couldn't engage much.

So yes, overall, a very strange period. And then things just got weirder after the inauguration. But let's save the Tillerson era and the defenestration of most of the seventh floor for next time.

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Q: Today is August 15, 2023. This is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Mike Dodman. When we left off last time you were the executive assistant in E. We had talked about your first year and a half in E, through the 2016 election and then the transition period. Now we are up to the point of the Trump administration taking office in January 2017. What can you tell us?

DODMAN: Right, so the first few days after the inauguration were pretty quiet. I think Tom Shannon, who was P (the under secretary for political affairs) was acting secretary. Rex Tillerson was nominated, but he wasn't confirmed for a couple weeks. We all spent a lot of time trying to figure out what he would do as secretary. Frankly, I thought having a seasoned businessperson at the top could work out well. Which, of course, it didn't, but we'll get there.

There was still a noticeable absence of guidance from the transition team or anywhere. But on maybe the second working day after the inauguration I got a call out of the blue from the executive secretariat directing me to an office on the ground floor to pick up a Schedule C political appointee who would be working in E. No guidance on who this was, what he was to do, how long he would be with us or anything. I had no idea if this was my new boss. I don't even remember if I was given the guy's name—I feel like they just told me to go to a room and find the guy was assigned to E. Which is what I did.

I have to say: we got lucky this time. Steve Akard was our new colleague. A friend of VP Pence who had been working on international trade for the Indiana state government. And more importantly, an ex-FSO who had done a couple tours maybe ten years earlier. Nice guy. And he had no more information than I did about what his new role was. Clearly the White House and transition folks were still making this all up as they went along. We gave Akard a window office, showed him where the coffee pot was, and left him to do his thing. Which as I recall basically involved reading all the transition papers, attending our staff meetings, and going off to meet with the other Schedule Cs scattered around the building. And just to skip ahead on the Akard story: he hung around in E for several years, really without too much to do. I would come back and see him from Mauritania, and he was always being considered for one job or another. In late 2017 he was nominated as director general of the Foreign Service, but amazingly enough the outcry that he wasn't qualified for that actually carried the day. He eventually became head of the Office of Foreign Missions, which was—in my opinion—a good fit. But then a few months later Secretary Pompeo fired the very competent State Inspector General, Steve Linick, and appointed Akard as acting IG. But he kept his OFM position. Which makes no sense, since the IG has to be independent of the rest of the department. But, of course, Pompeo wanted a lapdog, not an independent IG. To his credit, Akard resigned both jobs a couple months later and headed back to Indiana. Just one of many crazy tales out of this crew.

So back to January 2017. We did a lot of internal meetings at this time. Bringing together the acting assistant secretaries and others from the E bureaus, everyone trading whatever

info they had about the new team. I passed along whatever I heard from the Executive Secretary and others on the seventh floor, which wasn't much.

But that changed once the firings started. It began towards the end of that first week. As always in a transition, the career folks who filled the senior jobs in the department—the under and assistant secretaries—stayed in their position. Just like ambassadors overseas. They had been nominated into those jobs by the previous administration, and protocol required that they submit a letter of resignation to the new president. Normally that's just a formality and they stay in the job until someone new is nominated. But normal wasn't the way the Trump team did business.

I think it started with Pat Kennedy being told his resignation was accepted and he was no longer M, effective immediately. Then there were a bunch more let go, including Kristie Kenney in C (office of the counselor), Tom Countryman in T (under secretary for international security affairs), and a bunch of assistant secretaries. Really, the only senior person left in place was P, Tom Shannon. And I don't know if that's because the White House actually liked him, or they just needed to have someone legally running the department. Although he stayed on for another year or so, so either someone did like him or by this point they realized that making the top of the State Department mostly brain dead wasn't a very good idea.

It was horrible. These were good people being fired for no reason. They weren't political. Sure, maybe some—certainly Kennedy—had been in their jobs too long. But to just sack all this talent all at once was pure spite. The White House wanted to emasculate the department, plain and simple. And they succeeded. Partly by introducing a climate of fear and confusion. But also because they delayed naming anyone to serve in acting roles. And, of course, they were criminally slow in nominating and confirming top officials. Just to take our example: for the next twelve months that I was in E, not only was no one nominated for the job, but the White House never designated anyone—neither me, nor Steve Akard, nor one of the acting assistant secretaries in the E family—to serve as acting E. So, we just made it up.

And just skipping ahead on this leadership question, obviously most of the senior jobs were eventually filled, although it took a few years. But in my humble opinion the department still hasn't recovered from that mass firing. The management side of the operation has been particularly weak. So many other senior officials voluntarily retired after seeing the way the Trump team treated career officials. I obviously don't have great insights on the inner workings of the department right now, but I don't think the Biden administration has been able to fully undo the damage done.

Q: Okay, there's a lot to unpack there. You said there was no acting E. So, what was the office doing? Did you still have a staff?

DODMAN: We still had our Foreign Service and Civil Service staff. So maybe eight or ten of us in the office. We would loan staff to other offices who had a greater need than we did. The building kept functioning. The pace of work was really slow in the

beginning—it took a while for the Trump White House to get the interagency process moving—but papers were still being drafted. International meetings to attend. Congressionally mandated reports to prepare. So my staff continued to clear things and to participate in meetings and processes that continued.

But as I said, the main thing I remember was just trying to keep information flowing. I met regularly with the acting heads of the three E bureaus, which if nothing else was cathartic for the four of us. We pursued various rumors about people who may be nominated for positions in E. We still had the usual Foreign Service assignment process to follow up on. Really, the bureaucratic side of things just kept ticking. Kind of surreal.

A lot of effort during this period went into listening to the lawyers tell us who could and couldn't be considered an acting official. There are rules about how long someone can be acting. This is when we started using the phrase "senior bureau official" instead of "acting" so-and-so. Titles were changing regularly.

We decided basically among ourselves that the acting assistant secretary in OES, Judy Garber, would sort of be considered the senior official in E. We couldn't call her acting. She had no signature authority. But if someone needed to meet with the department's top economic official, they met with Judy.

Of course, eventually the White House did make some policy decisions. Like pulling us out of TPP. So that involved a lot of crafting of talking points to get guidance to our posts. Getting anything cleared by the NSC or White House was an insanely time-consuming process, since the political folks didn't trust any career officials, even the career folks on the NSC staff. So, there was a lot of backchanneling of information to embassies. Which isn't a smart way to run a government.

Q: Was E an outlier in any way? Or were all the undersecretaries' offices other than P in the same situation?

DODMAN: Yes, everything but P. Somebody was eventually designated for M, I assume because M has to sign off on so many things that are critical to managing the department. But J, T, C, R, the counselor, yeah, they were just empty. As in E, they had some career staff still in the office. We chiefs of staff would get together regularly to compare notes—everyone was frustrated. We had all recruited new Foreign Service staff for the summer of 2017, and many of those staff broke their assignment since it wasn't clear when—even if—there would be undersecretaries appointed. I encouraged anyone who asked to take another position. Still, that summer I got maybe five new Foreign Service special assistants. They had it rough since the E position wasn't filled until 2019.

Q: Yeah. And the assistant secretaries also were not being filled at the time, right?

DODMAN: Correct. I think someone was nominated for EB during 2017, and maybe even confirmed before the end of the year. But as we'll talk about, my focus shifted starting that summer.

Q: Right. And did you think it was the White House that was the main problem? Or was Tillerson not interested or energetic in getting these positions filled?

DODMAN: So, I don't have any direct knowledge of this. Tillerson's office was a black hole as far as the rest of the building was concerned. All I know is what was being reported in the press. We understand that Tillerson did object to some of the nominees that the White House put forward because he didn't think they were suitable. Which would not have surprised me at all. And I imagine the reverse is also true: people Tillerson wanted to put in place were rejected by the White House. We know that Tillerson and Trump quickly realized they didn't see eye-to-eye on much of anything. But I can't tell you who any of these people were, or where the real stumbling block was.

Q: Did you have any personal interaction with Tillerson?

DODMAN: I attended the very first weekly meeting that he had with senior staff. But after that, those of us who actually had no title were told not to come back. Those must have been really small meetings. I would get readouts from the acting assistant secretaries or senior officials in the E bureaus. I wasn't missing much.

Tillerson is best known inside the department for his "transformation initiative." At least I think that was the name. Like every secretary, he decided early on that the department was broken and needed to be fixed. Being a corporate guy, he brought in a bunch of outside consultants to come up with a plan. Because I had plenty of time on my hands and I care about things like this, I volunteered and was involved in the first few months of this process. Went to a bunch of brainstorming sessions at FSI and elsewhere. Tillerson came to one or two of those to set out his vision for how he saw the State Department. Early on I was still trying to like the guy and give him the benefit of the doubt. He said all the right things in terms of improving operations. But since in hindsight his tenure was doomed, so was transformation. It was all a waste of time and lots of money.

Anyway, jumping ahead to the next story, I had one other engagement with Tillerson. When I was in chief of mission charm school at FSI, Tillerson had all the outgoing ambassadors come up to his office to take a picture with him so that, you know, we had something to put on our credenza. There was no similar photo at the White House. Honestly, I have no idea if Tillerson's immediate predecessors had followed custom and done the photos. But I was very happy he did it. So, yes, I shook Rex Tillerson's hand once and have the photo to prove it.

Q: So, it sounds like you didn't have a good impression of his working style and effectiveness?

DODMAN: I can't say I saw enough of him to form a good impression. I really did want to like him. The State Department hadn't had a secretary who actually knew how to run a large organization since Colin Powell, so I had high hopes. I can't say whether Tillerson's ineffectiveness and his short tenure as secretary stemmed primarily from the fact that he

wasn't qualified or capable of doing the job, or because the president soured on the guy so quickly once it became clear that he actually had opinions about how U.S. foreign policy should work and how his department should function. Where I do very much fault Tillerson is he let himself get completely isolated from the building. He had a chief of staff, Margaret Peterlin, who I think was assigned to him by the White House. She severely limited access to him. Not that there were that many senior officials around who would have normally engaged with the secretary. Obviously, Tom Shannon did, but Shannon also would have had to pick and choose his battles, just as Tillerson would have to pick and choose his battles with the president.

To his credit, after a few months he started an initiative where he would come down to the cafeteria on a periodic basis and have lunch with a hand-selected group of department employees. I was never asked to join one of those lunches—and have no idea how the participants were picked—but I did happen to be sitting in the cafeteria one day very close to one of these sessions. Suffice it to say it looked very structured, very stilted, and very painful for everyone involved. Tillerson was not a manage-by-walking-around kind of guy.

Anyway, by the time he was fired in 2018, I was not sad to see Tillerson go. When Pompeo came over from the CIA, again, I was excited. I thought: this is somebody who gets it. He went to West Point, had been in Congress, and ran the CIA. He knew how Washington worked; he had Trump's ear. I really thought—maybe hoped is a better word—that we weren't going to have the same problems we did with Tillerson. That he would get rid of the short-sighted and harmful things Tillerson did like freezing all hiring. Anyway, we soon all saw Pompeo's true stripes. I actually became a little nostalgic for poor old Rex Tillerson. I mean, Tillerson was put in an impossible situation. He took the job only because he thought it was the right thing for the country, not as a stepping stone to higher office. Sadly, he was doomed for failure both because of the crazy White House he had to answer to, but also because he let himself get so cut off from the people at the department who could actually have helped him if they'd been given a little trust and access.

Q: I seem to remember that one thing Tillerson did was defend the State Department budget, at least to some extent, against what initially were going to be cuts of 30 percent or some enormous amount. Is that accurate?

DODMAN: Happily, I've forgotten most of these details. What I can say is this: things would probably have been even worse than they were if you hadn't had adults like Tillerson and Mattis running State and Defense. As much damage as Tillerson did with things like the hiring freeze, he understood that the United States needs to maintain a robust diplomatic function and resisted short-sighted efforts to just tear up all our alliances, close our embassies, and leave the world to fend for itself. The same as Mattis did on the military side. I have very few good things to say about Pompeo, but I can say the same thing about him. In the end I expect it was Congress that deserves the real credit for avoiding the draconian budget cuts the Trump OMB wanted. But I think both Tillerson and Pompeo helped.

Q: Other than his internal reforms, did you have the sense that Tillerson was deep into any policy issues? And the E issues in particular?

DODMAN: The only real economic issue that I recall from the first half of 2017 was unwinding TPP. But even there, I don't recall any direct engagement from Tillerson. It's hard for me to know if that's because I was so out of the loop without access to him or any decision-makers at State. Or because policy was actually all being shaped and run out of the White House, so the department really was as out of the loop as it appeared to me. No, my only strong impression of Tillerson was the engagement on the internal transformation project. And even there, I didn't last very long. It didn't get started until the spring, and by summer my attention was solely on my next job.

Q: What happened with your G-7 role in the new administration?

DODMAN: That continued. After that meeting in January before the inauguration, there were two more that spring. One in Rome, one in Naples. But I honestly can't recall a single thing that we were negotiating at those meetings. Probably because I had no talking points from the White House and really couldn't engage very much. I'm actually sort of surprised the White House let me go, but some things were still on autopilot. Trump was planning to attend the G-7 summit that summer. All those international meetings—G-7, G-20, NATO, and the like—ended up even more than usual being hammered out at the last minute. It was often unclear to the end if there would be a final communique or not, since Trump usually wanted something in there that the others couldn't live with. So, a lot of the prep work that was being done at my level became pointless. Anyway, I do recall enjoying those last two G-7 meetings. The Italians were great hosts, as the Japanese had been. And I have to say: all my counterparts in those meetings were very understanding of the situation back home. Honestly, I think my showing up just made them relieved. Proof that we hadn't yet given up on these structures and partnerships.

Q: What was our approach to China during this period? Was Trump still in his "I love China phase" then, or had he already started to shift to an antagonistic approach?

DODMAN: Yeah, Trump was always of two minds about China. There was the negotiation side, with both China and North Korea, where he had these visions of grandeur, that he was the world's greatest negotiator and he would personally solve all these long-standing conflicts. But then he was surrounded by hardliners, on trade generally and more specifically on trade with China. Or really anything having to do with China. As I said talking about the end of the Obama administration, I had definitely seen our policy towards China begin to get much more critical. That only accelerated over the next four years. Some of it was rhetoric and chest thumping or threats by tweet. But behind the scenes I know that there was a lot of work happening in the department on China. That rethinking I saw starting in 2016 continued and grew. And I think that was necessary and helped to shape some of what eventually came out of the White House. We had a lot of policy processes. One of the most important was CFIUS, the Committee on

Foreign Investment in the United States, which has to approve any investment in a sector that might touch on national security. I recall there were a lot of intense CFIUS debates during this time.

I guess I should state for the record here: I certainly don't believe that the Trump administration was without any foreign policy wins. China is probably the best example of where a much-needed reset of our policy was accelerated. And, of course, has continued under Biden. And while I personally wasn't directly involved in any of the China debates during these early months of 2017, members of my team were. I know State had influence in the interagency debates and helped to shape some of the absolutist positions of the China hardliners in the White House.

Q: Right. And Iran sanctions, were you involved in that at all and the change in policy there?

DODMAN: I was not. My Civil Service deputy, the senior Civil Service person we had in E, handled Iran and sanction things.

Q; Okay. Well, any other policy or other matters from the beginning of the Trump administration that you want to talk about before we move on?

DODMAN: Yes, just one thing I should have brought up last time. But it's an important one: something I spent a lot of time on during my two-plus years in E, but also something critical to the functioning of our overseas missions. That was my service on the DCM/ Principal Officer Committee. Getting to serve on this was actually one of my motivations for taking the job. In part because it let me continue working with the Director General and senior folks in HR that I had gotten to know in my last job. It was also one of the most "Foreign Service" things I did in my career, by which I mean old-school Foreign Service: a bunch of senior FSOs sitting in a room discussing candidly who should and shouldn't get these senior leadership jobs overseas. It was in many ways the antidote to the unsatisfying experience I had with the assignment panels in HR, where we almost never got to talk about who should or shouldn't get a job.

So, for the record: the DCM/PO Committee assigns officers to the position of principal officer or consul general at a consulate and approves the short list of those candidates that an ambassador can interview to pick his or her DCM. The preliminary work comes from the regional bureaus who provide their own short list of people for each job. But the Committee has access to the names of everyone who bid on each job and can revise the DCM shortlist or pick someone for PO who was not even on the bureau short list. So, a lot of authority.

Simply put: the Committee's objective is to make sure that people going out as DCM or PO are not going to fail on the job. Only strong, proven leaders who can effectively manage both up and down will fill these critical jobs. I can't say that we fully succeeded because I know there were people who we kept on a short list and who were chosen as DCM who did fail. But I'd like to think that, you know, we were able to prevent even

more people who, frankly, didn't have the skills or temperament needed to be a successful DCM or PO from getting chosen.

Q: You said the bureaus put together a list. Were these just the geographic bureaus or did the functional bureaus also have a useful input?

DODMAN: No. That's an interesting point. It's the bureau that controls the job that puts together the list. So, 99 percent of the time that is the regional bureau—which in this case would include IO (bureau of international organization affairs) since they control the UN-related posts. But for instance, EB controls the DCM at USOECD, so they put together that list. PM (political-military affairs) bureau also gave us lists since the committee also vetted short lists for the most senior POLAD jobs—the political advisors assigned to the most senior DoD combatant commanders.

But beyond who actually puts together the initial lists, there's a separate question about how the bureaus and the rest of the building have input on the decisions taken by the DCM/PO Committee. The way that the committee was—and I assume still is—structured facilitates that. Each of the undersecretaries has a representative. So, in theory, all the bureaus that report to an under secretary get a say. For instance, I regularly talked with the PDASes in the three E bureaus before going into a DCM/PO Committee meeting. I particularly wanted to get their take on the qualifications of someone that I didn't know well. If there were economic-coned officers working for them who were bidding on these jobs, I wanted their input. I would also talk to the under secretary, obviously. There were just a few cases where she had a personal connection to somebody and would give me clear direction to really push for that person. Obviously, the career under secretaries did that much more often. Pat Kennedy, in particular, was very active in the process; the M executive assistant would regularly make clear that someone was a priority for Pat. But it worked just as often the other way, with the M exec saying a particular management officer wasn't ready for X job, or me saying the same about an economic officer. Or a political officer or anyone else—there were no limits on who could speak up on any candidate for any job.

That gets to another issue: it was never clear if individual candidates were supposed to lobby members of the DCM/PO Committee or not. This will come up in a few minutes when we talk about ambassadorships and the D Committee—there it is absolutely expected you will lobby. It was always a little nebulous for the DCM/PO Committee, which was silly because it just confused people and it made it non-transparent. My advice always was that if you personally know somebody on the committee, perhaps a former boss, you should definitely reach out. Second, if you are an economic or consular or management officer, or whatever, reach out to the appropriate person on the committee just to make sure they are aware of your interest. I wouldn't call that lobbying; just good networking. I never met with a bidder who wanted to come see me to actually lobby.

Q: Well, I think this all would become even more important at that particular time during the transition in the first year of the administration when a whole lot of ambassadors had

left, as they do at the end of any administration, and you know, these were the people who were going out to be chargés around the world.

DODMAN: So, to their credit, both the committee and the regional bureaus took that really seriously. Particularly EUR, which has the largest percentage of political appointee ambassadors. Anytime EUR came in to talk about a DCM position at a post that is traditionally filled by a political appointee they would talk about how well they thought each candidate would handle a potentially difficult political appointee, and how confident the bureau was in the candidate serving as chargé for an extended period. And after the bureau had presented their list, we would spend a lot of time debating just those questions to come up with the best short list.

Now just to pick on EUR a little longer, they were also famous for giving us short lists that somehow only consisted of people who were currently office directors in the bureau. They weren't alone in doing that, but they did it more than the others. At least they did in 2015-2017. This may have been a game: they could tell their people that they had taken care of them, knowing full well that the committee was going to shake up the list. Or maybe they truly did think that only bureau insiders could succeed at EUR posts. Whatever the case, we were not shy about changing lists, from EUR or any bureau. As I said, I know we didn't get it right every time. But I'm confident that overall there was—and hopefully still is—better leadership at overseas posts because the wise women and men on the DCM/PO Committee served as a filter and the bureaus didn't just get to reward the assistant secretary's favorites.

Q: Okay, well thanks for those insights on the DCM and Principal Officer Committee. I guess that is a good segue to the D Committee. Start maybe by explaining what it is and if there even was a D (deputy secretary) at the time.

DODMAN: Sure. Similar to what I just described for DCMs, the D Committee operates at the next level up and selects career officers to fill chief of mission slots. It is chaired by the deputy secretary and it consists of the under secretaries themselves, plus the director general and I think the executive secretary. There are no substitutes allowed on that, or at least that was the practice in those days. If an under secretary position was vacant, that seat on the committee was vacant.

In the Trump administration there was eventually a deputy secretary. John Sullivan. By the way, a very nice and very competent guy. Went on to serve as ambassador in Moscow, did great work, and continued under Biden. One of the few Trump appointees I can really speak enthusiastically about.

Anyway, I can't talk about how the D Committee worked under Sullivan in 2017. There was no E or acting E, so we had no role in the process. Since there were almost no undersecretaries, I believe they brought in a few other political appointees to fill up the committee. But again, I had no visibility. My experience was all in 2015 and 2016, when Cathy Novelli sat on the committee chaired by Tony Blinken, and my name was in play

in 2016. So, before I get into my story, tell me if there are other specifics about how the D Committee functions that I can take care of.

Q: Well, the one question I would have would be whether the D Committee at this time in 2017 or more generally was getting a list from the White House saying, "We're going to do this as a political appointee so don't even look that these," or whether it was trying to fill everything and then being told, "Sorry, you can't do this one because the White House has somebody else?"

DODMAN: Right. So, the process starts at the White House. Every spring, I would guess, the White House personnel office looks at ambassadorships that are due to be vacated the following year. They decide which ones they will fill with political appointees. All the rest are sent to the department. Those are the jobs that then get distributed among career officers for them to pursue. And those are the jobs the D Committee will eventually take up. The D Committee has nothing to say about the jobs the White House is holding for political appointees. Maybe informally the secretary has some influence on those nominations, but not the committee.

That worked the same way in the Trump administration. The only difference being that instead of the normal 30-35 percent of jobs reserved for politicos, I think they held closer to 40 percent. Oh, and I should add that the department's list can and does change. In 2016 Slovenia was on the list and a career officer was chosen to be nominated. Probably not surprisingly, the Trump administration decided they wanted a political appointee sent to Melania's homeland, so the FSO that the D Committee had chosen never got nominated.

Q: Okay. Thanks for the background. So let's hear your story and experience with the D Committee and the chief of mission process.

DODMAN: Let me start in the summer of 2015 when I arrived in E. The D Committee generally meets in the summer, so one of my earliest tasks was helping prep the under secretary for those meetings. I'll explain how one gets on these lists in a minute, but the committee members all had the names of people who were competing for each chief of mission slot, as well as a list of the bureau's recommendations. So very similar to the DCM process. I gave the under secretary some background on each candidate, with a particular focus on economic officers. She had already been lobbied by candidates, so had some definite ideas of who would be good. She had gone through the process at least once before, if not twice. In 2014 she succeeded in getting my predecessor his top choice as ambassador to Cambodia. So she knew the process. And it was right up her alley: a lot of negotiation and horse trading.

For myself, as I already said, I knew that the under secretary was going to leave at the end of the Obama Administration regardless of who won. Which meant that if I was ever going to become a chief of mission, I had only one shot at it, and that was the 2016 list, for a job opening in 2017.

Now let me step back and say this: I absolutely did not set my whole career up to become an ambassador. Until this job in E basically fell into my lap, I had never given it any thought. I knew that the only sure route to becoming chief of mission is knowing someone on the D Committee. And to the extent I thought at all about this prior to 2015, it was that I doubted I would ever know anyone on the committee, so even thinking about becoming ambassador was a moot point. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, my ambition for several years was to become CG in Istanbul and have that be the pinnacle of my career. That night a few months earlier that I found out I had lost Istanbul, everything shifted and suddenly the path to an ambassadorship was basically mine for the taking. So, I won't lie: in those few months between losing Istanbul and starting in E, I had started thinking about becoming an ambassador. I knew I would be good at it. I knew the sort of post I wanted. And I knew that Novelli could make it happen. So, while I didn't plan on this my entire career, I definitely did a lot of planning in 2015 and 2016. And as soon as the process began in spring of 2016, I was all over it.

Oy, what a crazy process. Okay so it starts in the spring when the senior-level career development officers send around an email announcing that the list of COM posts open to career officers for the following year is now available. But you have to ask for it. And you are told not to share it with anyone else. All very hush-hush. At the time I don't even think there was a cable announcing the process was starting—that may have changed as the department tries to be more transparent and equitable.

So, you get the list and instructions. Which are, no surprise, ridiculously detailed on some matters and very sketchy on others. Basically, you have to ask someone who has actually gone through the process how it works in reality. Again, old school Foreign Service. Happily, I had a little bit of insight from where I sat. The key thing is, you don't actually bid on a position. You have to get a bureau front office—which is usually the regional bureau that controls the post—to nominate you for a specific job. But the good news is that *any* assistant secretary can put someone's name in play. The regional bureau that controls the job doesn't have to be the one to nominate. Which makes sense, because then it would only be bureau insiders or a particular assistant secretary's favorites who get considered for a post.

I'll say that the list in 2016 was pretty short. Maybe twenty posts. Some were complete non-starters for me: Moscow and Ankara being two good examples. Too complex and not realistic for a first timer. I would have loved someplace in south Asia, but there were no SCA jobs at all on there. In the end I came up with five posts that made sense for me—where I knew I would succeed and where I thought I had a shot. These were in EUR, AF, and NEA.

I had already talked with the heads of the E bureaus and knew that one of them would nominate me for the five jobs. In other words, I didn't need the regional bureau nomination. But it was a point of pride and part of playing the game. I went to see each of the three regional PDASes and made the case for why I would be great for each post. To varying degrees, they were welcoming, or polite I guess is the right way to put it, but none were particularly warm and friendly. Even if they knew me, as some of them did,

they didn't "owe" me. I particularly appreciated the candor of the PDAS in AF who in a very straightforward way said he had a slew of senior FSOs who had spent years working in Africa that he needed to take care of. Not only had I never worked in Africa, but I didn't need his nomination. What he did not say was that he thought I was not qualified for the job or couldn't hack it on the continent. Just that he needed to take care of his people, and not me. Refreshingly candid.

Okay, speeding this up a bit. So, I was put in play for five posts. The next step was to lobby the D Committee members. But I realized before I did that I really needed to decide on one post and focus my pitch. Frankly, it was pretty easy to zero in on Mauritania. It played to my strong suits: a high-threat post, very junior staff with lots of mentoring required, and honestly not likely to be as highly sought-after as some of the other posts I was pursuing, particularly those in EUR.

So, I went out to sell myself for Nouakchott. I saw many of the undersecretaries and others on the committee: Tom Shannon, Pat Kennedy, Kristie Kenney, Joe Macmanus, Arnie Chacón, the director general. I got messages to Blinken and the others on the committee through their chiefs of staff. Those meetings were a great experience: talking with some of the luminaries of the Foreign Service, and they were all decent, charming and supportive—although obviously non-committal.

When the D Committee finally met later in the summer of 2016, I had given Novelli all the ammo to support me for Nouakchott, and some backup points in case my name came up for other posts. That's the weirdness of this process: the committee can tap you for a post that you weren't nominated for if it is needed to make the sorting process work. Anyway, Novelli's negotiating skills obviously won the day, and I got Mauritania.

The next day the DG called me to make it official and explained that while the vetting process would start immediately—or as soon as the secretary signed off—the White House nomination wouldn't come until next year. In other words, it would be done by the new administration. So, expect this to take a while. And by the way, you can't tell anyone anything about this until the White House makes that announcement.

Q: When was the position in Mauritania becoming vacant?

DODMAN: All these jobs were notionally opening up in 2017. Meaning that the incumbent ambassador would finish his or her three years in 2017. But I say that's notional because the confirmation process is so screwed up that most people don't arrive or depart when they are expected to. In this case it worked fine because the incumbent in Mauritania was also a player in that year's D Committee sweepstakes. He was nominated for another post around the same time I was nominated for Mauritania, and we were both confirmed on the same day. As soon as that happened, he left Nouakchott and I did my swearing in and a bunch of other things and I arrived two months after he left, which is a normal interval for a turnover.

Q; Okay. So, you already knew in the summer of 2016 where you would hopefully be headed. And for your last year or so in E you had that in front of you, clearly.

DODMAN: Yeah, but I always had a bit of uncertainty due to the election. In this respect I was frankly more worried about Clinton, knowing that she had lots of people she knew in the department and the Foreign Service, so maybe she had some favorites that she wanted to award these jobs to. Then when Trump won, it raised another set of questions. How would their vetting work? What are they going to be looking at? Would the fact that I had just finished working for an Obama administration political appointee count against me? I didn't really have a social media presence, so I wasn't worried about that side of things, but everything about this new administration and their processes was a big unknown.

Q: And how did the process go in the end?

DODMAN: Like so much else, it was a bit surreal. For many months nothing much happened other than filling out a lot of paperwork. I guess Tillerson had to sign off on the whole slate of candidates that Kerry had approved a few months earlier. In March I finally got an email from the people that manage this in HR, State's presidential appointments people, telling me that my "package" was now going over to the White House. I started bracing myself for the summons to be grilled by the White House lawyers. But instead, two days later this same person writes back to report that the president had signed my nomination and the process would keep moving. I immediately called her and said, "Sorry, there must be some mistake, because no one has called me for the vetting." Nope, no mistake. Trump had signed and everything was full steam ahead. Weird, but I guess par for the course.

After that the file got stuck somewhere again. I think it was DS (diplomatic security) this time. Anyway, after several more months with no news things suddenly started happening all at once. We got agrément turned around quickly from the Mauritanians. One day in mid-July I got my first and only call from the White House, when someone in personnel called to clarify a discrepancy between the forms I had filled out and what was on my LinkedIn profile—glad to have some sign they were taking this so seriously. And that person was able to give me the heads up that the announcement would come that evening. Which it did. I was actually over at the Old Executive Office Building for a happy hour when the announcement came out, which was a nice touch.

So, from that point in mid-July I pretty much pivoted from full-time E work to nearly full-time preparations mode. I did the chief of mission class in August. In September I started brush-up French lessons at FSI and then consultations all over Washington. I had my hearing in October, which is pretty quick. It was a group of seven or eight of us, all career folks going to African posts. We were all confirmed in November, right before the Thanksgiving recess. So really, once the announcement came from the White House, things moved very quickly. We had none of the politically motivated holds in the Senate that have become so common.

Tom Shannon agreed to do my swearing in, which happened the week before Christmas. A great ceremony with lots of family and friends there to celebrate. And we left for post on January the second or third of 2018.

Q: Okay. Did you get any questions at your hearing?

DODMAN: The hearing went pretty much exactly as expected. Only two senators were present for most of it, Jeff Flake and Cory Booker, who were the top two people on the Africa subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I got one question from each. And they were exactly the questions I expected, based on the conversations I'd had with their staff. Flake asked about terrorism in the Sahel, and Booker about human rights.

But all that said, I had prepared quite a bit. In fact, one of my takeaways from this is that I vastly overprepared for the hearing. I had dozens of pages with possible Qs and As that the desk had prepared. And then I rewrote everyone so they were all in my own voice. All along I knew that terrorism and human rights were likely to be the only topics, so I was very prepared on those, but still wasted a lot of time preparing the rest. The whole thing was very collegial. Really a lot of fun and definitely a high point of my career.

Q: Had you met the two senators before? Did you pay courtesy calls on them beforehand?

DODMAN: Yes. Flake wanted to see each of us beforehand. Flake was just a true gentleman and I really enjoyed meeting him. It's great Biden chose him as ambassador in Ankara. Booker wanted to meet but we couldn't find a time. But he was a super decent guy in the hearing. I said something in my opening statement about my wife being from New Jersey, and he just lit up and made her feel very welcome.

One other Senate-related tidbit. Senator Inhofe from Oklahoma had a long fascination with Africa and asked to see all the nominees going to African posts. I was surprised to learn he had been to Mauritania and knew a fair bit about the country. He also had very strong views on the Western Sahara question. He asked me if it would be alright if he came to visit Mauritania while I was there, which I thought was an odd request but maybe just his folksy way of putting people at ease. Of course, I welcomed him and any CODEL. He went on to say he liked to meet with African leaders and pray. Which sounded interesting in a Muslim country like Mauritania, but who am I to judge. Well, lo and behold, he came. He led the only CODEL that we hosted during my three years in Mauritania, and certainly the first the country had seen in many years. And yes, he prayed with the president. He and several congressmen who joined him were on the ground maybe three hours, but they came with spouses and military escorts, so we got to do the full CODEL drill.

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Q: Today is August 22, 2023. This is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Mike Dodman. When we left off last time you had been confirmed as ambassador to

Mauritania. Before talking about the post, I wanted to go back and ask about the chief of mission training you did at FSI. What were your impressions from that class?

DODMAN: So, yeah, I did the traditional charm school class in August of 2017, so very soon after I was nominated. At this point, about six months into the transition, the Trump administration was finally moving on appointments. It was a full class, I would say about half career, half political. But, again, always something weird with this crew. We had one political guy in the class who had not yet been nominated. And in fact, he never was nominated. He never should have been in the class. But these guys weren't big on following rules or precedents.

The class was a fine experience. A bunch of similarities to the DCM/PO class, both in terms of the in-class speakers and the week-long off site where you had the touchy-feely leadership stuff. The mix between career and political folk worked well for the most part. A couple of the politicals had clear chips on their shoulders: they both distrusted the career folks and just plain thought they walked on water. But most of them were genuinely open to what they were learning in the class and what we career dips had to share.

There was a separate short class just for spouses, which Joan attended. That was memorable because Newt Gingrich was in her class. His wife, who was nominated to the Vatican, had taken the class the previous month, but he couldn't make it then. Apparently, he was mostly on good behavior during the class.

Q: Okay. That's great. I recall you being kind of critical of the DCM course as not necessarily focusing on what it should. Did you feel the same way about the COM (chief of mission) course?

DODMAN: No, I'm not as critical. Recall I had done the DCM course twice, both as student and mentor, so got to dive into that much more deeply. The dynamics of the COM class were so different. The split between career and political was such a prominent part of the class, and we career folks were there as much to guide and orient the politicals as we were to learn ourselves.

Q: Did they give you any brush-up language or try to give you any Arabic or anything like that?

DODMAN: Yes, and the language experience at FSI was one of the best parts of my prep, so I'm glad you asked. French is the working language in Mauritania and I knew I needed some serious brush-up since I had never actually used my rusty French in an official capacity. The language school at FSI was incredibly accommodating. They gave me one-on-one lessons with an instructor who was originally from Burkina Faso, so I was able to get a good dose of regional dynamics in addition to the language. The guy completely adjusted to my schedule. It was exactly what I needed. And unlike nearly every other part of the year-long process where I was constantly asking and sometimes

begging people to help me get things done, the language school just bent over backwards to give me whatever I needed.

In addition to all the benefits of customized, one-on-one classroom instruction, FSI has a film studio where they set up mock media interviews in the language. So, I really left there feeling very comfortable with my French, and ready to engage in a lot of press and public diplomacy.

As far as Arabic: it turns out there was a Mauritanian guy on staff at FSI. He wasn't a language instructor, but he agreed to sit down with me for a couple hours to give me some introduction to Hasaniya, the local Arabic dialect. Which also included a bunch of helpful cultural tips. So, yeah, the FSI part of my preparation was extremely effective and very enjoyable.

Q: Okay, great. And did you find generally people around Washington were interested enough in Mauritania to have solid consultations?

DODMAN: Yes. The people who have an interest in Mauritania were very few, but they generally were very engaged. With the help of the desk in AF I am pretty confident that over those several months I saw every person in the USG who engaged in some way on Mauritania, plus the very few private sector folks following the country, which were mainly in the human rights realm, but also some business.

Probably the most interesting thing I had during that period was the roundtable that INR (bureau of intelligence and research) sets up with scholars or other academics to give new COMs the chance to have a real open discussion about the country. They will fly in academics from elsewhere in the country. In my case we had a few Mauritanian American academics, plus some local think tank types, and we had a fascinating discussion about the country and its recent history. I kept in touch with several of those folks and saw them when they came through Nouakchott. That was a really productive session and another thing I should give the department credit for doing to get new ambassadors launched effectively.

So, suffice it to say, by the time I got on that plane in early January, I felt I was very well prepared to take charge of embassy Nouakchott.

Q: Right. That was January of 2018. And how did you get to Mauritania? You have to go through Paris?

DODMAN: We always did. There were other options. My kids usually came via Casablanca. But we tended to stick to the Air France flights for anything official. That first flight was nice since we were in business class and the embassy had arranged for the airline to take good care of us for the layover in Paris. So, we arrived in Nouakchott in good shape. I think we got there on a Friday afternoon, so we had the weekend to get settled.

Q: Okay. Maybe we can start like we usually do and you can tell me about the embassy and its structure. I guess you don't have to tell me how you fit in this time but what was the embassy? What was the size of it? What agencies were there?

DODMAN: Yeah, so it's a small embassy. As I said before, it was smaller than the consulate I ran in Karachi. We had fewer agencies and just fewer of everything. It was an 01-level DCM which, you know, there are 02 DCMs so this was not the smallest of small posts. But beyond that, I believe the RSO, the senior security officer, was an 02, but otherwise all of the section heads were 03 officers. Pretty junior. I liked to say that nearly everyone in the embassy—myself included—was doing their job for the first time. So, it was very much a starter embassy. But that's what I knew going into it and what I wanted: a place where I could be a mentor to a lot of staff and really get my hands dirty engaging in all aspects of the embassy.

The political-economic section was two officers, one 03, one first-tour. Public affairs one officer. Consular one. RSO had three. Management had maybe ten Americans, including the very important medical provider. But the management slots were never all full. Worst case: on paper we had three IT slots, which is good sized. Only two were filled when I arrived, and for my last two years we only had one IT guy—and he was on his first tour. That was rough.

The defense attaché office was likewise small: two officers and two enlisted. Equally small security assistance office. One contractor for USAID plus one local hire—they reported to a regional office in Dakar. A small regional affairs operation. No commerce or agriculture or FBI, DEA, or anyone like that. The section with the most Americans was actually the Marine detachment: we always had ten to twelve Marines at post. All told, including the Marines and the family members who worked, we never had more than fifty Americans working in Nouakchott.

Q: Peace Corps?

DODMAN: Sadly, no. Peace Corps pulled out of Mauritania in the late 2000s after a couple unfortunate assassinations, not of Peace Corps volunteers but of an American and some Europeans. In fact, due to unrest throughout the Sahel, they had left pretty much all the countries in the region by 2018, with the exception of Senegal. Which was a shame. A lot of Mauritanians had great stories about Peace Corps Volunteers they met during their childhood. I did lobby to get Peace Corps to consider coming back to Mauritania as our security situation improved during my time there, but there was just too much uncertainty in the broader region for them to consider it.

Q: And the embassy itself, what was the building?

DODMAN: Okay. When I arrived in 2018, we were still in the old embassy compound, a place we had long since outgrown. When Mauritania became independent in 1960, the capital was just a small village. We got pride of place for our compound right next to the presidential palace. We built a small chancery and a bunch of residences. Over the next

sixty years, staffing grew and our requirements changed. That tiny chancery was still the core of the embassy, but all the residences—other than mine—had been turned into offices. So, we had a sprawling compound which was definitely showing its age. And didn't meet security standards. A new embassy was fully constructed, and in fact I was assured during my consultations that it would be open by the time I arrived. Surprise, surprise, it wasn't. In fact, for over a year the move had been delayed repeatedly for a bunch of reasons that we don't need to get into. But the upshot of this was that no maintenance had been done on the old compound for years. Plus, all the local staff had packed their boxes to move so many times that I arrived to find a lot of frustration and confusion.

In the end I have to say, I'm glad I got to experience working on the old compound. It helped me relate to the staff, particularly our long-suffering local staff. Plus, I had the shortest commute of my life: about thirty seconds to walk from my front door into my office. And truly, my office was the only one on the entire compound that you could say was in any way nice. And even that was being generous.

So, priority number one was getting us into the secure and modern new chancery that was just waiting for Washington to sign off on occupancy. I managed to get that done within two months. And the new compound was everything we wanted. Yes, it was one of those cookie-cutter chanceries—a mirror in many ways of where I'd worked in Baghdad and Karachi. But it had some distinctive architectural finishes—it actually looked kind of similar to the new African-American History Museum. But most important, it was clean and new and functional, and happily suffered from very few defects. The staff were happy, and I got to look like a hero for getting the job done.

Q: Did the new compound also include a new ambassador's residence?

DODMAN: No. It was a large compound. It included a house for the Marines. Plus, lots of amenities: a nice swimming pool, tennis court, playground, and the like. But other than the Marines, it was not a residential compound. The CMR (chief of mission residence) stayed on the old compound. This had been worked out by one of my predecessors. I never got the full back story, but I imagine this was done so we could retain the old compound because—apart from the crappy office space—the compound itself was quite lovely. Lots of green space, which is always in short supply in the desert. It also housed the American school. And of course, it gave us a secure alternate site should something happen to the new compound. It was only about a ten minute drive between the two locations, so I still couldn't complain about the commute.

Q: Did you participate in the Art in Embassies Program?

DODMAN: We did. Great program. They provided a curator to help decide what artists we wanted to showcase in the CMR. It was a little difficult since we picked all the art before we got to post, so we didn't have a good sense of the space. But it all worked. The best part of it was hosting a vernissage to introduce the exhibit to the art community in

Mauritania. Which, let's be honest, was a pretty small group. But one that we got to know well, especially Joan. That reception was one of the best we did during our time there.

Q: Okay, let's talk about the issues. What did you do as ambassador? What were your priorities? Maybe we should start with how were relations with Mauritania?

DODMAN: For the most part I'd rate relations as good. Mauritania obviously doesn't rank among our top partners. It's small, at least population-wise, and has tended to be very inward looking. Beyond that, our relationship has always been episodic. That stems in part from the country's history of coups. But also from shifting American priorities. In the sixties, when Mauritania and its neighbors became independent, we were in the thick of the Cold War and very much wanted friends in our camp. Consequently, we had major investments in the country: a big Peace Corps program, big USAID, lots of love, lots of friendship. Even today, our public diplomacy constantly references all the great things that we did in the 1960s, including the United States being the first country to recognize Mauritanian independence. That changed, particularly after the first coup in the seventies. During the Clinton Administration human rights became our overriding priority and that created a lot of problems. Mauritania was the last country in the world to outlaw slavery, which didn't happen until the 1970s. And they didn't criminalize it until the nineties. And then post-9/11 our focus has shifted between human rights and counterterrorism. Always with a little humanitarian assistance thrown in to deal with the country's persistent poverty.

So, the point of that mini history lesson is that we don't have a real strong basis on which we've built the bilateral relationship, other than those glory days in the early 1960s. That's the relationship that I inherited. Human rights and counterterrorism remained the top priorities. But we also focused heavily on democratization and business development.

Other than COVID, I'd say the defining development of my time was the 2019 elections. This was the first time Mauritania moved democratically from one elected president to another. The outgoing president had taken power initially in a coup, so it's hard to say he was fully democratic. But the president elected in 2019 came in through the ballot box. And even though he was a retired general, and even though there were certainly some irregularities in this election, it was democratic enough, if I can be so glib, and we definitely celebrated his election. As important, we worked extremely well with the new president on slavery and human trafficking in particular, as we'll talk more about. He hasn't been a panacea for the country, which remains very underdeveloped. But when you look at the rest of the Sahel, and particularly the problems lately in Niger and Burkina Faso, it's clear that Mauritania stands out as a relative beacon of stability. President Ghazouani deserves a lot of credit for that.

Q: Okay. Well, shall we talk about some of the issues and how you spent your time?

DODMAN: Sure. Let's stick with slavery and human rights. So, stepping back, there's no doubt that slavery was a defining element of society and the economy in the territory that we know today as Mauritania. The same could be said of many other countries in Africa

and elsewhere. The unique feature in Mauritania is that it persisted as long as it did. As I said, Mauritania was the last country in the world to outlaw slavery, and that happened only about fifty years ago. It's estimated that half the population today are former slaves or the descendants of slaves, and they suffer from a lot of the problems you would expect, notably weak education and persistent poverty as well as some social isolation. Mauritanians acknowledge all this and talk about the "legacy of slavery" and the need to address the lack of equal opportunities. And they were generally happy to have our help in addressing these areas. Indeed, I made frequent references to how the United States continues to wrestle with its own legacy of slavery, particularly after the George Floyd killing dominated headlines in 2020.

Where we didn't always agree was to what extent actual enslavement of individuals continued to persist. In other words, how serious was Mauritania's trafficking in persons problem. And was the government doing enough to seek out and prosecute traffickers, protect victims, and all the rest of the anti-trafficking playbook. This dialogue—whether slavery was a contemporary problem or just a legacy—was very difficult to have with the government when I arrived. In part because that government took a very hard line against independent NGOs, which included many groups who alleged that individuals were still subject to forced labor. Happily, we saw a real change after the new president came in in 2019. First, he very quickly passed a law giving NGOs more room to operate. Second, he directed his government to work with us on trafficking issues broadly. This was all in addition to taking steps towards his number one campaign promise, namely addressing the social divisions that stemmed in large part from this history of slavery, as well as the economic and educational deficits of this large underclass.

The president's new approach was critical for many reasons, but the most pressing issue for us was that the Trump administration had introduced TIP (trafficking in persons) sanctions for Mauritania in 2018. I could go into a ton of detail on how this happened and how it impacted the embassy and our bilateral relations. The short version is that the new administration basically decided it would dramatically reduce the number of countries that received national security-based waivers of TIP sanctions. The annual *TIP Report* had ranked Mauritania at tier three, the lowest level, for at least a decade. But the required sanctions had been waived given Mauritania's role as a key counter-terrorism partner. Why the Trump administration changed policy on this I have no idea. Could be they were looking for any reason to reduce foreign assistance. Or maybe somebody in the White House really had religion on the TIP issues. I'll never know because there was no discussion with us. The announcement came out of the blue, meaning I had to scramble to tell the host government we were going to be cutting large parts of our assistance the following year—including much of our military training. Just as difficult, I had to manage the anxiety of a significant number of embassy staff who wondered if their jobs were now secure.

The sanctions stayed in place for two years. The good news is they worked as intended. They got the attention of the government. As I said, we had much more traction with the new government beginning in 2019, and also developed a very good partnership with the TIP office at State; our reporting and a couple well-timed visits helped to overcome a lot

of skepticism that office had long held—for good reason—about Mauritania. The 2020 *TIP Report* upgraded Mauritania, and I think they were upgraded again in 2022. So, a lot of pain and work for us for a couple of years, but a positive outcome.

Q: Was all U.S. assistance cut for those two years?

DODMAN: No. The law required that any assistance to the host government had to stop. So that meant all military support, including one of our key programs in any country, namely sending officers to study at U.S. military schools through the IMET program or international military education and training. Unfortunately, a number of programs supporting youth training and education were set up to run through the government because of the previous government's suspicions of NGOs, so these had to stop even though the beneficiaries were just poor kids. It didn't help that the lawyers at State and AID took a very narrow view of what might be considered non-government assistance.

Q: What other types of assistance programs did we have prior to the TIP sanctions? Did you have PL-480 and other programs in the agricultural sector?

DODMAN: Yes, we had several agricultural programs. Actually, I don't think most of those were impacted by the TIP sanctions. Perhaps because the American agricultural lobby made sure these commodity-based programs continued. I can't be sure. But yes, the programs that USAID and USDA did in the agricultural sector were very significant, even if the dollar amounts were not large. In a country with a population of just four million, a little bit goes a long way. We also had a lot of small ag sector projects through the U.S.-Africa Development Foundation, which is a small Congressionally funded agency. These small projects could have a big local impact.

One of the achievements I'm most proud of was getting USDA to include Mauritania in the McGovern-Dole food program, which provides U.S. commodities to support school lunch programs, but also includes a significant education and development component. USDA came up with a large project that was really going to have a significant impact in Mauritania. It was so significant that we even got the president to attend the launch of the program in 2020. That, and then much more the granting of a small MCC (Millenium Challenge Corporation) program for Mauritania that was approved just after I left, were exactly the sort of things I wanted to see the USG do to build our partnership with the new government. And the sort of thing that the TIP sanctions, if they had continued, would have prevented.

As I said earlier, we really didn't have a lot of assistance. All the sums were small. We weren't building large municipal projects like the Chinese were or like we had done when I was in Pakistan. But we always maximized the press impact of anything we did, and we touched a lot of lives with the community-based projects. So, it was sufficient.

Let me wrap up on assistance by going back to the comments I made when I summed up my Pakistan tour. I continue to be a skeptic of the value of much foreign assistance. Particularly when we are just throwing money at the country, as was the case during my

time in Pakistan. What I took away from my experience in Mauritania is that small amounts of assistance, managed effectively, which I believe we did, can have a positive impact.

Q: All these programs you mentioned, were being managed out of the embassy?

DODMAN: Yes and no. As I said, we had a very small USAID office, and a small security assistance office. One innovative approach that I should have highlighted earlier was our program and grants office (PGO) which was staffed by two FSNs, one of whom was the highest-graded FSN in the embassy and reported directly to the DCM. That office managed all of the small programs that weren't handled directly by USAID or the DoD office. Well, also public affairs programs, which I should have been highlighting—those were handled obviously by PAS (the public affairs section) directly. PGO did all the USDA, USADF and many other small programs. They also coordinated an internal committee that reviewed all new assistance proposals and prepared recommendations for me. And they supported programs that were run out of Washington, things like anti-trafficking programs. PGO was a real asset to me and the embassy. I'm glad it was highlighted as a spotlight on success in our 2019 OIG (office of inspector general) inspection.

Now, obviously the MCC which is currently gearing up to launch their first Mauritania program will have, if they don't already, staff on the ground in Mauritania. I just hope they'll keep a small footprint and not overwhelm the small but effective assistance coordination team that existed when I left.

Q: You mentioned public diplomacy. Did you have an active section? International visitors program and the like?

DODMAN: Like the rest of the embassy, it was small but very active. We sent IVs (international visitors) to the States every year, maybe eight to ten. Small. My favorite program here, as in Pakistan, was the English language instruction. I loved going to see these bright but underprivileged kids as they showed off their English. And seeing their parents at graduation ceremonies and how immensely proud they were.

The biggest problem we had with the PD programs, and frankly all of our assistance programs, was making sure that all of the communities in Mauritania benefited equally. And that our various contractors didn't just favor their ethnic group or community. It was a constant struggle. I saw it mostly in engaging with the alumni of the programs. The Harratine community—the former slaves—was always underrepresented. Then you would have sharp divisions between people who travelled on French-speaking programs—normally members of sub-Saharan ethnic groups from the south of the country—and those who went on Arabic programs. But I'm sure this dynamic exists elsewhere.

Q: We've talked a lot about human rights and U.S. assistance. What were some of the other issues that occupied your time?

DODMAN: Thanks. Yes, human rights and slavery were perennial issues, but happily there was more to work on. The top two were probably economic development and counterterrorism.

So, of course, I'm an economic officer. It was natural for me to want to focus on the economy. Our bilateral economic relations were miniscule. The country was incredibly poor and underdeveloped. So, in a sense there was nowhere to go but up. But happily, my time in the country coincided with some major natural gas discoveries offshore. Which meant both that we had some immediate business opportunities, and that the country was poised for some increased long-term growth.

Setting aside the hydrocarbons sector for a minute, there wasn't much to talk about in terms of bilateral trade and investment. Mauritania had a fairly robust mining sector, and we exported some equipment to support that. There were a couple Boeing planes in the national airline's fleet. But that was really it in terms of U.S. exports. Mauritania's main exports were from the mining sector—gold and iron ore, primarily—and from their very rich fishing grounds. But almost none of that went to the States. Every year we worked with the main seafood producers to try to find some niche that could get them into the U.S. market. Without success during my time.

Happily, there was more to talk about with hydrocarbons. The offshore gas fields had been discovered by Kosmos, a small firm out of Texas. They had developed a very close partnership with the Mauritanians over the previous decade and were a great model of effectiveness and community engagement. But as much as I loved Kosmos, I can't lie: one of my greatest days in Nouakchott was attending the opening of Exxon's office there. They had won a concession to explore some of the offshore blocks. With Exxon there, with the new president and the prospect of higher growth and more equitable economic development, I'll admit that in 2019 I was really starting to get excited about prospects for the country and bilateral ties. Unfortunately, the Exxon piece didn't last. I can't be sure if it was that their explorations came up dry, or a change in their global strategy, but within a year after my departure Exxon pulled up stakes. Beyond that, COVID also helped to temper some of that enthusiasm. But skipping ahead to the end of the story, I do remain optimistic about Mauritania's future.

One key reason underpinning the optimism is and was the security situation—

Q: If I can just jump in before you leave the oil and gas sector, I actually wanted to share one historical note. My father worked for Conoco. In the early sixties he was vice president of something called Conoco of Senegal and Mauritania, based in Paris but focused on trying to find oil and gas in those two countries, which finally petered out, although he always maintained that the potential was there.

DODMAN: And he was right because the potential was there and still is. There had been small offshore finds of both oil and gas during the 2000s, but never in quantities that amounted to much. It took Kosmos and whatever magic they used to find this stuff to

make the first major discovery, which interestingly straddled the Mauritania-Senegal border offshore. And then a couple years later they found another even larger natural gas deposit further north, fully in Mauritanian waters. I know Exxon didn't have any more luck than Conoco in the sixties, and I don't think Shell and Total and the others who began exploration while I was there have either.

That's really interesting to know that personal connection you have, but also that a U.S. company was so involved back in the sixties. I hadn't heard that before. But it doesn't surprise me. As I said earlier, the sixties really were the golden days in terms of bilateral relations. I can't tell you the number of people who talked to me about "Kennedy milk" which was powdered milk that USAID or someone distributed soon after independence during a period of food insecurity. Sixty years later it came up all the time, including from people who hadn't been alive to see it. Hopefully we're getting close to a second golden age.

Which is a good segue back to counterterrorism. Obviously, security is key for economic development. As I mentioned in talking about the Peace Corps departure, Mauritania had gone through a difficult period in the late 2000s, with some significant homegrown and external terrorist attacks on both domestic and foreign targets. Some French tourists were kidnapped and assassinated: an American missionary was assassinated in downtown Nouakchott. This was all part of a broader terrorism surge across the Sahel and in north Africa, much of it linked back to the fall of Qaddafi. Both DoD and State responded with a number of programs to bolster the military capabilities of the countries in the region. By the time I arrived in 2018, these programs had been underway for at least six-seven years. I can't speak to their effectiveness in other countries. But in Mauritania they really seem to have made a big difference. The last terrorist attack on Mauritanian territory happened in 2011. I don't want to suggest this was all our doing. The Mauritanian military, police and intelligence services are pretty competent. Despite it being a massive and sparsely populated country, and despite a growing insurgency and terrorist threat just over the long and porous border with Mali, they maintained an admirable awareness of what was happening in the desert. We helped by building up some special forces brigades and providing lots of other training. But by the time I arrived in 2018, this effort was winding down. Mainly because the needs were so much greater as terrorism really ripped apart Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. But also because the Mauritanians proved to be relatively good students for all our training.

So here again, my struggle with Washington and with AFRICOM (the U.S. African Command) was to make sure we didn't "reward" Mauritania for its success by cutting all military support. This was harder in the Trump administration both because of the TIP sanctions, but also their desire to limit our global military engagement. The killing of several U.S. troops at the Tonga Tonga raid in Niger a few years earlier didn't help.

We had some success with this. I found the leadership at AFRICOM very open to engaging with Mauritania, even if we couldn't always get the budget we wanted. Our biggest success was in early 2020 when we hosted a major special forces military exercise that AFRICOM organized every year and that involved dozens of countries and

thousands of troops. Flintlock, it was called. It was a great way to showcase some of the progress Mauritania had made and get some positive press in the regional and international media. Funny story on that: because of some of the weirdness coming out of the White House, the Pentagon decided that the AFRICOM senior brass couldn't do any major press engagements, particularly not with the *New York Times* and other major outlets that, ironically, the AFRICOM press operation had arranged to come witness the exercise. We had no such concerns from State. So, I ended up doing most of the international press engagement during the exercise. Which was fun.

That exercise was certainly the biggest single undertaking the embassy handled during my tenure—it took many months of planning. But what's amazing is that it was only one of several remarkable events that happened within a three-week period in February of 2020. We had a whole bunch of high-level visitors from Washington for this exercise. We had Senator Inhofe and his CODEL, which was unrelated to the exercise but it was during that period. And Under Secretary David Hale, P at the time, came just before the exercise—the highest State Department official to visit the country in over a decade. This was a lot for our little embassy. I give massive kudos to my amazing DCM, Anne Linnee, who juggled all these overlapping visits and kept everyone from burning out. This burst of bilateral engagement helped fuel that optimism I talked about earlier.

But then a couple weeks later COVID hit and everything changed. But let's save that for later.

Q; Yes, we'll get to that. Was the terrorist threat in Mauritania and across the Sahel from ISIS? Or al-Qaeda? Or some other group?

DODMAN: All of the above. I don't know if the terrorists in the 2008-2011 period were affiliated with one of those groups or were more homegrown. But definitely during 2018-2021, the threat in the Sahel came primarily from the local affiliates of ISIS and al-Qaeda. Plus some homegrown groups Again, since we happily didn't have the threat on our soil, I can't even remember at this point which group was dominant in which part of the Sahel. But the point is that it was a complicated mix. With a lot of long-standing ethnic and tribal tensions thrown in as well.

One point I should add here to lend some credence to my claims that Mauritania was doing and had done a good job confronting the terrorist threat—certainly a better job than its Sahelian neighbors to the east: in 2019, I think it was, Nouakchott was moved off the department's list of high-threat posts. In fact, I'm pretty sure I was told that Nouakchott was the very first post that DS (diplomatic security) had moved off the high-threat list since it was created in the wake of the Benghazi attacks.

Q: Well, that's great.

DODMAN: The way I remember the discussion is that Ouagadougou was being added to the high-threat list, reflecting the very sharp rise in terrorist attacks that Burkina Faso was experiencing. And in order to make sure the high-threat program didn't get too big,

someone had to come off. I was very happy to take the downgrade, since Ouaga clearly needed the resources and more intense DS focus more than we did. Of course, I put up a bit of a bureaucratic fight. I wanted to be sure we didn't lose one of our RSO slots, or any of the extra Marines we had. Which we hadn't by the time I left.

Q: Did you lose your danger differential?

DODMAN: No, because believe it or not, we weren't getting danger pay. Which makes no sense: we had been on the high-threat list, but no differential. We did have a very high—and very well deserved—hardship differential, but that's different.

Q: Weird. Okay, I did want to ask you about the French, whom you've mentioned a couple of times. Were they still diplomatically the main country in Mauritania?

DODMAN: If you ask the French, I'm sure they would say yes.

Q: Well, I'm asking you. (Laughs)

DODMAN: So, the way to answer this, there's no question that in Mauritania and all the Sahel, frankly, all of Francophone West Africa, France is a hugely dominant force. I mean, obviously, the language ties help. But France does maintain large and very active embassies. Big cultural and education exchange programs. There are long-standing business ties between metropolitan France and these countries, including some that are not at all transparent. And in many cases, although this is declining in importance, they continue to have a very strong military presence. Although this last piece didn't apply in Mauritania, where no foreign country had troops stationed—not the French, not us, not the Chinese. That's just one example of why Mauritania's ties to France were a little different than those of some of its neighbors. It goes back to history. When France colonized what is today Mauritania around the turn of the twentieth century, it maintained a very light colonial footprint. The colony was administered out of the town of Saint Louis, in today's Senegal. The French had some mining operations to the north, but basically they didn't see anything of value there. I'm sure they were also soured by the fact that the Mauritanians had fought hard against French forces, which is an important part of Arab-speaking Mauritanians' cultural heritage. Basically, these desert nomads just wanted to be left alone. Which they largely were. The sub-Saharan tribes along today's southern border—who came from the same tribes and ethnic groups that were present on the other side of the Senegal River—were more integrated into French colonial life, including getting the benefit of French education. Which is why those areas and those groups are more heavily Francophone to this day. And this all is another reason why slavery was allowed to persist for so long.

Anyway, that mini history lesson is to explain why the French embassy in Nouakchott didn't dominate in ways that I would guess its counterparts do in other Francophone African countries.

This leads to another issue that came up often, and may be your next line of questioning, which is how powerful the Chinese were in Mauritania. The way I came to see this is that the Mauritanians were very happy to play all three of us—the Americans, the French, and the Chinese—off against each other. In many ways, the Mauritanians just wanted to be left alone and have their beautiful desert all to themselves. Which gets back to the fact that there are no foreign bases on Mauritanian soil. And I would wager there will never be. I really got the sense that the Mauritanian government liked having these three major powers playing off against each other. Taking whatever they offered in terms of assistance. But never letting one get the upper hand. Anyway, that's my pet theory. So, to answer the question, the French embassy was big and influential, but in my assessment, it did not dominate the scene.

Q: Did you find yourself working closely together with the French ambassador on some of the issues we cared about?

DODMAN: Yes, definitely. But you could say the same thing, although certainly to a lesser extent, about the Chinese ambassador. The fact that we were a small dip community in a rather austere environment I'm sure helped with this, but all the chiefs of mission got along surprisingly well. And certainly with the European embassies, we had very common objectives on democracy, human rights, and economic development.

Let me add here, getting back to your earlier question: it was fascinating to watch how the French used the EU mission. The EU was definitely the largest aid donor—a relationship that has only grown since I've left as the migrant traffic from northwest Africa to the Canary Islands has again exploded. It was abundantly clear that the French were dictating to the EU how large parts of their assistance should be spent in Mauritania. I'm assuming this dynamic was repeated across Francophone Africa, but I don't have proof of that.

This would manifest itself in really unseemly ways. Whenever Paris was unhappy with the way things were going in the Sahel, particularly if too many French troops were being killed, Macron would literally summon all the presidents to Paris for a meeting. And they would go. Even the Mauritanians. And there would be some declaration, usually involving the creation of some new French-dominated multilateral initiative. And lo and behold, in a few months the EU would announce huge amounts of new funding to support this initiative. That nobody other than the French wanted. Certainly there was no buy-in from the Africans. We would sometimes get sucked into these initiatives—because we continued to rely heavily on counterterrorism cooperation with French forces, so couldn't just ignore this stuff—but often in a very halfhearted manner. It got to the point where some of the other Europeans would almost beg me to get the United States more involved—to engage the EU in ways that the member states didn't feel they could—to try to get some of these French vanity projects shut down. Sadly, because of TIP sanctions and the general weirdness on foreign policy emanating from the White House, there wasn't much I could do.

Oh, but this reminds me of one story I have to get on the record. One of the most unpleasant nights I ever spent as an American diplomat was at the table of the French ambassador. Let me be clear: I spent many wonderful nights there. The chef was fine. As I said, we all got along. But this night he was hosting the leadership of the French trans-Sahel counterterrorism force, which technically covered Mauritania even though they had no activity there. I think the commanding general—who was based in Chad—was rotating out and was in Nouakchott for his farewell calls, with several of his aides and senior staff in tow. If I ever had any doubt about how the French really see their former colonies in Africa, particularly in the Sahel, it was completely dispelled that evening. These guys were so arrogant, so patronizing and without the slightest iota of respect for any of the militaries and governments they worked with. I mean, they had fine things to say to me about collaboration with U.S. forces. But not a single civil thing to say about the Africans. I honestly was shocked that they didn't think it appropriate to censor themselves in the slightest around me and several other ambassadors. Let alone around the Mauritanians who were serving us. Really, my blood was boiling and in hindsight I sort of wish I had set aside my diplomatic protocol and made a scene and stormed out of the dinner. But of course, I let my desire to preserve the good ties within the small dip community, and to avoid damage to the U.S.-French mil-mil partnership in the Sahel that at that point was still very important to us, I let those win the day.

Q: Okay, well that seems to be a good story on which to wrap up for today. We'll finish up the rest of your Nouakchott experience next time.

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Q: Today is August 29, 2023, and this is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Mike Dodman. Mike, last time we started discussing your experiences as ambassador in Mauritania from 2018 through the beginning of 2021. Still much more to review from that period. Let me start with consular issues and in particular, this was the time of the so-called Muslim bans. I wonder if you would talk about how all that worked out for you.

DODMAN: Yeah. So, we had a small consular section. Everything was small, so I guess I can stop using that modifier. One 03 FSO and three local staff. Except when I arrived, we didn't even have that. CA (consular affairs bureau) gapped the American job for a year. So we couldn't do anything but emergency visa interviews, when one of our other junior officers who still had their consular certification would run down to do the interview. Any routine cases had to get themselves to Dakar or another post to apply. That was a really bad look for us: our most public-facing service was closed and in many Mauritanian minds it meant the embassy itself was closed.

Happily, the position was filled in the summer of 2018 and we could resume regular services. Now, I should be clear that this was not a result of the Trump visa and travel bans—it was purely a matter of short staffing, and the fact that the workload in Nouakchott was pretty small.

So, Mauritania is a Muslim country. After all, it is formally the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. One of my greatest fears during those three years was that I would wake up one morning and discover that someone in the White House had realized this place called Mauritania exists and it would be the perfect place to expand the travel ban. Sort of like the way I woke up to find we had lost our TIP waiver. I'm happy to report that never happened. But that didn't mean we didn't have our share of consular problems thanks to the Trump administration's new approach to these issues.

One problem was that while there were few Mauritanian travelers to the States, they had a very high rate of overstay. So even though the actual number of Mauritanians overstaying was miniscule, percentage-wise Mauritania ranked very high. The second highest in the world in 2019, if I remember correctly. At some point that year the department and administration went full throttle on these overstays, but based solely on the percentage rate, not the actual number of individuals involved. So, while you had many, many thousands of Indians who overstayed every year, the USG decided to fixate on a few dozen Mauritanians. That led to a lot of conversations with the foreign minister to see if there was anything the government could do to encourage their citizens to come back. Which there wasn't. Obviously our very high NIV refusal rate went even higher, which made it harder to promote business, to get Mauritanians to the States on our exchange programs, and even to get our FSNs back for training. So that was one problem. Happily, the threatened visa sanctions were never imposed on this issue.

But our much bigger consular-related problem had to do with removals. As I just mentioned, you had a lot of Mauritanians who would get to the United States and try to adjust status, mainly by claiming asylum. This practice boomed in the nineties when the authoritarian and very Arabist government at the time took some incredibly nasty moves against the country's sub-Saharan residents, culminating in executing some black army personnel. Many black Mauritanians successfully claimed asylum in the nineties. The problem was that their success became well known in west Africa, and you had a flood of sub-Saharans from other countries who falsified documents to pretend to be Mauritanian and used essentially the same story of persecution to claim asylum. Eventually our immigration authorities caught on and started turning down all these claims. But in part because the Clinton administration was very critical of Mauritania's human rights record overall, these folks were all allowed to remain in the States "temporarily." A policy that the Bush and Obama administrations continued.

But, of course, then came the Trump administration, which wanted to get rid of anyone in temporary status. Send them all home. Two issues here. These folks, of course, had been in the United States in some cases for twenty years; they were married and had Amcit kids. That didn't mean a thing to ICE (immigration and customs enforcement) under Trump. But the other issue was where we ran into real problems: many of these individuals who had petitioned for asylum as Mauritanians, and therefore were considered by ICE to be Mauritanians, in fact were from another country. The Mauritanians were reluctant to accept every one of these removals; they wanted to first verify who were actual Mauritanians. Which is a fair point, but not one that ICE and the White House were sympathetic to. They had quotas and political agendas to pursue; they

didn't give a damn about legal niceties in an unimportant country like Mauritania. To be fair, it did look like the Mauritanians were just using this as an excuse to slow roll the number of removals they allowed into the country. So, I had many, many conversations about this with the foreign minister and the Mauritanian ambassador in Washington. It took a lot of pushing. But we finally broke the logjam in 2020 when I used realpolitik with the foreign minister: pointing to the Muslim bans and other knee-jerk policy moves from the White House, I finally convinced him that Mauritania could well be next on the list if they continued to piss off folks in Washington, which would put at risk all the very positive momentum we were experiencing under the new president. He agreed and let everyone on the list come back. We know that many—I would guess nearly all—of the non-Mauritanians who were deported back to Nouakchott quickly left the country. And further than many of them ended up getting to Mexico to try to get back to their families over the southern border. So did many of the Mauritanians. But that's a different set of issues.

One anecdote to cap this off and shed a bit more light on life under the Trump team. At some point in the first half of January 2021, literally days before Trump left office, I ended up on a secure call with the White House and Homeland Security talking about sanctions for Mauritania and a couple other countries for just this issue. At least in my case this made no sense, since Mauritania had cleared the backlog. All of ICE's priority cases involving Mauritania were settled. And yet, still, at the very end of the administration, they were trying to come in and sanction Mauritania, going back and citing past delays to justify slapping on visas or some other sanctions. Which goes back to your initial question. This spirit of the Muslim ban, the animus against all foreigners but particularly those from black and Muslim countries, none of that went away. They were trying to put in place sanctions, knowing that it would take the Biden administration months or years to undo them. Pure spite was the way I saw it. Anyway, with strong support from State, and I think even from Homeland Security, the NSC stood down on Mauritania. Another bullet dodged. But what a hassle this issue was.

Q: Did you have any Mauritanians at Guantanamo?

DODMAN: Yeah. That's a great point. There had been three Mauritanians at Guantanamo over the years. One was released early on, the other two just before I arrived. So, by 2018 there were no Mauritanians in Guantanamo.

This would have been pretty much a non-issue for me, since all the agreements with the host government were already in place. Except that the final detainee to come back to Mauritania ended up being one of the most prominent and prolific detainees at Guantanamo. His name was Mohamedou Slahi. He had written and gotten published a memoir of his early days in Guantanamo, called *The Guantanamo Diary*. That book was eventually turned into a full-length feature movie called *The Mauritanian*, which came out in 2021. So clearly Mohamedou was not your average detainee. One factoid to prove that point: I think he told me that when he got to Gitmo he spoke no or little English; within a year he was writing his memoir *in English*. He was a brilliant guy, which made him stand out among the other detainees, who I gather were more like foot soldiers. This

also made him a very high priority for the CIA and FBI, since they assumed he must have been a leader of some sort. I don't want to get too much into the background here: while I read his book and saw the movie, I never read or had access to the classified USG file on Slahi. To this day I can't tell you whether he was or wasn't involved in 9/11 or any other attacks. But there are a few things that are relevant and undisputed, beyond his intellect. Mohamedou had gone to Afghanistan in the eighties and trained with and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. Which at the time, when the mujahideen were our allies in fighting the Soviets, didn't have nearly the stigma it did after 9/11. He was the cousin of a guy named Abu Hafs, who was a very close associate of bin Laden. While he was studying in Berlin on a German government scholarship, Slahi had some of the future 9/11 hijackers in his apartment. And while he was at Gitmo he was tortured. Which meant that when his case eventually came before the military tribunal, it was thrown out and he was free to leave Gitmo. Although it took many, many years between that decision and his actual return home.

All that said, my engagement with Mohamedou was not about relitigating the past. It was focused on the future and shaping the relationship that the embassy—and perhaps the USG more broadly—would have with the guy who was about to become pretty famous in a Hollywood biopic. Oh, and also assisting someone who was married to an American and had an Amcit child. Because amazingly he had married one of his lawyers. She and their son lived in Berlin. As an ex-Guantanamo detainee—even one not convicted—it was nearly impossible for Mohamedou to get permission to travel to Europe. And because of some ridiculous German bureaucratic BS, the kid couldn't get a birth certificate, and therefore a passport, until he was one or so. Which meant Mohamedou missed the whole first year of his kid's life. We spent a lot of time talking about that.

Because the fact is, I got to know Mohamedou pretty well. So well that by the end of my tenure, in January of 2021, early January, before the inauguration, I invited Mohamedou to come to the embassy and do a webinar discussion with me—this was still COVID times so we weren't doing in-person engagements—to meet with our English language club, which was a group of several hundred young people who wanted a place to practice their English. We jointly did a panel discussion about extremism and some of the lessons he had learned in his life. It was one of the most interesting things I did in Mauritania. I loved it, the kids loved it, the public affairs section loved it. Mohamedou loved it. Afterwards the question everyone asked was, Did Washington love it? Did you get the Trump administration's permission to do that? The fact is, no, I didn't ask for permission. It would have been denied or more likely slow rolled. I knew it was the right thing to do. Who better to engage Mauritanian youth on one of our—and the USG's—top priorities, combating violent extremism, than a well-known and articulate former extremist.

Q: Well, you're a brave man. Did you catch any flak afterwards for that?

DODMAN: None. As with all our PD engagements, we summarized it for the department after the fact. It was one of the largest outreach events we did during COVID, but I don't recall any reaction one way or the other.

Q: Okay. But you had met him before, so you were confident that he wasn't going to go off the deep end.

DODMAN: Right. As I said, I felt I knew him pretty well at that point. I will admit I was quite reluctant to meet with Mohamedou early on. I ended up doing so basically at the request of the German ambassador, with whom Mohamedou had a close connection given his earlier study on a German government grant. After that initial meeting we slowly started seeing each other more often, including coffees and eventually meals at the residence. He also became active on the diplomatic circuit because he was a polyglot and just a fascinating person. As well as a world-famous author. So yes, after three years of increasingly frequent engagement, I was certain this program was going to be a success.

Q: Fascinating. You've mentioned COVID a couple of times. I imagine operating under COVID must have been quite a challenge.

DODMAN: It was. So, like most of the world, you know, for the first couple of months of COVID up until the middle of March it really wasn't an issue. We were tracking it. But as I described earlier, February of 2020 was the busiest the embassy had seen during my two years there. We all assumed this higher tempo would continue. But it all came to a screeching halt in the middle of March. Not diplomacy and embassy operations per se. But certainly the visits, PD programming, receptions. Yeah, life slowed down a lot.

In the end, COVID didn't hit Mauritania that hard, as was the case in many sub-Saharan countries. But the *fear* of COVID definitely did. This was because the healthcare infrastructure in the country was abysmal. You did not want to get sick in Mauritania. Certainly not to the extent that you needed hospitalization and, God forbid, a ventilator—of which there were maybe ten in the country, but the number that were actually functional couldn't have been more than one or two.

So, cognizant of all that, the way the government reacted in mid-March was with blunt force. Literally closing all the borders, shutting the airports, basically doing anything they could to keep the disease out of the country. Which, I should note, was similar to the way the government—even the new government—dealt with mass protests: their first step was always to shut down the internet for the entire country so social media couldn't be used by organizers. Never mind the cost to the economy and individual citizens. Blunt force.

So anyway, around March 16 the airport was closed. No flights in or out. Indefinitely. A couple points on that. First, it didn't really work. Of course, the virus was already present. And anyway, the land borders were too porous to effectively prevent travel. But as I said, the virus for whatever reason didn't spread there rapidly, so while there were deaths and many positive cases, the worst case was averted. But that didn't stop the airport closure from becoming a major pain in my ass. On a purely personal note, my wife was in Washington for personal and work reasons that month. So, she was stuck there for what ended up being three months. But the bigger problem was the impacts the airport closure had for the embassy. Obviously no pouch deliveries, which was going to be tough in a

hardship post; although after a month or so cargo-only flights were permitted, so that made people happy. But the real concern was what would happen if one of our American staff got sick enough to need a medevac (medical evacuation)—whether for COVID or anything else—could we get an air ambulance in? Once I got the foreign minister's agreement that yes, we could get a flight in for a medical emergency, that calmed a lot of fears in the embassy.

So, then there were the daily impacts. How could we work since we technically weren't supposed to be coming to the embassy at all? No surprise, but Nouakchott's internet infrastructure was weak. Very weak. Most people, and certainly most of our FSNs, couldn't reliably telework from home the way you could in the States. They could really only operate using their phone. I was fine since the CMR was well wired. Maybe the DCM too. But that's it. So, we never ever went fully remote. We tried various things to limit people in the chancery, limit meetings, and eventually required masks. All the usual stuff. We got by. It helped that our engagements were so few that the pace of work was really reduced.

We did do one charter flight out for resident American citizens and any embassy Americans who wanted to leave. That was probably in April, once the government began to give more exceptions to the flight ban. There were maybe fifty Amcits who wanted to leave. Finding them and getting the government to waive the internal travel restrictions that were also, theoretically, in place was a heavy lift. Only a few embassy staff took advantage of the authorized departure, mainly people with health conditions. In the end maybe half a dozen staff. Compared to other African posts, that was a very small percentage of our staff. That certainly made me feel good, knowing that my people felt comfortable staying despite the health risks and hardships. It helped that we had a great medical provider in the embassy, which was always my top job to fill. I think we just generally took care of people and they felt it.

So, our operations continued fairly unimpeded, just with a lot fewer engagements. By the summer things started to change. The flight ban was lifted in late June so my wife was able to come back. People were able to PCS pretty much as scheduled. More government meetings could happen, and some social events came back. In the fall we started getting our first visitors from Washington. Not many, but enough to rekindle some of that optimistic spirit we had experienced in February.

Q: How about work and communications with the government in the early days? Did they have computers with cameras at their desk?

DODMAN: There were very few video conferences with the Mauritanian government. I know they did a few international meetings that way, including things the USG organized, so they had a video conference facility. But we never used it for routine work between the embassy and government. Even before COVID most of my routine interactions with government officials took place on WhatsApp. So, in that sense COVID didn't disrupt the communication flow, which was another reason the impact on our operations was less than it might have been.

Q: In the end did you have any COVID cases in the embassy? Did you ever need those medevac flights?

DODMAN: We never had to medevac, for COVID or anything else, during the period flights were banned. The only significant incidence of COVID was in November, so when things were well on their way to getting back to normal. Somebody had gone out to the Canaries or somewhere for a brief visit and brought the virus back. Unfortunately, they went to a Thanksgiving dinner with some other staff, and several people got infected. None of the cases were serious, and it created a huge amount of work for our wonderful medical team to do the testing, but otherwise didn't impact operations significantly. I probably wouldn't even remember this if there hadn't been a Washington angle. As usual, Washington was trying to micromanage everything. I was actually outside of Nouakchott on my first domestic trip since COVID had put all travel on hold. I ended up having to call the DAS or someone way too high in the department to offer assurances that we had this all under control, and that no, my people and I weren't flagrantly ignoring all the guidance Washington was offering us, etc, etc. It passed, but another annoying example of Washington interference—although in this case I definitely can't blame it on the Trump White House.

Just to say something nice about the department, let me praise how well they handled the delivery of the first Pfizer vaccines. Because we were one of the posts with the weakest local healthcare, we were in the first wave of deliveries. Logistically this was an amazing feat, delivering sub-zero freezers and then the actual vials maintained at that low temp. Kudos to the OpMed team that was created within MED (bureau of medical services) during the Trump administration to bring some military-style capabilities to that operation. I was really impressed and pleased that we had a very high vaccination rate in Nouakchott. Well over 90 percent, which I didn't expect given particularly the many hundreds of local guards we had on staff, who I'd expected may be a little more vaccine hesitant. I really encouraged the vaccines. Joan and I were the first to get them in January, and we shared pictures widely within the embassy so people knew that we, at least, had no doubts about their safety. As an added bonus, Joan and I were able to get our second shot the day before we departed post, so we came home fully vaxxed at a time when vaccines weren't even yet widely available here.

Q: Okay. That's great. Moving on, you had said one of the things you wanted to talk about was your inspection.

DODMAN: Yes, indeed. During my consultations in 2017, the two most immediate and high-profile administrative items on the agenda were the new embassy compound and an OIG (office of inspector general) inspection that was scheduled for spring of 2018. Since as late as December everyone in Washington was still assuring me that we would be in the new chancery no later than January, doing an inspection a few months later seemed reasonable and even fortuitous. Well, once we blew through the January move date, it looked very likely that the move could actually coincide with the inspection, which seemed like just the sort of thing that could break this small embassy. So, I wrote the IG

himself and basically begged for a last-minute postponement of our inspection. Which I knew even at the time was something OIG didn't like to do. But particularly because I didn't know the capabilities of my team well enough at that point, I didn't feel I had a choice. The OIG folks agreed, and I feel guilty to this day that they decided that Bangui would get inspected in our place, which meant that that even smaller embassy had a very compressed time to prepare for an inspection.

Our inspection took place in the spring of 2019, by which point the embassy was, you know, fully settled in the new chancery, and I was very aware of my team's strengths and weaknesses. I also had a fantastic DCM at this point, a management-coned officer who was just superb and made sure that the embassy was set up to take full advantage of the OIG's expertise. So, it ended up being a very good experience. As every inspection does, they found many small things that needed to be fixed. But overall, it was a very positive report.

And I can draw a direct line from that experience to the work I started just this month, as an REA (reemployed annuitant) doing inspections in OIG. I'd been involved in several inspections at other posts, but of course not nearly as involved as I was in Nouakchott. I really didn't understand that it was retired ambassadors who led these teams, nor any of the mundane issues related to work schedules and the like. Seeing the inspection up close and having a few opportunities to learn more about what it's like to work as an REA in OIG definitely piqued my interest. And here I am.

Q: Great. We've talked a bit about foreign policy. Was Mauritania involved at all in the Western Sahara issue or was that even a much of an issue when you were there?

DODMAN: You know, it surprised me that it was not a major issue. So, again, a quick history lesson. When Spain left the Western Sahara in the seventies, Morocco invaded to try to take over that territory from the Sahrawis, as the native people are known. Less remembered is the fact that Mauritania also invaded and tried to claim the territory. Obviously, Morocco won. The year or so that Mauritania spent fighting both the Moroccans and the Sahrawis did not end well. It led to the country's first military coup, for instance. And soured relations with Morocco. Perhaps as one consequence of this ill-considered operation, Mauritania has kept a low profile on Western Sahara issues for the past fifty years. This has also been an important part of their North African foreign policy as they have tried to stay out of the conflicts between Morocco and Algeria, who are both important neighbors. So, for instance Mauritania recognizes the Polisario, but doesn't allow them to have an embassy in Mauritania.

Now if you look at a map you will see that by far the largest land border that Western Sahara has is with Mauritania. The Sahrawis and Mauritanians—that is, the northern Arabophone Moors of Mauritania—are basically the same people, speaking very similar dialects, sharing the same traditional dress, food and nomadic heritage. Many tribal and family ties cross the border. Given all this, I kind of expected Mauritania would be more of a player on Western Sahara issues. Or put another way, that the UN negotiators would try to use Mauritania more to resolve the conflict. Mauritania is recognized as an official

party in the process, along with Morocco and Algeria. The UN special envoy would come through Nouakchott maybe once a year. We diplomats would always get together with him. But it all felt a little for show. This is where my lack of history on the region doesn't help. I don't know if James Baker or other previous UN envoys had tried to use Mauritania to broker a deal and been disappointed, or if nobody believed that Mauritania's ethnic ties with the Sahrawis compensated for their weak political stance and their general inward-focused mentality.

I never got to Western Sahara myself, unfortunately. I would have loved to have seen it. But it did not take up a lot of my time or my staff's time, unfortunately.

Q: You said there was no Polisario embassy. Were the Polisario operating militarily out of Mauritania or were they operating militarily at all during that time?

DODMAN: That's a good but tough question. I don't want to dive deep in the weeds—you would appreciate some of the wonkiness of this issue, but it's probably too much for most readers. Short story: the Moroccans built a berm, or let's call it a man-made dune, that extended through the desert along the Western Sahara's borders, which means mostly along the Mauritanian border, plus the small Algerian border. Only this wasn't right on the border, but in most areas a few miles inside. Morocco controlled and administered the interior but left this extended narrow strip as essentially no-man's land. This was controlled by the Polisario, and from there they would launch small-scale attacks across the berm. These weren't a major issue during my time, but they happened. Now the practical fact is that to effectively use this no-man's land, the Polisario would have to access Mauritanian territory. So, this became part of Mauritania's game, effectively turning a blind eye to this Polisario activity. Or, I would guess, actively engaging the Polisario behind the scenes to make sure they didn't step out of line. A similar dynamic existed with smuggling, since illegal cross-border smuggling provided much of the Polisario's finances, and there's no question these traders came into the country from their base in Tindouf, Algeria, right on the Mauritanian border.

The one area where the Western Sahara conflict did openly touch Mauritanians, and also me and my staff, was when the Polisario would periodically cause a fuss about something and close down the one actual border crossing between the Western Sahara and Mauritania. Which was the only route that trucks from Morocco could use to bring produce and other consumer goods into the country. So, for a week or two there would be no tomatoes or yogurt or other things in Mauritanian shops. Very annoying, but perhaps a more effective tactic than taking pot shots over the berm.

Fast forward to the end of the Trump administration and our approach to the Western Sahara all changed when, in return for Morocco recognizing Israel under the Abraham Accords, we agreed to recognize Moroccan control over the Western Sahara in ways that we previously hadn't. I think the Biden administration put on ice a lot of the happy talk from Trump's ambassador in Rabat—for instance, opening a consulate in the Western Sahara. But I don't think we've walked back the recognition. Not clear to me how this will impact Mauritania in the end. For instance, one thing we haven't talked about is the

country's tourism potential. The Sahara is gorgeous in places, as is the Atlantic coast, and there is a lot of potential for niche tourism with a little investment and somewhat better regional security. Well, the Western Sahara has the same desert and coast as Mauritania, so a more normal international posture towards that territory could make it that much harder for Mauritania to emerge as a unique tourist destination. I know, the idea of Mauritania as a tourist destination may sound far-fetched. But I did say a niche market.

Anyway, suffice it to say I would have enjoyed spending more time on the Western Sahara question. Of course, it was complicated because Morocco and the Western Sahara belong to the NEA bureau, Mauritania belongs to the AF bureau. It was one of those cases where I really tried to do things to bridge those bureaucratic differences. Tried—at least early in my tenure—to maintain a three-way dialogue with our chargé in Rabat and ambassador in Algiers, both of whom were friends. But in the end, there never seemed to be that much interest coming out of Washington.

Q: Okay. Was Mauritania ever a player for better or worse in the UN system?

DODMAN: Not really. You had some good Mauritanian diplomats in the UN, as you do from every country. The foreign minister I mentioned was one of those. But the government itself was rarely an ally for us on UN votes. There is a very strong pro-Palestinian sentiment among the Mauritanian population. Particularly since currying favor with the United States had not been a very high priority—at least of the government before 2019—there was no real upside for them in voting with us on the many Israel-Palestine resolutions. To their credit, the Trump administration was much more active than its predecessors in tracking voting records and using these scoresheets to highlight consequences of consistently voting against U.S. positions. That really helped strengthen my talking points when I went to see the foreign minister and others before big UN votes, including decisions on candidates for top UN posts. That plus the 2019 change of government made it practical for me to lobby much harder on these issues. I can't say it made a huge difference in the Mauritanian approach. I do recall one case where we got them to switch from a Chinese-favored candidate to a U.S.-favored candidate for some UN agency. Don't recall which one, but I know the AF bureau was tracking closely how every country voted, so I was happy to for once get Mauritania in the right column.

Q: Was Mauritania a member of ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States) and did they care?

DODMAN: Mauritania was a founding member of ECOWAS. But they left the organization years ago—probably the eighties or nineties. Another example of the country's authoritarian rulers doing anything to promote their Arab identity. Happily, they were beginning to move in the opposite direction when I was there. Partly because their hopes that closer ties with their Maghreb brothers to the north would bring economic gains just didn't pan out—Western Sahara being a big stumbling block. Partly also because Morocco was becoming much more of an economic powerhouse in sub-Saharan Africa, and the trader instinct that is very strong in Mauritanians' economic identity

finally began to have more sway in government thinking than the pan-Arab ideology. If I'm remembering correctly, Mauritania and ECOWAS concluded a free trade agreement when I was there. But I'm pretty sure it encountered a bunch of stumbling blocks and hadn't come into effect before I left.

Q: All right. As a small country. I presume they wouldn't have had a big role in the African Union. And the Francophonie and the Organization of Islamic Conference and all these kinds of things, I suppose they're members but not major players.

DODMAN: Exactly. First, we can throw out the Francophonie. I would guess they were members initially, but certainly would have left once you had governments committed to enshrining the country's Arab identity. Which included designating Arabic as the country's official language. They were active members of both the OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) and the Arab League. We haven't talked about Mauritania's ties with the Gulf States, but these were significant. Not always transparent, but the Emiratis, in particular, as well as the Saudis had a great deal of influence in the country. Some of that stemmed from the very strong reputation of Mauritanian clerics, grounded in the long and proud tradition of Koranic study in this part of the Sahara. So, in a sense the influence flowed both ways, with some Mauritanians occupying prominent clerical positions in the Gulf. Anyway, that explains some of their focus on the OIC.

They did take the AU (African Union) seriously. Of course they weren't major players, although there were a few Mauritanian nationals who had prominent positions in Addis. In 2018 they hosted the AU summit in Nouakchott in a brand-new conference center completed just days before the summit opened.

Q: Well, nice. Did the Chinese build that conference center, I'm guessing?

DODMAN: For sure. Anything big like that was almost always Chinese-built. The new airport, which was close to the conference center, certainly was too. But as we talked about last time, these projects shouldn't be taken as a sign that the Chinese had a lock hold on Mauritania as they did in some other underdeveloped countries. As I reported back to Washington at the time, I thought the Mauritanians were fairly savvy in managing the relationship. Taking these gifts and subsidized infrastructure projects, which they knew came with strings attached, but limiting the amount of debt and other obligations to Beijing that they incurred. But yeah, signs of Chinese largesse were everywhere. For instance, every minister was chauffeured around in a black Chinese-made luxury sedan.

Q: Interesting. You've alluded a couple of times to internal travel but you haven't talked much about it. I imagine that it was a pretty tough country to get around.

DODMAN: It was. Made tougher by my security restrictions. I always traveled in a fully armored Land Cruiser. Now, anyone reading who knew Mauritania from as late as the 2000s will be surprised to know that there is a relatively reliable network of paved roads connecting most of the major cities. And to know that most of the main and secondary roads in the capital are now paved. That doesn't mean the roads are well maintained, but

that's another story. Anyway, the point is my armored vehicles could get me most everywhere I needed to go. But not everywhere I wanted to go. We couldn't go off-road through the desert, which was essential to get to small villages—where we often had assistance projects—or to some of the more interesting oases and other beautiful corners of the desert. Sometimes we'd take along a standard 4x4 to do those side trips. But other times I just had to skip some things I would have loved to do.

But yes, I made it to every province in the country. With the exception of the peak COVID months, I travelled often. Maybe an average of once every other month. The trips nearly always had an assistance component, showing the flag at past projects, sometimes inaugurating or cutting ribbons on new projects. I tried to do as much business as possible, which brought me often to Nouadhibou, the second city and commercial hub, particularly for fishing and minerals. Always tried to do some cultural outreach, meeting with students or community cooperatives and the like. Again, as I did in Karachi, it was important to me to be out showing the flag and not hunkered down in our secure embassy or just socializing with other dips.

We nearly always drove. It's a big country and the roads are few and in poor shape, but there wasn't a real alternative. There were no domestic commercial flights. The UN ran a charter service down to the far southeast of the country where there was a big camp they ran—and we supported—for refugees from Mali. I took that flight once or twice, but I also made the drive there once. It took several days, but I got to make a lot of stops in regional capitals and see some natural beauty that I would have otherwise missed.

So, yeah, I got out a lot and was well taken care of. Always incredibly generous hospitality. As I've said before, it was a pain having all the security. On the other hand, it was great having all the security because they took care of everything. I tried to always travel with a pretty limited footprint on the theory that more staff away makes a greater impact on the small embassy, plus increases the number of vehicles needed, which inevitably leads to more flat tires and breakdowns. I would almost always have someone along from the assistance side and an FSN from PD to manage press. Beyond that it depended on the trip. In hindsight, I regret not spreading the wealth more broadly when it came to travel. It would have been a good career development opportunity for our folks in management, for instance. I always said I was going to offer the Marines a chance to send someone along to see more of the country and better understand diplomacy. I never did. But that's my only regret. I think the travel we did was well done, impactful, and a good use of limited resources. And almost always a lot of fun.

Q: Interesting. Well, we've come to the end of my list of questions. Are there other issues you want to talk about with Mauritania?

DODMAN: Sure. Let me talk a little about family life, which builds on the travel discussion. Each of the three years over Christmas some of our kids came. They all got there at least once. Those visits always included some travel in-country. Our favorite spot was the town of Chinguetti. An oasis town in the desert that developed as a caravan stop on the trans-Sahara route. A smaller version of Timbuktu, complete with private libraries

of ancient Islamic manuscripts. That was a great base to get out and explore some incredible sand dunes and camp in the desert and just really disconnect from the modern world.

Of course, most of our time at post it was just me and Joan there. But we had a lot of families in the embassy community. Nouakchott itself doesn't offer a lot of entertainment, but what it had in abundance is gorgeous empty beaches, something that set us apart from the other austere posts in the Sahel. I'm convinced the beach helped keep me and many of our team sane, particularly during COVID. I'm not big on just hanging out at the beach, but I loved walking in the surf. We would walk for miles, with one of my security following in the distance. There were a couple spots close to town where you could get an excellent seafood meal. These were beaches known to be frequented by westerners, so women felt comfortable sunbathing there. This is where we would have our most successful CLO (community liaison office) parties, over a bonfire at sundown.

Other than the beaches the American school was a big part of the lives of families at post. As I think I mentioned, it was very small and occupied a corner of the old embassy compound, so nearly next door to our residence. Even though we didn't have kids there we did everything we could to support the school and the teachers. My wife was on the board for several years. It was definitely a critical element in attracting bidders and keeping up morale in a pretty austere environment.

So, I guess that's it for Nouakchott. Not everyone's cup of tea, but we loved it.

Q: Okay. I have just one last question. Your final days in Mauritania coincided with the change of administration, and specifically you were there January 6. How did that impact you as ambassador, and how were those events perceived?

DODMAN: Yeah, so first of all, I had also been there for the George Floyd incident the previous summer. We didn't do a Fourth of July reception that year, but I recorded a message and raised George Floyd and Black Lives Matter and everything going on that summer back home. This reinforced our message that the United States continues to deal with the legacy of slavery more than 150 years after emancipation. So, we were able to get some positive diplomatic mileage out of those difficult times

January 6 was nothing like that. It was just awful. It was evening in Nouakchott as the events at the Capitol unfolded. I know my colleagues there were all trying to be helpful, but getting texts saying things like "Don't worry, we're with you," or whatever just made it worse. It was probably a true low point for the tour. Which would have been the same if I wasn't overseas and representing the United States. But being the face of America there and knowing that, you know, I was going to have to say something to friends and colleagues, I was going to have to say something profound to the embassy staff the next day—it was rough. Of course, I said all the things you would expect about the strength of American institutions, blah-blah. I can't say that I 100 percent believed that, but I certainly hoped it would prove to be the case.

The actual transition was pretty much a non-event, other than a sense of relief it happened peacefully. I was only at post for a couple weeks after the inauguration, so there was no time to see any change in policy. But I didn't anticipate any significant shift.

Q: Okay, well like any ambassador, you serve at the pleasure of the president but you were also expecting a three-year assignment. Did you figure well in advance that you would be leaving in early 2021?

DODMAN: Yes. I knew three years would be the right amount of time. What I absolutely did not want was to be in an open-ended situation, just sitting around waiting for the White House and Senate to act, not being able to plan my life and my onward.

I took the first steps on this only around a year after I arrived. So, in early 2019 or perhaps even late 2018. AF was preparing the list of COM vacancies to be competed in 2019 for positions opening in 2020. My position had been on the list to be filled in 2017, even though I didn't arrive until 2018. So, they gave me the choice: did I want to leave it on the 2020 list, meaning in theory my tour could be shortened to two-and-a-half years, or move it to 2021? I knew the chances of anyone getting confirmed "on time" were slim, so I told them to keep it on the 2020 list, expecting that at best a replacement would get to post early 2021, giving me the three years I wanted. Which in the end is exactly what happened. But there were a few ups and downs getting there.

At some point during the spring of 2020, during peak COVID times, we got the request for agrément for my replacement. I was happy to know things were unfolding as they should and as I'd hoped. I was able to pretty quickly line up a follow-on assignment for 2021 at the National Defense University. And then it was just a matter of hoping that the Senate confirmation process moved forward as it should. I expected no hold-ups specific to my replacement, a career FSO. But the politics of confirmation are just so unpredictable. And of course this was the Trump administration, during an election year, in a country completely divided by the pandemic.

That fall we got the happy news that our son was getting married in March 2021. That cemented my desire to make sure that I finished up my tour and got settled back in Washington right around that three-year mark. The only way to overcome the uncertainties tied to the Senate confirmation process was to take the drastic step of submitting my resignation. Which in my case wasn't that dramatic as I knew I would be retiring soon anyway. So, I think in November or December, I filled out the retirement paperwork which would have me leave post in February and enter the March job search class. And then, much to my surprise, in December the Senate actually did the right thing and confirmed my successor. I immediately pulled my retirement application and continued with the plans I had already laid: PCSing from Nouakchott early in February 2021 and keeping my onward assignment at NDU.

Q: So, were the retirement papers strictly a tactic to get you home after three years or were you really planning to retire?

DODMAN: No, I was very ready to retire. In fact, I told NDU when I took the handshake that I couldn't commit to giving them anything more than one year. I knew—and feel free to probe on this—I knew I didn't want another chief of mission assignment. I had aging parents who needed my help. After thirty-some years I was ready. But I really wasn't excited about the prospect of retiring from overseas—the Foreign Service Act contains some weird language that makes that not so advantageous for a sitting ambassador. I also liked the idea of the NDU gig, which I would have given up if I retired in 2021. But even so, I would have definitely gone through with the retirement if my replacement didn't get confirmed before the end of the Trump administration, which would have delayed everything by at least six months.

Q: Was there a particular reason you weren't interested in another ambassadorial assignment?

DODMAN: So, I guess this is a good point to sum up my experience in Nouakchott. I loved the assignment in Mauritania. I loved being an ambassador. I loved doing it in Mauritania. Joan did too. But I did not love it as much as I expected I would. I suppose in some small measure that was due to the administration I spent most of my time under. But really it was Washington itself, not the specific administration, that drove me crazy. For the most part I was lucky in Nouakchott: except for a very few issues, we were not high on Washington's radar. I could largely do what I wanted, which was great. But even still, I felt the long arm of Washington more than I thought I would or more than I wanted to. I didn't have the autonomy I wanted. That didn't completely sour the whole experience. But made me much less interested in doing it again, particularly when I had good reasons for going home.

There was a related issue. I knew that if I did try for another post, I would likely only be successful in AF. Even after three years serving the bureau reliably, I still didn't consider myself an AF hand or an AF insider. If we were going to do this again, I knew we wanted an English-speaking post. Those are much more sought after in AF, particularly the posts that are a little more comfortable. I didn't think my chances of success were high. And frankly, I didn't feel like playing the game. I was tired. I had my ill parents plus the prospect of grandkids coming along. I had the COM title. And of course, the department wasn't the place I had known and I guess loved for decades. I really did feel that generational shift I mentioned earlier: my generation wasn't the one to fix or even lead the department going forward. It was the right thing to do to step aside and make room for younger generations to move up. It was time to go.

The NDU opportunity was important to me, since I had some visions of maybe teaching in retirement, so this seemed to be the perfect final assignment and potentially a launching pad for that. So, I was very happy to delay the retirement, although as we'll get to, I did only end up doing a year at NDU and then retiring. Although not until after one final twist, we'll get to that too.

Q: Okay, well before we turn to the NDU assignment, anything to share about your departure from Mauritania?

DODMAN: Well just to go back to summing up, it was a successful tour. I felt good about the progress on bilateral ties, and particularly the TIP upgrade. We had managed COVID. The OIG inspection and plenty of other assessments confirmed we had a high-functioning post and high morale despite all the hardships. I felt I had mentored lots of junior staff. And we had fun doing it. So, a full success. I was glad to see it recognized. The Mauritanian president gave me a prestigious medal before I left. Later it turned out I received a Presidential Rank Award that was based on my three years in Mauritania. So, I was definitely leaving on a high note. And, as I said, at the time I wanted to.

Frankly I was glad that COVID gave us the excuse to skip a lot of the farewell parties—we had learned our lesson in Karachi when we overindulged in those. We hosted a great farewell barbeque in the CMR garden for the staff and received lots of thanks from the team. It was all good. Then a comfortable but masked flight back through Paris one last time.

I think it was the second week of February that we got home. I had gotten approval for a very long home leave, since my NDU assignment didn't start until the summer. Joan went back to her job in MED immediately, but after I did a few meetings with department stakeholders to close the loop on Mauritania matters, I settled into a very pleasant routine that I termed my test for retirement.

One decision I made was to quickly pivot away from Mauritania. I knew I wasn't going to be one of those ambassadors who keeps milking that last tour—becomes a consultant to companies operating in the country or writes papers and speaks about the region for a think tank. As I did after every tour, I was ready to move on to the next thing. Which for me was enjoying the longest break I'd ever had, focusing on family, and getting ready for academia. So, I cut off all the daily news feeds on Mauritanian things and immersed myself in American life in the time of COVID. After enjoying a lovely wedding celebration in North Carolina.

I was due to start at NDU in May. I also signed up to do a promotion board in the summer. I ended up reviewing specialists up for promotion over the senior threshold. That was an eye-opening and positive experience. So, all to say, the transition away from being a chief of mission was smooth and productive.

Q: Okay then, this is a good place to leave it and we can take up with NDU next time.

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Q: Today is September 7, 2023, and this is Peter Eicher continuing the oral history interview with Mike Dodman. When we left off last time it was the summer of 2021. You

had finished up in Mauritania, taken a long home leave, and were going to an assignment at the National Defense University. So, why don't you tell us a little bit more about that?

DODMAN: Sure. So, first, I never studied at NDU, at the War College or any of the other schools. I had done, as I mentioned, the Princeton program so was not eligible for a year at one of these service schools. I had always heard great things from colleagues who had studied at the War College, so I had always hoped for some way to get the NDU experience.

My assignment was to the Eisenhower School, which used to be called ICAF, the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. NDU has five schools or colleges, four of them here in Washington. Eisenhower is actually the largest of the schools in terms of the number of students but of course, the National War College is the oldest and most prestigious, the one that everybody thinks about. Eisenhower focuses on the management and logistics side of the military, so it is usually an econ officer who is assigned to the senior State Department slot at that school.

But in the end, I didn't really do the Eisenhower job. I started in May and had some overlap with my predecessor at the end of the academic year. But while I was off doing the promotion panel, I got a call from Arnie Chacón, then the senior vice president of NDU and the top State Department official there. Chacón was leaving early to serve as chargé in Ottawa. He was going to be replaced by the former ambassador who was the top guy at another NDU school, CISA, the College of International Security Affairs. They needed someone at CISA, and would I be willing to take that job. The guy I was replacing at Eisenhower was able to extend, so this switch would work out for everyone. So, of course, I agreed, it made a lot of sense.

But one important difference. At Eisenhower I would have been the deputy to a military commander. These deputy jobs filled by former ambassadors are not, I would say, real rough jobs. Kind of a figurehead or even a potted palm to show civ-mil unity, with few real job responsibilities. A great pre-retirement job, in other words. But at CISA, they were without a head of the college. So, I was going to be the acting chancellor, running the whole operation. A very different job.

CISA focuses on irregular warfare and special operations—issues I actually had some exposure to from the time in the Sahel. CISA is the newest and the smallest of the five NDU colleges. It was formed in the aftermath of 9/11. But in fact, I never really focused much on the substance of the curriculum. My days were filled with administrative tasks. Lots of engagement with the NDU president and the leadership of the centralized institutions, HR, finance, other things that are all at the university level. This was still COVID times so a lot of COVID management. Also a lot of hiring, things like that. Very different job than I had signed up for, but definitely interesting and I learned a hell of a lot in what ended up being a relatively short time.

Q: Well, interesting. What was the enrollment of the college and how many were American versus international?

DODMAN: Yeah. So, CISA was unique in several ways. We were the smallest and newest school. But the only one whose operations were divided into two locations. The main part of the school was at Fort McNair in Washington. But we had a branch campus and a second large program at Fort Bragg in Fayetteville, North Carolina, which is the home of U.S. Army special forces. At Bragg we had maybe sixty students in the full-year program. Those were nearly all American special forces officers and NCOs, mainly army. But we regularly had two State Department students down there, and for some reason the Germans usually had some military students there. Up at McNair our signature program had maybe 120 students, the majority of whom were international military. CISA's focus, and its mandate from the Pentagon, was to promote and strengthen international partnerships. We usually had four or five State officers and a few from other agencies, plus a couple dozen U.S. military officers. The really heavy focus at CISA on international students—international fellows, as we called them—also made CISA unique. The other schools all had IFs, but they made up maybe 10 percent of the student body, not the majority.

Q: I was aware that Foreign Service former ambassadors often filled those deputy jobs at NDU. But I didn't realize this was an established structure. You're saying the deputy jobs were all reserved for FSOs? That talks to a much closer, more constructive relationship between State and DOD than you would sometimes imagine might be the case.

DODMAN: Yeah. And NDU in particular takes that very seriously. I can't speak about the other service graduate schools, you know, the Army War College, the Naval War College and the like. But NDU is the college that is aligned with the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. It is by definition *the* joint military college. And besides doing everything to stress military jointness, NDU leadership—and by extension, the joint chiefs—want to stress whole-of-government jointness. Thus, the students from State and other agencies. All the schools also had faculty from State and other agencies. Making a former ambassador the deputy of the whole university and of each component college was I guess another way to emphasize this jointness. I'm not sure when this was formalized, but it's definitely been that way for a while.

Q: Had you been expecting to teach when you were first assigned there?

DODMAN: Yes. I knew those deputy jobs didn't have that much content, and so I would definitely have time for teaching. And Eisenhower was short on professors, so they were expecting me to teach.

That was a concern when I moved to the much busier leadership job at CISA. Because I did want some teaching experience. Again, this whole thing was to be a bridge to a potential teaching role somewhere in retirement. In the end I carved out time to lead a section of American Studies, which was a cross-NDU elective class that we required most of the international fellows to take. Something to give all the non-Americans a structured intro to American society. It was an interesting class: by design, it focused on

some of the more controversial topics, like racism and poverty. I had twenty students and led some really interesting discussions about what makes the United States unique.

Q: And did you enjoy that?

DODMAN: No, not as much as I thought. Which was actually a very useful experience. I had taught in graduate school many years earlier and spoken in front of a lot of classes. What I learned from this is that while I enjoyed the time leading discussion in the classroom, I didn't enjoy any of the other pieces: the grading, the team meetings with other instructors, the curriculum review. Plus, there were other elements of the NDU leadership experience—dealing with difficult PhD professors, having to suffer through endless meetings on topics that in the end weren't that important—that caused me to rethink my whole interest in academia. Some of the issues I had were NDU-specific and reflected the idiosyncrasies of the DoD bureaucracy. But the overall experience was enough to tell me that I wouldn't be pursuing any adjunct teaching jobs. I still love talking with students and have a very part-time role doing this a couple times a year at the Joint Forces Staff College, which is the NDU college located in Norfolk. But nothing that involves any of the administrative side of teaching. If I hadn't had the chance to teach at NDU, I might have wasted a lot of time pursuing adjunct teaching jobs.

Q: Great. You said this was a year-long master's program, so obviously it was very academic. You also had said that it was focusing on irregular warfare and special ops which doesn't sound very academic to me. How did that all fit together?

DODMAN: The CISA curriculum was very academic. Students studied theories of conflict and then did deep dives into many actual conflicts that had involved irregular warfare. I remember that insurgencies in Sri Lanka were something the faculty used a lot. I have to say that one big regret I have of my short time at CISA was that I didn't spend much time in our classrooms. In other words, getting to know the students and being exposed to the curriculum. So, sadly, I can't go into it in great detail. We did require everyone in the master's program at Fort McNair to write a rather long thesis at the end, so that gives some indication of the level of academics.

Q: Did you feel that the CISA program met the Pentagon goal of strengthening military ties with other countries?

DODMAN: Yes, for sure. I can't point to any data to prove that. But I know from talking to alumni of our programs, but more from talking with officers in Mauritania or the Czech Republic about their experience in U.S. military schools, that these were really impactful experiences. At NDU, and I would say especially at CISA, we put a lot of effort into the alumni side of things, to make sure that these networks lasted more than just the year the IFs were with us on campus. Every year the school hosted a big continuing education conference for alumni, usually at an overseas location.

I assume someone at DoD or State has some actual data showing what bang we get for our buck on these programs—since certainly at CISA most of the students came from

countries that would not have been paying for their officers to come study with us. In other words, the USG was funding their study, normally through the IMET program I mentioned earlier. I'm just a true believer in this stuff after three decades of working on exchanges. I'm convinced that bringing people together, providing training in U.S. doctrine and U.S. approaches to foreign policy or even, as I said, U.S. society—that all of this builds more reliable partners. Of course it doesn't always work. Apparently, the leader of the coup in Niger a few weeks ago had been through training at Fort Leavenworth, so—

Q: Okay. You've mentioned a couple of times operating during COVID. Was that really still the height of the COVID times? Did you have to do a lot of things online instead of in-person?

DODMAN: Yes. Most everything I'm discussing took place in the second half of 2021. We had moved back to in-person classes for the '21-'22 academic year. But with a lot of restrictions. Masking requirements, testing and vaccine requirements. And then of course procedures to deal with individuals who had some objection to masking or testing or vaccines. The NDU president was very focused on managing this closely and doing everything we could to maintain in-person instruction. There were weekly meetings on these topics, and constant reporting requirements up the chain. At some point in December or January there was some new variant that caused us to go back to remote instruction for a while. And we needed to have some way to make it possible for people who got sick or infected to stay home but keep up. In theory the technology should have been there to make that sort of hybrid instruction work. But it wasn't. I remember being at Fort Bragg once and seeing a student hold up a phone throughout an entire lecture so a fellow student at home could follow along—all while expensive A/V equipment in the room sat nearby and didn't work.

Q: I'm curious: did you get to live in one of those wonderful little mansions along the river there at NDU?

DODMAN: I did not. Those were all reserved for senior Army officers, most of whom I assume worked at the Pentagon. The NDU president did live there—he was a three-star Air Force general, so I'm curious how he enjoyed fitting in with all the Army brass. I never got inside his house, and the officers' club there was closed for renovation during my entire tenure. But it was a lovely site to walk around and enjoy the river views.

Q: So, you also mentioned you had a satellite campus at Fort Bragg. Did you spend a lot of time down there?

DODMAN: I went down to Bragg, to Fayetteville, three times, I think. That was partly to show the flag and see what's going on, and partly because we had a few issues with one of the faculty members. It had a very different feel. They were on a huge functioning army base, unlike the idyllic campus setting we had at McNair. Everything was very connected with the Army special forces training command there. One thing that I found super interesting about our program at Bragg was that the student body was about half

officers at the O4/O5 level, and half NCOs, so E6s and such. But in keeping with our university ethos, we did away with the required formality. Uniforms were discouraged, and students called each other by name. It seemed to work really well. I found some of the enlisted folks to be superb students. In fact, when I was at Fort Bragg, I actually had the time to engage with students directly and sit in classes, which as I said I almost never did at Fort McNair.

Q: So among the five commandants or chancellors of the NDU schools, were you the only civilian? And how did you find interacting in the management committee or whatever it was with all the military officers?

DODMAN: Right, so of the five NDU colleges, three of them, the three largest—National War College, Eisenhower and JFSC down in Norfolk—had a military commandant. Usually at the one-star level. The two smaller and more specialized schools—CISA and CIC, the college of informatics—had civilian leaders who used the title chancellor. Both CISA and CIC in 2021 had acting chancellors, which was a direct result of a flawed reform effort of a prior NDU president who basically tried to make a name for himself by closing the two smaller schools. That led both of those chancellors to resign, and also drove away some faculty. By the time I arrived in 2021, that ill-conceived plan had been shut down, but we were still rebuilding.

The heads of the five schools got along great. But that's not surprising given what we all know about bureaucracies. We all had common enemies in the centralized NDU hierarchy. We were dependent on these central bodies for most of our admin requirements—HR, finance, IT—but we had no authority over them. I would say there really wasn't any issue between the military and civilians. It was much more between the schools and the university. I would guess there was probably some rivalry between the schools, say between CISA and the War College, but that was probably more between individual faculty and whatever theory they were promoting. There were also rivalries on the sports field. Tiny CISA did great with soccer, given our international student body. Not so good with softball.

Q: Okay. Well, if I recall correctly, you had said this was going to be a two-year assignment, but you had warned them in advance that you might leave after one year. How did all that work out?

DODMAN: So, one of the major hiring actions that was underway in the fall of 2021 was for a permanent chancellor for CISA. By late fall we had a name and the NDU president let me know that we would see the new person by the end of the year. In the end it was mid-January. But I knew by November or so that I would not have too much longer to serve as acting chancellor. It had never been made clear what I would do after that: go back to my original job at Eisenhower or stay on at CISA in the deputy chancellor role. What I decided was that I didn't want to do either, and that the arrival of the permanent chancellor was the right time to put my retirement plan into action. Driven by the same reasons as before: I wanted more time to help my aging parents, and frankly wasn't having as much fun as I thought I would at NDU. The timing of the new chancellor's

arrival actually worked well. There was a job search class at FSI that started in March 2022, which would put my retirement date right around May 1, which was one year from when I came off home leave. That gave me a few weeks at NDU to overlap with the new chancellor and get her well oriented and off to a strong start.

So, what that means if you do the math is that I really only did six months as acting chancellor of CISA. Probably a little less than six. But they were six intense months where I learned a lot, made a difference, and felt like I was leaving at the right time.

Q: Did you get any pushback from either NDU or the State Department, any pressure to at least finish out the academic year?

DODMAN: No. When I met with the NDU president in November to let him know I was retiring, he was fully supportive and appreciative of my work rebuilding CISA. State didn't really care. I was giving them the twelve months after home leave that I'd committed to. Plus, there was already an ambassador in the field who had been assigned as CISA vice chancellor. No one knew when he would be free to leave his post, and in the end, I don't think he ever took up the job. One of the two senior FSOs we had on faculty at CISA ended up taking on some of the vice chancellor duties for the new chancellor. So, everyone was fine in the end. No, no pushback.

Q: Okay. And so, did you actually go to the retirement class in March?

DODMAN: Funny you should ask that, Peter. No, I did not. So, I was doing the very first day of the four-day retirement seminar that covers financial issues—the class that is offered right before the longer job search class begins. I think it was literally March 1. I was logged into the class from home, standing right where I am right now talking with you, and an email pops up saying basically, "Hey, Mike. I know you're about to retire, but what do you think about coming to Prague for a few months to run the embassy?" Now let me step back and say that throughout my time at NDU, and definitely since people had heard I was going to leave the CISA position, I'd gotten several offers or feelers about coming back to State to fill DAS or other positions. I had turned them all down without much thought. And I was literally about to reply to this email with my standard "no thanks" when I stopped myself and thought, This one could actually be fun. I immediately wrote my wife at work and she loved the idea. I mulled it over just a bit more, and in particular weighed how I was going to manage some of the responsibilities I had taken on for my parents. But before the end of the day I had told EUR yes, had once again pulled back my retirement papers, had dropped out of the job search class, and had begun to plan for a TDY to Prague a few weeks later.

Q: What were the circumstances in Prague that led to that?

DODMAN: Prague had been without an ambassador since the Trump appointee departed in January 2021. Nobody had yet been nominated. The DCM had been chargé in Prague for well over a year. The DCM was—sorry, I feel like I say this often, but this is the way the Foreign Service works so it's important for the record—the DCM was a friend of

mine. She had worked for me previously so knew me, knew that I had served in Prague, knew that I was retiring. She had put my name in play with the bureau. She had just been given a great job back in Washington, standing up the State Department's new cyber bureau. But the requirement was that she start that job almost immediately. Her replacement wasn't going to be able to get to post until later in the summer. EUR needed a senior officer to run the embassy basically from March to what ended up being the middle of August.

Q: Well, that's great. So, did you move into the beautiful ambassador's residence in Prague?

DODMAN: That was—I wouldn't say that was a condition of my taking the job, but it was one of my first questions when I actually sat down to work out the details with EUR. And happily, the bureau's response was a resounding yes. For two reasons. One, it was going to save money because otherwise they would have been paying for me to be in a hotel for all that time. But two, after the departure of the previous ambassador they had fired the old residence manager and hired someone new, who was doing a great job running the residence, meaning the very active representational space, but she had never had an ambassador living in the house. They thought that I would be a good person to help break her in, being a former COM. Spending several months living in that gorgeous CMR, with the large staff to take care of me, was just a fabulous way to wind up my career. I had many visitors come. Joan came and stayed for a few months, all the kids came at various times, lots of other family and friends. We definitely gave the new residence manager some good on-the-job training. And when a new political appointee did get to post a few months later, I know—since I just saw him last month—that he found the staff all well up to the task.

Q: Okay. That's great. So, what was going on in Prague? What were you dealing with?

DODMAN: Yeah. So, it was a great time to be in Prague. Okay, it's always a great time to be in Prague. But I mean a lot was happening last summer.

Putin had just reinvaded Ukraine that month, in March of 2022, so that put central and eastern Europe back on Washington's radar. The Czechs were heavily impacted by the invasion. They absorbed a massive inflow of Ukrainian refugees. That included a bunch of locally engaged staff from Embassy Kyiv, who were safe havening in Prague with their families. We were able to put them to work at Embassy Prague, which helped us fill a number of staffing gaps. But added some interesting dynamics to the embassy.

Madeleine Albright passed away right before I left here. Madeleine Albright, of course, was born in Prague and an icon of Czech American relations. So, one of the first things I did when I got to Prague was to attend a requiem mass that was held in the cathedral up in Prague Castle and they asked me as chargé to speak about Albright. I had never met or worked directly for her, but I came up with something that worked and speaking from the pulpit in that massive cathedral was a very moving experience.

We were coming out of deep COVID times in Europe and the States, which meant that there was a lot of pent-up travel that was happening, even apart from travel related to Ukraine. The day after I arrived in country the assistant secretary for European affairs came with a delegation for the first in-person meeting for several years of the Czech-U.S. joint strategic dialogue—or something like that. The night that I arrived we had the deputy secretary of Energy in Prague for a nuclear power-related trade mission. So, I literally arrived from the airport to the residence about 5:00 Monday, went upstairs and changed, went downstairs and hosted a reception for this trade delegation. Made my first remarks and hosted a meeting in the library between the Czech national security advisor and the deputy secretary. None of that would have worked so smoothly if I didn't know that CMR inside and out, didn't know a lot of the local staff who were working the issues, and didn't feel so confident walking into this situation. It helped that the Czech national security advisor was an old contact from my earlier tour. That first week set the tone for my first few months until July, when we had pretty much non-stop visits.

We launched negotiations on a new bilateral defense agreement when I was there. The Czechs decided to buy F-35 fighters, in a very satisfying conclusion to the story I had told about their decision not to acquire F-16s twenty years earlier. Everything wasn't Ukraine-related. The nuclear issues were big throughout my time there. There was a tender going on for a new nuclear power plant that U.S. firms were and still are actively competing for.

Another great thing about my filling this position was that it calmed some of the Czech angst over not having a new ambassador nominated. Because I was a known quantity and had the title of ambassador—even though I couldn't formally use it in Prague—it gave the government some sense that Washington was taking this relatively small country seriously.

Q: So, you had left Prague what, fifteen or twenty years earlier? Had you kept up these relationships in the interim or did you just pick them up from scratch again? That's a long time.

DODMAN: It was fourteen years since I'd left, since I'd completed my four-year tour there. There were a few folks that I had kept in touch with. Connected with on LinkedIn and things like that. A few I had seen when I worked in Brussels. But no, for the most part it was reconnecting with people that I had not seen in over a decade. Many of them I warmly remembered and we picked up again right away. Often, I would be at a reception and someone would come introduce themselves to me who I must have met at some point as political counselor, but I just couldn't remember them. I ended up doing a fair bit of press considering how briefly I was there, so my name and face were out there.

The most extreme case: one day I was out walking near the embassy at lunchtime. I heard someone shout my name. It was a guy, a former Czech diplomat, who had served at the Czechoslovak embassy in Washington in the early nineties when I was handling central European economic stuff. So thirty-plus years ago. He remembered me from that period and had seen that I was back in Prague. That kind of stuff just kept happening to me

during those months. I honestly never would have guessed how many people I would know in Prague, and how helpful that would be in making me so effective so quickly in that relatively short time as chargé.

Q: That's great. Had the embassy changed a lot?

DODMAN: Yes and no. It had grown with, you know, a couple new offices. Definitely some new staff. For reasons I could never quite fathom there was now an office tied to some U.S. naval research institute—although they were doing cool stuff, so that was a great new addition. But the physical layout was the same. That old palace that I had found so charming and quirky on my first tour there was, as the chargé, much more of a pain. I hadn't realized what an impediment it was to smooth embassy operations and esprit de corps. It helped me really appreciate even more those functional cookie-cutter embassies and consulates I had worked in for most of my tours after Prague.

Q: Was there any particular reason why there had been no ambassador assigned by the Biden Administration?

DODMAN: Well, so the usual dysfunction of the White House, not particular to Biden. The Czech Republic, like many, you know, posh European posts, tends to get, well, obviously political appointee ambassadors, but more specifically political appointee ambassadors of some means, which means that their vetting can be long and detailed given their large portfolios. The rumor was that there had been somebody designated in 2021 who went through that onerous process and in the end decided to walk away. I never found out what the story on that was. And then it took a while to find somebody new. While I was there, we started getting inquiries from the lawyers about a prospective nominee's financial holdings, to determine if they would create a conflict of interest. Eventually we got an agrément request that I managed to shepherd through the government pretty quickly. The new ambassador was formally nominated right before I left, which was great because it prevented the new DCM, the new chargé, from having to start out her tenure by answering questions about why the United States didn't respect the Czechs, and why did you get rid of Dodman who actually knows something about this country?

I was able to start a conversation with the nominee, a businessman from Massachusetts named Bijan Sabet, before I left, and then pass that along to the new chargé. And then I met Bijan when I got back to Washington. I felt good being able to get him oriented early on to this country that I was very fond of. And it was great to meet him back in Prague in July this year and see how well he is doing at post.

Q: Okay. Well, that's great. Sounds like a wonderful ending to a career. That kind of ties things back together in a different way.

DODMAN: Honestly, you could not have scripted it better because it was such a satisfying time. As I said, central Europe was back on Washington's radar after a long absence, and we just got a lot done. Joan and I were able to host one last Fourth of July

reception, and on a much grander scale than we had done in Karachi or Nouakchott. And then the last six weeks I was there the pace really slowed down, so we got to enjoy the city even more. After a couple days of overlap with the new DCM, I headed back to DC and finally to retirement.

Q: So, August 2022 that would have been, right?

DODMAN: Yes. So, in the end I did almost five full months.

Q: Well, that's great. And were you able to get back into the retirement seminar you missed in March?

DODMAN: No, unfortunately. When we were first negotiating the terms of this TDY, I had told EUR I could only stay through July, since I was determined to enter the retirement class in August. But after I got there, I realized that didn't make sense. I knew the new DCM wasn't coming until mid-August. This was an embassy that I cared a lot about. It didn't make any sense to put the staff through the hassle of getting another temporary chargé in for a few weeks. As I've made clear throughout these interviews, handovers and leadership transitions are important to me. I wanted to do it right. So, I told EUR I would stay as long as needed to get the new DCM settled. I would have stayed into September if they wanted, but EUR basically told me the new DCM and I could have a day or two of overlap, then they wanted me out of there. It all worked fine.

So I came back to DC and spent the last week of August doing some follow-up meetings in the department to tie up loose ends and give my general impressions of what still needed fixing in the embassy. Then I retired on August 31.

I did finally get to take the retirement class, the job search program, that I've talked so much about. It was in March of 2023. So I had already been retired for six months when I took it. And I didn't get paid to take it. But it was nice because my wife was retiring from her civil service position at that time, so we took it together. And I have to say, I didn't find the class nearly as useful as I had thought I would. That may well be because I'd already experienced retirement at that point. And because I had been thinking about it for so long, I felt I was mentally very prepared for the transition. On the other hand, it was nice to get back to FSI one last time.

Q: So, you must have already started thinking about what you were going to do in retirement?

DODMAN: Yes, very much so. I knew I didn't want to do anything—by which I mean no return to work—for at least a year. Many things happened right away to ensure I was never bored. On the plus side, our first grandchild was born a month after I retired, so we've had plenty of time to spend with him in North Carolina. On the other side, my father passed away around the same time after a long illness. I continue to travel very often to Buffalo for eldercare responsibilities with my mom. I tried a bunch of volunteer opportunities in DC. The one that has stuck so far is doing tax preparation through AARP

at our local library. And around all that, Joan and I have also been busy traveling internationally since she retired.

In terms of actual work, I do have this part time gig that gets me down to talk at the Joint Forces Staff College a few times a year. But I feared that after a year away from the department, I would probably be getting bored and looking for something with a little more structure. Before I left Prague, I put out some feelers around State about part-time work. Which generated way more interest than I expected, and several bureaus wanted me to start right away. But I still had in the back of my mind the idea of doing inspections for the OIG. They had told me they had a long hiring process, which was fine for me. So, I started that process just as I retired, and a year later, just a few weeks ago, I came on board with them.

Q: So, you are back as a reemployed annuitant?

DODMAN: Indeed. I have a badge again and I'm back on OpenNet. We'll see when I do my first inspection next year how much I like it. Because the thing is, unlike what I feared a year ago, I haven't been bored at all with retirement. It has been a very full year, very busy, and very satisfying. If I like spending a few months out of the year doing an inspection, getting out to some country I've never been in before, and if I feel like I'm helping to make the department a better place, then I'll keep doing it. If I feel like I'm just wasting my time with a bureaucratic exercise, then I will have no problem returning to being happily retired.

Q: Okay. That's really great. Are there any further reflections you would like to talk about as you look back and your long and varied career?

DODMAN: Right. I probably should have given this more thought.

I had a great career. No regrets. I was worried about the family side, about raising kids, things like that. But, you know, that all worked fine. Joan was a fantastic Foreign Service spouse. I think we made a great team, particularly once she moved smoothly into the added duties of CG's spouse and ambassador's spouse. She was a natural and definitely deserves credit for any successes I achieved.

I look back on the career with a lot of fondness. I feel great about the things I did, the people I mentored, the impact I had on the organization and on U.S. foreign policy. All that said, I still wrestle with how much to recommend this career to young people today. That's partly because our role on the world stage has changed so much since I started in this business during the Cold War. We don't have the voice and the influence that we used to. At the same time, the State Department has evolved and grown over the decades in ways that I think are mostly unhelpful. It's become too hard to manage. And it's lost influence to the NSC and the Pentagon.

I'm sure some of this is just sour grapes from an old timer. But I really do wonder, and sometimes worry, about what the future holds for the State Department and the Foreign Service. Well, and for the United States too.

But back to your question, I had a wonderful career and I wouldn't trade away any of it. Thanks for helping me think through it and memorialize it in this way.

Q: Okay. Well, unless there's something else, let me say thank you for participating in the ADST oral history program and for sharing, again, what has really been a fascinating career and a wonderful piece of history, which I think will be a valuable addition to the collection.

DODMAN: Well, thank you for being a great interviewer, Peter. And yeah, I hope it is of use to future readers, historians and maybe even potential Foreign Service officers.

Q: I think it will be.

End of Interview