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

HALVOR C. EKERN

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Initial interview date: January 16, 1992

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is January 16, 1992. This is an interview with Halvor Ekern on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. I wonder if you would give me a little about your background...where you grew up and were educated, etc.?

EKERN: My father was a Norwegian immigrant who came over at the age of 18. He married my mother in South Dakota. He had finished pharmacy school but he went out as a homesteader to eastern Montana where I was born. I was raised in western Montana, finished high school and then decided to go trapping which I did for a year. Then I spent three years in the CCC which very few people know what that means anymore.

Q: Civilian Conservation Corps.

EKERN: Yes. Then I went to the University of Montana.

Q: When were you born?

EKERN: I was born in 1917. I finished at the University of Montana in 1941 and got my marching orders for the Army and went off to be a 2nd lieutenant in the 7th Division at Ft. Ord. About three months later the 10th Mountain Division was formed. I was a forestry graduate. I went to Ft. Louis in the ski troops up on Mt. Rainier. We then moved to Colorado and trained. My regiment went up to liberate the Aleutians. Then I came back

and went to Italy and went up the Italian peninsula over the Apennines and into the Alps where the war ended.

Q: That must have been very difficult.

EKERN: It was the so-called Gothic Line we had to break down in the mountains.

I was then transferred to the Allied Commission for Austria which was sitting there waiting to go into Vienna. I worked for the US element of the Allied Commission which was called the Quadripartite Directorate.

Q: You did that for almost ten years.

EKERN: That is right. The State Department took this over in 1950. The Allied Commission was still there and they took me over too. After a bit I was integrated into the Foreign Service.

Q: This is a very interesting period. What was Austria like when you went in and what was your attitude towards Austria? Was it different than towards Germany?

EKERN: Well, you may remember that Germany was a conquered country, but the four allies decided that Austria was a liberated country. In Germany they had the nonfraternization policy, a very stern attitude, but in Austria we were free to make friends. The city was devastated, having been bombed very badly. The Russians got in there first. The Allied Authority in London had decided where the demarcation lines between the four zones were, as well as the four portions of the city, to be divided among the British, French, Russians and US. We were supposed to move in, but the Russians weren't quite finished looting the place and they stalled. Mark Clark was our High Commissioner and Commanding General. The Russians wanted to come in, but he said not until they sign the agreements on access, something they didn't bother to do in Berlin. Al Gruenther was the Deputy High Commissioner and went in and talked to the Russians and said that his Commissioner was not coming in until they sign the agreements for access by rail, air and road. A smart decision. So we got there in August.

The city was totally demoralized, looted and violated. They had really sacked that place. It was a terrible chapter that had been sort of passed over. We got the High Commissioner operating by September 1.

Q: We are looking at this in the field of foreign affairs. In the first place, what was your particular rank and position?

EKERN: I was a major. The Allied Commission Head was General Sasman and General Floree. I served Clark in the Allied Commission meetings as an assistant.

Q: He was a very controversial person. He seemed to have rather an imperious air.

EKERN: He did.

Q: Mark Clark, George Patton and Douglas MacArthur seemed to be the triad of great actors in the American general scene. Could you describe how he operated from what you saw of him their as High Commissioner?

EKERN: The good side was that probably what we needed was a man on horseback there. He didn't take too much back talk from the Russians and the Austrians were prepared for a deliverer, which they saw in Mark Clark. He did a tremendous amount of grandstanding. He had a public information section that was first class.

Q: His ability to have a photographer with him everywhere was one of the great stories.

EKERN: And you photographed him from the left side only. The photographer was Okimoto, a 2nd lieutenant in the Signal Corps. He later became Lyndon Johnson's photographer.

Q: He was used to dealing with tall, imperious people.

EKERN: Yes, the same thing. Clark had a tremendous ego. In two years Clark left and Jeffery Keys came in, a very modest, devoted, pious man and down to business. Probably what we needed then was a quiet, thoughtful figure to get the country out of the hole it was in.

So the Allied Commission operated as a member of the Four Powers which had an Executive Committee of their deputies and then 12 Four-Power Directorates for internal affairs, economics, finance, political, military, etc. They met weekly and the Council met twice a month. The work went on and our objective was, of course, to get a treaty and get out having established a democratic government. But the Russians had no intentions of leaving.

The first negotiations on a state treaty began in 1947 and we thought by '48 we would be out of here for sure. Well, we left in '55 because of the Russian intransigence. They were not prepared to leave and they stalled on the treaty. So I worked on that treaty from 1947 until 1955.

We had several High Commissioners there. After Keys came Walter Donnelly who was also High Commissioner in Bonn later. Then Llewellyn E. Thompson who in my view was probably our finest statesman.

Q: You are not alone in thinking that. You say you worked on the treaty, but here you are there for ten years. A treaty is not that big a thing. How does one work on a treaty when you know the other side is not going to do anything with it?

EKERN: Well, by diplomatic persistence and patience. Meeting whenever we could get them to come. Article 35 was the question of disposition of German assets. Since Germany literally owned everything, they took over the country lock, stock and barrel, the Russians were free to choose what they wanted to seize in their zone as German assets...including the unbuilt autobahn, for example, which they seized as a German asset. So we could not leave them there with an unchallenged territorial position or we wouldn't have had an independent country. So we whittled away at these other articles trying to get them squared away, all the time chewing away on Article 35. We even had a special Austrian treaty commission come in, mostly to deal with the disposition of the oil fields. An American lawyer came in an worked for a year and gave up.

I would have to look in the book to find out how many meetings we had of the Council of Foreign Ministers, and the Deputy Foreign Ministers, plus special negotiators. Finally, what I think led to the treaty was that the Russians at that time, 1953, '54, were trying to get a neutralized Germany if I remember. They made an attempt to get Germany out of NATO, but we didn't think a neutralized Germany would work. So Molotov decided to set an example and have a neutralized Austria, to show them how it could be done. So it was in early 1955 that they called Chancellor Rabb and suddenly said they wanted this treaty. It shocked us all. I remember Llewellyn Thompson got the telegram and called us in and said that we must be prepared for 30 days of hard work. He was right.

By that time the German scene had changed. Germany was more integrated into NATO.

Q: Adenauer was well in place.

EKERN: Yes. And it became clear even to the Russians that the neutralization of Germany was not going to work.

They had called for this treaty and they were stuck with it. We hammered out a treaty. It was not as easy as Llewellyn Thompson predicted because on the last day, mind you, the Foreign Ministers were scheduled to come to Vienna May 15, 1955 and I think even Molotov was in town and they were stuck on this issue of extraterritorial privileges for the Russians having to do with properties. We refused. They went into a one plus one meeting and Thompson picked me to go with him. You could see that the British and the French were ready to cave, their Foreign Ministers were on their way. It would be hard to pick up a phone and tell them not to come. Even, Leopold Feld, at that time the Foreign Minister, was silent.

Q: The Austrian Foreign Minister.

EKERN: I think he would have caved. The pressure was tremendous. The people were gathering in the streets and everything. But Thompson said, "No. I am prepared to tell my Foreign Minister not to come." And the meeting broke up.

Q: This would have been Dulles.

EKERN: Yes, Dulles. He was in Paris. Thompson put me on a plane and told me to go see Dulles and tell him what is up and what we have done. But while I was in the air the Russians caved in so the treaty was signed.

Q: Could you explain a bit how you saw Thompson, who is one of our preeminent diplomats of this area? How he operated as you saw it.

EKERN: Tommy Thompson was a very quiet, modest man, always seeking the background. He didn't want accolades. While he was High Commissioner in Vienna he spent a year in negotiating the treaty between the Yugoslavs and the Italians over Trieste and finally obtained it. He was a modest man of great ability. Later he was adviser to four Presidents on the USSR. I found him nice to work with, a gentleman of the first order; if you produced what he wanted he was most amicable.

Q: Did he ever comment on the Soviets, either as a government or as negotiators, in the moments when you were all sitting around?

EKERN: There was such agreement on that that there wasn't too much to discuss, namely that the Soviets were in an aggressive mode; had a lot of military power and would probably use it; that they were leaders of an evil empire; and it was evident every day in our dealings with them that they were untrustworthy and tough to deal with and there were no allusions about this.

Q: And, of course, you had the example of what they did in the rape of Austria right in front of you. As a group you were probably as realistic about what you were dealing with as any.

EKERN: Exactly. There just wasn't much room to debate about it except some of the finer points. Did you know Martin Herz?

Q: Oh, yes.

EKERN: Martin was there. He was a major like myself.

Q: For the record, Martin Herz was later Ambassador to Bulgaria, but he is a Foreign Service officer of considerable repute as far as his political acumen is concerned.

EKERN: During this period General Balmer was the Deputy Commission under Keys and a statesman of the first order. He has really never gotten the recognition he deserved. He was really the one who ran our policies there. He gathered together what he called his Operations Committee which included Martin, myself, Ted Kaghan, and a couple of others, whom he relied on for his policy assistance.

Back to Thompson. He was a true statesman and a gentleman of the first order.

Q: Did you ever develop any personal contacts with the Soviets or was this not...?

EKERN: Oh, yes indeed. Quite a lot because part of my job was to run the Four Power Allied Secretariat. I knew a lot of them and later as I got to thinking probably knew more of them personally than any other American of that period by virtue of my tenure there. To help build a biographic sketch of them we trained our interpreters and other people around there to ask the proper questions of their counterparts, etc. They were divided into the KGB and the actual diplomats. But it was easy to distinguish them.

Q: What were the roles that the French and the British were playing in this?

EKERN: The British, of course, sent some very fine people. They had some outstanding generals and statesman. Lord Cotchia was their first civilian High Commissioner. General Sir John Winterton was their Deputy Commissioner and I think he became High Commissioner for a while. He is an outstanding man and still alive.

Q: Cotchia later was Ambassador to the United States wasn't he?

EKERN: I think so.

The French, of course, were dealt into the picture about the time the war ended because they asked for a zone. So a zone was taken out of the American zone and given to the French.

We had a number of civilian relief programs in which the French and British were unable to participate in because of their own shortages at home.

Q: How quickly did we install the Austrians government into the various zones

EKERN: An election was called for in the European Advisory Commission Agreement which came out in November, 1945. The Russians thought they had prepared their constituents well. But the Communist Party got under 5 percent of the vote and the Russians were absolutely devastated. They couldn't believe it.

Q: At the time you left did you go right into the Foreign Service?

EKERN: They had a system where I went from a Lt. Colonel to FSS, Foreign Service Staff, which did not require an exam. Then there was the Wriston program under which I was pulled in as an officer.

Q: You came in when?

EKERN: It was 1955. I came in as an FSO-3. After the treaty was signed I stayed on and helped the transition to normalcy and was transferred January or February, 1956 back to the Department.

Q: What were you do in the Department from 1956-59?

EKERN: I was assigned to what at that time was called Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for Atomic Affairs which was run by Gerald Smith. Later it was call ACDA. I worked there for three years. My primary duty was the establishment of the International Atomic Energy Agency. We had a number of fields, military weaponry, treaties of cooperation, bilaterals with various countries around the world, sharing the Atoms for Peace program. As I reconstruct it from memory, President Eisenhower met with Winston Churchill in the Bahamas in about 1955. On the way back, so I am told, the President was going to address the UN shortly, and he asked what he should talk about. Well, atoms were pretty much a topic of the day, atomic energy, start a world organization for sharing of nuclear energy, etc. He said fine. He made the speech. Time passed. Then eventually the White House called the State Department asking what ever happened to the world organization.

So the heat was on and we were given the job, along with the Atomic Energy Commission. It led to a lot of work with the UN. By 1958 it was established in Vienna. That is where I spent most of my time--in Vienna and in New York with the UN.

Q: What was the attitude at your level about sharing the nuclear information?

EKERN: It was important. We spent most of the time on safeguards. Even as today, the IAEA is setup to inspect other countries' nuclear facilities so that they can certify they are not using this knowledge for military purposes. As you know there is the problem in Iraq which IAEA is trying to sort out. IAEA did very little for 20 years other than become another UN bureaucracy and have meetings and staff, etc. But, I guess it has sort of become useful now.

Q: At that time at least from what I gather, our idea was...Okay we will go ahead with this but we are going to put so many controls on it that it really won't go very far.

EKERN: I had my doubts, personally, because the recipient country of whatever they were to get out of it had to pledge no multi uses and open all its facilities, etc., while the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union and the French were excused from all this surveillance and were allowed nuclear weapons. So you began to wonder why anyone would want to sign out anything in the first place as it was certainly all one sided. But Germany was in a position where it almost had to take the pledge.

Q: This was something that really wasn't on the front burner.

EKERN: No. It provided a lot of bureaucratic waltzing around, and a lot of jobs in the UN, etc. The AEC was all for it because it gave them a chance to sit around the green tables and be diplomats.

Q: But as we were saying, like so many UN agencies, all of a sudden this one is extremely important in the last six months or so as a result of the war between allied nations and Iraq. We found out the Iraqis had been developing nuclear weapons and the IAEA is a main focus of world attention right now.

EKERN: I guess you could say it has justified itself. I don't know.

Q: Then you finally got overseas.

EKERN: Yes, I went from there to Iceland, Reykjavik. This was not exactly a high exposure job. I was political officer for the Embassy. Our main purpose there was to keep the base at Keflavik...to keep the Icelanders from kicking us out as the Communist Party, which was strong there, wanted to do. There were demonstrations and they tried to get it on the ballot.

Q: At that time the major Soviet fleet was stationed up out of Murmansk and Archangel. Iceland sort of acted like a cork or at least a channel so Keflavik as a base was not just a base, it was extremely important and remained so until the demise of the Soviet empire.

EKERN: Yes, I guess they had underwater listening devices, etc. It was important. I had three Ambassadors there. John Muccio. Did you know him in Korea?

Q: No, but he was there at a very difficult time when the North invaded the South.

EKERN: He was a funny man. I remember him saying after a telegram came in from the Department, "Well, we got the base, we got the political people with us, what more do they want?"

Then Tyler Thompson was there for quite a while. And then Jim Penfield who was the Deputy Commissioner Austria with me.

Q: Did you get the feeling that Iceland for Ambassadors was sort of a resting spot?

EKERN: We had good Ambassadors there, they certainly were not sending out duds. The work certainly was very routine. The economic officer reported on the trials and tribulations of their economy, which were many.

Q: Mainly fishing?

EKERN: Yes, and sheep. The Icelanders were good people. They were rather sensitive about their nationality and culture, there were only 210,000 of them, which was being overwhelmed by TV, etc.

Q: Did you find that coming from good Scandinavian stock helped?

EKERN: I didn't speak Icelandic, there was a lot of English spoken. There language was what was spoken in Norway 1,000 years ago and kept pure by virtue of their isolation. But the Norwegian language evolved so much they couldn't even read each other's newspapers.

Q: With this strong Communist Party in Iceland at this time how did we deal with it? It was a time when we just had to have that base. How did we mollify and deal with it?

EKERN: Persistent diplomacy I would call it. There were three parties there. The Conservatives were with us, the Communists against us, and the Farmer and Labor were in the middle. We had to stroke the latter a lot. Iceland actually voted to leave NATO at one point so we had to work to get them to nullify or ignore the vote. It was a day to day job of presenting our point of view to the leaders.

Q: Was it a matter of personal persuasion...explaining what the situation was...or was it a matter of as many politicians do of getting things for their constituency in the form of favorable trade, etc.?

EKERN: Both I would say because in a little place like that you knew almost everybody in the parliament. So it was a good amount of persuasion and helping them to present the case to their constituents. We had an AID program there but it didn't amount to much. The main thing was getting Icelandic fish on the American market. We helped them. They did set up a factory over here, etc. It was sort of touch and go but we did our best.

We had a small amount of clandestine activity, but it didn't amount to much.

Q: You moved from there going directly to Sierra Leone. It looked like somebody thought you had been in deep freeze too long. How did that assignment come about?

EKERN: You have to be prepared in the Foreign Service for anything and anywhere. If you don't like it you are in the wrong job. We made the transition all right. Sierra Leone had just gained its independence and our Ambassador had arrived shortly before me. He was a former Congressman from Missouri who didn't know too much about the place.

Q: His name was Carnahan?

EKERN: Yes. Carnahan. My wife and I tried to be as helpful as possible. I was the DCM there. I helped him identify our goals to see what we could do there. It was kind of an

obviously hopeless case. Right after I left the opposition took over and a one-party state was formed.

Q: Sierra Leone is a very small place anyway. What was the political situation? Was it all tribal?

EKERN: Yes, basically, tribal. The Prime Minister was from the dominant tribe and the opposition was from the other. The leadership came from those they called Creoles who were not tribal people. Actually they were the descendants of...back when Britain abolished slavery, they released the slaves but also cleaned out the prisons, particularly all the prostitutes and sent them down to Sierra Leone, which is why you have the light skinned element there which is better educated and populate the area around the coast.

The British in my view had done a masterful job as administrators. I have the highest regards for the British Colonial Service. They had their finest people in there. They lifted them out of the bush into what they could of modern structure. Gave them an infrastructure of roads, justice, and courts, etc. But when they withdrew there was kind of a collapse there. It is still that way.

Q: Well, what was the British role there compared, say, to the United States?

EKERN: Initially there was some resentment about the US moving in with a big AID program, etc. as they were phasing out. But we worked this out with the British Embassy. You see the British left behind an Army Commander, Provincial and District Commissioners, and advisers in many offices. They didn't just walk off and leave them. They did their best to make the turnover as smooth as possible.

But on the other hand the United States was not prepared to totally defer to the British, but the relationship at the top was at least smooth.

Q: What were American interests in Sierra Leone?

EKERN: Not really much. That is this was seen as part of the liberation of Africa from colonialism.

Q: This, of course, is in 1961 era when the Congo was blowing up and all these countries were gaining independence. A time of the discovery of Africa by the Americans.

EKERN: Right. We were there as some of the pioneers to see what we could do to make them democracies.

Q: You had Governor "Soapy" Williams as head of the African Bureau who ran it a little bit like a private fiefdom and was enthralled with this whole process. Did you get the feeling that you were pushed to do things? Could you give me a feel of the times?

EKERN: We felt his objectives were unrealistic. To plunge them into immediate nationhood, freedom, unyoking the white colonial collar, etc. We went down to Liberia and met with him. At least I had a lot of doubts about all this but we all listened to what he had to say.

Q: There really were some true believers within the African Bureau weren't there?

EKERN: Yes, he gathered them about him. So you couldn't be too negative.

Q: From your perspective, Sierra Leone had no particular strategic importance?

EKERN: No.

Q: Were there any concerns about the Soviets moving in?

EKERN: Well, the Soviets opened an Embassy there when we were there and, of course, all of our ears went up...here was the threat, etc. The Soviet ambassador lived across the street from me and our clandestine agency was keen to get a head on all of this. But I don't think they presented any...well, I don't know about that. Siaka Stevens followed Margai and Stevens was...

Q: This was head of government.

EKERN: ...the Prime Minister. The Russians were pushing Siaka Stevens and he was a left wing dictator, so I guess you can say they succeeded as they did in so many other countries there. I guess they were a threat, but in a sleepy little town like that it is hard to think about atom bombs and stuff.

Q: Were UN votes a big issue then?

EKERN: Sierra Leone until I left was still safely on the American and British side. It was after I left when Siaka Stevens, who I got to know quite well, took over as Prime Minister and then I think they voted with the Soviet side.

Q: You left there in 1963 and went to the Senior Seminar. You get out of the Seminar in 1964 and then you went to INR from 1964-67. What were you doing in INR?

EKERN: We had a geographical division in that part of INR and I was covering mainly Europe and Africa. There was another man for South Asia and one for Latin America. I was supposed to be assisting in the management of clandestine affairs. The State Department was supposed to know what the CIA was doing around the world. I also served as the FBI liaison for the State Department. We offered advice to the high echelons as to what covert operations should be approved and not approved. It wasn't all that exciting, those three years.

Q: I was just going to say, during a period of activism there still seemed to be a feeling of romanticism...if you could put a few people out in the jungle or do something like this they could really change things around. From your perspective, what role did the Department play? As inhibitor or pusher for covert operations?

EKERN: You will have to look back...CIA who was composed of some find Americans, believe me, was in a growth stage. They had been somewhat successful, like turning around the Italian vote in 1948, etc. They were on the rise and prone at times to get a little out of hand. Like any growth agency or industry they were looking for new opportunities. They sent a station chief to Sierra Leone and we questioned whether that was really needed. It was a matter of finding out what they were up to. In 1955, there were a lot of people in Washington who knew what they were doing, and there was no disapproval of it. But they got a little top heavy in 1966 and some of their cover was blown. There was a diagram in the Washington Post which really exposed a lot of their wheels within wheels, dummy corporations and things like that.

Q: And support of things like the National Student Organization and other groups.

EKERN: I think they brought this upon themselves. However, I think their intentions were absolutely patriotic and they were good people.

So that started to come apart by 1967 when I left. We helped them as best we could with deniability, cover stories, etc. They then tended to level with us more. At first there attitude to the Ambassador in a country was, "Mr. Ambassador we are here to help and cooperate with you, but there are some things that we are sure you would not want to know." Not all Ambassadors bought that so they leveled to the extent they had to.

Q: What was your impression of the FBI? J. Edgar Hoover was still there and was quite a presence. He really didn't like other agencies. How did you deal with him?

EKERN: Well, Hoover gave us such material as he thought we ought to know. Theoretically whenever they had a foreign contact operation within the US they were supposed to come over and tell us about it. Their officers were almost spitting images of Mr. Hoover. They dressed like him, talked like him, gave the correct replies, etc. I liked the fellow I dealt with. I never saw Hoover. Not very many people did. But they were ruthless too at times. They had a big office in Mexico City and the Ambassador there insisted on knowing something of what they were doing... more than they wanted to tell him. So this image of Mr. Hoover came in and said, "Mr. Hoover says that if we don't drop that business down there he will open a file on the Ambassador." So I took it up to higher authority. The Ambassador finally decided to drop it.

Q: The Ambassador probably was Fulton Freeman and he had been sort of not under fire but had been a Far Eastern hand and had been moved over there at the time of the McCarthy thing, so he was vulnerable from the extreme right.

EKERN: That caused us to drop the whole thing.

Q: You left there and got yourself overseas. You went to Bonn where you served from 1967-69. What were you doing there?

EKERN: I was called the political/military affairs counselor and we had Ambassador George McGhee followed by Henry Cabot Lodge. It was probably the most intense atmosphere of any Embassy in the world because that was the center of things. It wasn't London, Paris, or Moscow, it was Bonn where the world looked. Fortunately we had some good people. Jimmy Sutherland was counselor for political affairs; Marty Hillenbrand was DCM. Sutherland had some very good officers. Sutherland was one of the finest men I have ever met. Later he went up to the UN. I thought Ron Spiers took his place, but I am not dead sure of that.

It was a tough spot. We worked long hours, weekends, holidays, etc.

Q: When you say you worked, what were the issues that you were dealing with?

EKERN: Mostly feeding information to Washington about things that were happening there and policy matters. Whither NATO? What was the German future? Heavily defense oriented because that is where we faced the Russians. The actual telegrams that went out were quite a variety of everything, I am talking about the political section. There was the ABM treaties;, Nuclear Proliferation treaties; all of those affairs that were current at the time...Germany's positions on NATO affairs, which had their own North Atlantic Council over there...had an Embassy there too...so the liaison was close.

Q: What was the attitude towards East Germany? Today we are talking about in the last 18 months to almost everyone's surprise Germany is now united. But how did you feel about that then?

EKERN: The attitude with which I couldn't quarrel was that reunification for Germany was something that might happen long after our life time. That was the universal position. I don't know a single soothsayer who foresaw what has recently occurred. There was the question as to whether the East Germans would fight very hard for the Soviets if they came. That was a big question mark.

The American Embassy in Bonn even today is about to fall down. It is a temporary building. We couldn't even do a paint job without arousing comment that we had given up on East Germany and were not going back to Berlin. It was a very touchy thing.

Q: What was the attitude towards the West Germans? Was it a matter of saying, "Boy they are with us," but we kept taking their pulse to see this? Was there concern that they might turn neutral?

EKERN: Not during my period there. They were our loyal allies, our most loyal allies. I never saw...Oh, I guess Willy Brandt did some things that caused us to fuss a little, but at the level of the Laender and the military, they were our loyal allies. I am surprised that they jumped through the hoop as often as we required them to do. They would bend over backwards to be loyal. I don't know of any conspiracy against us. There may have been political elements toying with a less obsequiousness. Cooperation was 100 percent.

Q: How did we view this period, and actually this will cover your return because you continued somewhat in the same line as political adviser so we are really talking 1967-73...How did we view the "Soviet threat" in that period?

EKERN: It certainly was very real. There weren't very many people who downgraded it. It was there. The tanks and soldiers were right there. During the Czech crisis in 1968, there were 25 divisions moved and we didn't know whether they were going to stop at the German border. That was the first time I really got talked to by the German Foreign Office. It was before they actually moved, we knew they were coming, and the State Secretary called Sutherland and myself over and he said, "You tell your Generals not one soldier will move forward." They didn't ask us they told us. They were so concerned that their might be an imagined provocation that would cause them to come. So I got General Polk on the phone and said, "General, you are not supposed to move any of your soldiers at all." He swallowed hard because he certainly didn't want to go down in history as the general whose troops were overrun in their barracks. In the event only one officer disobeyed and that was a German Commander who pushed his troops out to where he might be able to defend himself. He was relieved later.
So the "threat" was considered very real.

Q: There must have been a calculation made because if these divisions were moving you can't let your troops stay in the barracks. Was a calculation made that indicated this was really a Czech thing. Were we getting assurances from both intelligence sources?

EKERN: As I remember it our friendly CIA covered both sides of the street...they could come, they won't come, etc. The military intelligence was that they knew they were there and moving. The one person whose telegram was correct was from Thompson in Moscow. He said they will move. Up until then the general consensus was that they were bluffing about moving into Czechoslovakia.

Q: For the record this was to squash what was known as the Prague Spring of 1968 when a certain liberalization was going on in Czechoslovakia.

EKERN: So, they did move, but didn't cross the border. We believed they could have. The distance between the Russians and Rhine at that point was about 70 miles so you had to take it very seriously.

Q: There must have been alerts.

EKERN: At the border, reconnaissance up there, you stay up all night and the commander saying "You be ready wherever you are." But we weathered that all right.

Q: Did you have any dealings with Henry Cabot Lodge?

EKERN: I was there for a little while before I moved to Heidelberg. He was entirely different from George McGhee. He was not losing much sleep over the job. He was thoroughly relaxed. Made a good TV appearance and that was what we needed. He came into the Embassy after he had had his coffee, etc. I think this was his last act. He had seen the whole course. He was not prepared to get too uptight over this.

Q: Then you moved to Heidelberg where you served for four years as POLAD, political adviser...?

EKERN: ...to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army there.

Q: Seventh Army?

EKERN: It was Headquarters, EURCERU and Seventh Army. My first Commander-in-Chief was General Polk, the second was two years with General Mike Davis.

Q: What would a political adviser do in that particular job?

EKERN: Well, pretty much whatever he wanted. First of all to keep the General completely current with the political situation around him...the German Army, the British and all. I did at least a weekly updating. I got all the pertinent cables sent down from Bonn.

Then to bring about good relations with the Laender where his troops were.

Q: "Laender" being the equivalent to county.

EKERN: State.

Q: Oh yes, "Kreis" would be county.

EKERN: This we accomplished by setting up briefings for the Minister-Presidents' and their cabinets. Having the Commander-in-Chief visit them, to get to know each well. The problems were pretty much enormous. Germany is about the size of Oregon and has a population at that time of about 61 million. So every square meter of land was needed for something. We had large chunks of it there for troop training, barracks, etc. There was a push all the time and some of them could get acrimonious because some development was needed and our barracks sat right in the middle of the area. Having barracks in the middle of town was an understandable nuisance to the Germans. We also requisitioned

good houses for our senior officers. We were under pressure to turn some of these back. But we operated under a Status of Forces Agreement and the Germans were reasonable. When it came to the crunch they were fair and we tried to be fair and work the problems out. And they never did get up into the diplomatic levels to speak of.

That was the internal scene. Then we tried to get the Commander-in-Chief to visit the Defense Ministers and hopefully the Prime Ministers of the Low Countries, France, etc. so he would be known.

Q: Did you find that you spent a good deal of time sort of instructing, or at least trying to get things across besides military matters, the political side of these countries? You understand that often a military person tends to think of everything being military, yet there is obviously a major diplomatic, political component which they have to take into account. Or did you find that these people were quite savvy about this already?

EKERN: Yes, General Polk and Davis certainly were. There were officers beneath them...in fact I told the Commanders-in-Chief when I went there that I would not tolerate any officer here calling the State Department a bunch of striped pants bastards. But I also told Bonn that I would not tolerate any of them talking about those brass hats in Heidelberg. So that was settled. I said to the Embassy that there are things that we do in Heidelberg that I am not at liberty to tell them about even thought you pay my salary. So I had, I think, the complete confidence of the Commander-in-Chief and that helped a lot. He was always willing and anxious to listen to what role he had in this German frontier state.

Q: How were you feeling on this? You were both in Bonn and Heidelberg. You were there during the real Vietnam thing. Could you describe the impact of Vietnam on our Army?

EKERN: There was indeed. General Polk had only one captain in command of a company, all the rest were lieutenants. He was stripped of senior non-commissioned officers. This was a period, the late '60s, with all the turmoil of racial and drug problems. He had a hell of a job. It was a draftee army, you know. So he had a real problem with discipline, which he handled to the best of his ability. But everything was drained off to Vietnam including his ammunition, gasoline. It was hard to get his forces to Grafenwohr and training grounds like that. The Germans were rioting in the streets. They had some bombings in Heidelberg at the Headquarters. They would march pass by the thousands in front of the Headquarters. But by keeping their cool and just doing their jobs all the Commanders did a good job.

Q: How did you feel about the intelligence that was coming out about the Soviet Army. Right now we are going through a dramatic (this is 1992) reappraisal of how we view the Soviets. Obviously it had tremendous weaknesses and one would catch little snippets of this at various times, but it was never put together. How did we view the Soviet Army from where you were?

EKERN: That was, of course, probably number one objective for the intelligence people, particularly military intelligence which was supposed to find out who their opponent was and how he was equipped. They used all the resources they could. Human and signal intelligence, etc. And they kept track of movements. I think they had a reasonable picture despite some of the shortcomings in the Soviet Army, particularly the East German and Czech Army. They had to view it as a real threat so they kept track of the armored vehicles, what kind they had, the aircraft, etc. I would say they were pretty up to date on it.

Q: You can be up to date on everything, but what was the feeling about the motivation, the professional ability of the men who were in these units?

EKERN: I don't think there were any doubts about the Soviet Army concerning obeying orders. The real question was how far would the East Germans go? Would they shoot fellow Germans? The question was never fully answered. It was debated forever. The same as to what the Czechs, the Hungarians, etc. would do. We didn't put them down as much of a threat as the Russians. In fact, we always thought if the Russians were successful in going right to the Atlantic, the East Germans, Hungarians would come in for a piece of the action. But if they met resistance, there would be some defections.

Q: Was the feeling at that time with obviously a weakened army because of Vietnam, one of confidence that we could stop the Soviet military or not?

EKERN: This was the big debate about the use of nuclear weapons. NATO's question about the first use of nukes and our position was "Yes, before we surrendered we would use nukes." So I think our Commanders-in-Chief felt they would be able to give the Soviets a hell of a fight although we would be outnumbered. It certainly wouldn't have been a walkover. They would have held them east of the Rhine for quite a long time. Our worry was more on the northern flank because the British forces were weaker there. Thank god we all felt the Germans were on our side. They are good soldiers. To this day they have fine troops, I am sure. I knew all the 3 and 4-star generals in the German Army. I went on maneuvers with them. The Dutch, I don't know about them. The French were good soldiers.

Q: Was there any conceivable place where the French might not join in a battle?

EKERN: I didn't think so. There was this political division with de Gaulle. But at the military level we had good cooperation. I visited the French Headquarters both the Second Corps in Germany and the First Army in Starkburg frequently. I told the State Department that they would fight. Why do we need to revise the NATO Treaty. I told that to Ron Spiers.

Q: Then you move from there to Vienna. What were you doing there?

EKERN: The negotiation of the so-called Mutual and Balanced Reduction. Actually it stemmed from the Mansfield Resolution in the '70s to withdraw our forces from Germany. There was tremendous pressure. Since I knew the Senator very well, (he was my professor in college) I would make trips to Washington to reason with him and he came there at least once. But he was adamant. He wasn't going to change. It came within one vote in the Senate. So the State Department said, "All right, we will reduce but together." Well that was pretty smart because it kept it going for another fifteen years.

Jonathan Dean was the spark plug there and the meetings were in Vienna. I had come home to retire, but Dean said I had to go with him to Vienna and open the talks. I stayed for the first year and then retired.

The Treaty was finally signed last year.

Q: Did you feel you were going through almost a political charade in order to keep from unilaterally withdrawing, or did you think something could be done?

EKERN: I think both. I really think Jock Dean, Stan Risner was the leader of the delegation, hoped that someday it would come to something. But for the moment the thing was, I believe, to keep our forces from being removed. I think State was absolutely right on that. Had we moved our forces out, we would have a different picture today.

Q: Did you get any feeling how the Soviets were approaching this at this time?

EKERN: Well, I had dinner with them every other night. It was my impression that they were told not to give the thing away, but keep talking, which they did. We made very little progress during the time I was there, but we kept talking and hammering away. It took 15 years or so, but they finally got a treaty.

Q: So it does show that diplomacy is not necessarily full of great leaps forward but often a steady, hard slogging process and keeping lines of communication open.

EKERN: Yes. One does have to be prepared for a lot of tedium at times. Anybody who wants to rush in and find a quick solution really shouldn't be in the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you find that you were getting conflicting instructions from the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, the State Department, etc.? Was it hard to tell where your master was?

EKERN: Not too much because we would come back and meet with the NSC, the State Department and the Defense Department. They would bang heads here in Washington until there was some kind of consensus and then you had, of course, to sell it to the Allies. You couldn't change your position vis-a-vis the British without going back home and go through the process all over again. There were differences, yes, but we usually hammered them out.

Q: But there weren't tremendously different divergences on this?

EKERN: The ISA and the State Department always had hard times together. Sometimes they didn't speak. So there were problems. This probably held us back, too, with our Allies. But they were smart, they sensed what was going on. They knew darn well what the trouble was. They would be patient.

Q: Well, then you retired. When was that?

EKERN: I retired in 1974 and became involved in Northern Virginia politics. Then I went to work for a think tank over here, as so many people do. I did that for about eight years.

Q: What sort of think tank?

EKERN: This was J Corps which was doing classified studies for the Defense Department primarily...on nuclear stuff.

Like you, I am sure, sometimes it is kind of hard to withdraw from all this.

Q: Well, I really appreciate this. It has been fun.

EKERN: Well, thank you so much.

End of interview