The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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TED GEHR

Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is November 7, 2023. We're beginning our interview with Ted Gehr. Where and when were you born?

GEHR: Portland, Oregon, 1961.

Q: And did your family stay there?

GEHR: Yes. Born and raised in Portland. We lived in one house for ten years, then moved up the road into my grandparents' place when they retired and moved south. I stayed there until college at the University of Oregon in Eugene, about two hours away.

Q: Tell me about your family—siblings?

GEHR: Two older brothers.

Q: How did your parents meet?

GEHR: At the University of Oregon. A lot of my extended family went there, including one of my brothers, all three of his daughters, my parents, even my father's parents. My father was in a fraternity, my mother in a sorority. My mother says openly she went to college to find a husband, which at the time wasn't uncommon. On my father's side, some relatives were prominent athletes.

Q: Have you explored your ancestry?

GEHR: Not as much as I'd like to. All my ancestors come from across the Atlantic Ocean. My mother's paternal side of the family comes from Syria and the Balearic Islands off the coast of Spain. My grandfather was actually born in Alexandria, Egypt. That's why I was excited about Cairo being my first post with USAID. My mother's maternal side comes from Trieste, when it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Ireland. They were true pioneers, taking the Oregon trail by wagon train in the mid-1800s. On my father's side of the family, they come from Holland, Germany and

England. So, you can say that I am a good example of the quintessential melting pot that makes up so much of the United States.

Q: What kind of schools did you attend?

GEHR: Public schools—grade school was a ten-minute walk, high school a fifteen-minute bike ride.

Q: Was Portland changing economically while you grew up?

GEHR: Oregon was, and still is, very WASPy and historically institutionally racist. Its 1859 state constitution prohibited Black residents. In the 1960s, a freeway expansion destroyed the city's main Black neighborhood. Timber drove the economy then, but industry was hit hard in the 1990s, especially hurting small mill towns.

Q: Eastern Oregon is still agricultural?

GEHR: Very much so. In college, I worked three summers on a wheat ranch near Pendleton—pea harvest in early summer, wheat in late summer. When President Carter imposed a grain embargo on the Soviet Union in the late '70s, the rancher I worked for was upset as the Soviets were a major importer of eastern Oregon's soft white wheat. Now, much of the area along the Columbia River has been converted to vineyards, especially for white wine on the Washington State side. Oregon's Pinot Noir grown in the Willamette Valley gained fame in the late 1970s after beating French wines in a blind tasting.

Q: In school, were you involved in extracurriculars?

GEHR: Mostly sports—baseball, football, basketball in grade school; baseball in high school once I started working. By junior year, I was working 40 hours a week at a grocery store—after school and weekends. In grade school I delivered newspapers and picked strawberries.

Q: What did your father do?

GEHR: He owned a variety store. He bought it from my mother's parents, who ran several along the Oregon coast and in Portland. He owned it for about ten years. It wasn't his passion—he loved boats. He started selling small catamarans, forming a sailing club where we'd all go camping at different lakes in the area and race. Many families from this group became close family friends. Later, he became a manufacturer's representative for marine products, including inflatable kayaks. Those neighborhood dime stores are pretty much gone now, but back then everyone knew my dad. He sold candy, Halloween costumes, birthday gifts, even turtles. I remember the yoyo demonstrations from company reps and getting a hold of the latest toys like Hot Wheels.

Q: Did that business give you any international exposure?

GEHR: Not the store, but my mother's work as a travel agent did. She went to places like India and Egypt and would bring home brochures that sparked my curiosity. We used to also take annual vacations to Mexico. Later, my maternal grandparents built a house in Guaymas, Mexico on the Sea of Cortez, and we spent Christmas vacations there. My brothers and I would drive down from Portland. It took about three days. We'd stay with relatives in San Francisco and Los Angeles or Tucson. These annual vacations to Mexico got me interested in Latin America.

Q: Did you study languages in high school?

GEHR: Spanish, though mainly because it was required to study a foreign language. The real turning point came when I attended a meeting in high school on foreign exchange programs with American Field Service (AFS). The organizer, a friend's mother, roped me into applying. I was accepted to spend my senior year in Chile. I had to look on a map to see where it was. I lived with two different families, attended a public school, all in Spanish, and basically learned Spanish through immersion, as very few people spoke English. The first couple of months were brutal, but by six months I was thinking and dreaming in Spanish.

Q: What was Chile like for you?

GEHR: My first host family was quite religious and conservative. I ended up moving to another family because my host mother didn't like the crowd I was hanging out with, especially my girlfriend. At the time, Chile was under a military dictatorship led by Augusto Pinochet. One day when I was riding a bus, a stranger overheard my gringo accent and started to lecture me on how the U.S. was responsible for the military coup against Salvador Allende. That sparked my interest in U.S. foreign policy and human rights. I also met a Peace Corps volunteer who was trying to put together a baseball team. Not many Chileans knew how to play baseball, so it was kind of fun being the star of the team. The experience also got me interested in the Peace Corps. My year in Chile pretty much set my academic and career path—international relations, Latin America, Peace Corps, and eventually USAID.

Q: Did the Chilean education system influence you?

GEHR: Classes were very rote—mostly copying from the chalkboard and memorizing. I did learn a lot of Chilean history and discovered the great poet Pablo Neruda. What did influence me was seeing how my Chilean colleagues who were graduating from high school faced major challenges in moving on to higher education. Slots were limited, and entrance was based on a national exam. Most kids going to public schools where the quality of education is limited, and where they can't really afford tutoring or other ways to prepare for the exam, are at a real disadvantage in getting accepted. I started to appreciate that back in the U.S. at the time most high school graduates with not terrible grades were accepted into state universities.

Q: All right, let's follow you back. When you returned from the AFS year, did you work again in the grocery store?

GEHR: I think briefly. The Chilean school year ran from February 1979 to February 1980, so I had several months before starting college in September. I lived with my parents and helped my father with his manufacturing representative business. I worked in a marine wholesale warehouse, packing and shipping marine supply orders.

Q: At summer's end, you went to the University of Oregon—a familiar choice in your family. How different was the learning environment?

GEHR: I chose the University of Oregon because that's where all my friends went. It was almost a given. I never considered other schools. In high school, I was a solid B student. At the University of Oregon, many friends were there, and it was just two hours down I-5 to Eugene from Portland. I lived in the dorms at first, and while it was kind of a big party school, my Chile experience made me appreciate having the opportunity to pursue higher education. In Chile, college wasn't common or easily attainable. In Oregon, with in-state tuition, loans, and parental help, it was within reach. I took it seriously—partly from fear of flunking, as I'd never taken advanced college preparatory courses in high school—and worked hard from the start. As a result, I earned mostly As, which was a pleasant surprise. Once I knew I could excel, I kept pushing. I graduated *summa cum laude* with honors in Political Science and was invited to join the Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society. My parents, who hadn't seen me as a strong student and didn't really pay attention to my report cards, were kind of stunned at graduation when I received the recognition.

I did well and was engaged, focusing on political science and Spanish since Oregon didn't offer an international relations major at the time. My political science studies focused on Latin America and foreign policy. For my senior thesis, I worked with a dynamic Latin American politics professor. This was the mid-1980s, when Central America was in the news during the height of the Contra war in Nicaragua and the human rights abuses in El Salvador. Most of the South American countries were also transitioning out of military dictatorships at the time. He encouraged activism, lamenting what he called the university's "Department of Political Silence." He organized speakers on Central and South American issues, always with a strong human rights focus.

Q: Any other highlights from college?

GEHR: Spending my junior year in Madrid during Spain's first democratic elections after Generalissimo Francisco Franco's death. I lived with two divorced doctors in an apartment across from where Felipe González, the Socialist Party (PSOE) candidate, lived. He ended up winning the elections and becoming prime minister.

It was exciting to witness Spain's democratic transition firsthand. Another cultural experience of the program was getting to know my classmates, who were mostly from East Coast liberal arts colleges like Dickinson, Tufts, and also the University of Virginia. Coming from Oregon, I was a novelty to them, as they were to me. I formed a few lasting friendships, including with a current State Department employee and a former Congressional Hill staffer turned lobbyist, both of whom I still see when I travel to Washington.

The year abroad experience deepened my interest in political transitions to democracy. I also learned that Spain is really a conglomeration of regions, many with their own languages and identities. The experience further fueled my interest in international relations and politics.

Q: A quick question—the Spanish in Spain is quite different from Chilean Spanish. Was that difficult at first?

GEHR: Yes. I learned Spanish entirely through immersion in Chile, without formal study, so I struggled with grammar and writing. The program in Spain, run by the University of Chicago, used Spanish professors and everything was taught in Spanish. While I was able to communicate fine, my grammar was inconsistent (still is!). The accents are also quite different depending on the region, but I adapted over time.

Q: And as you traveled, you encountered Catalan, Basque, and other regional languages?

GEHR: Yes, but I never learned how to speak them. Most people spoke Spanish if they needed to. Catalan is somewhat similar to read, but I never learned it or other regional languages. The Basque language, for example, is entirely different from Spanish.

During winter break, one of my fellow students and I spent a month traveling around Morocco by train and bus. We spoke no French, so when we arrived in Ceuta from Gibraltar, we were swarmed by very aggressive young men who insisted on serving as our tour guides. We met a French-Canadian traveler who spoke French and had been to Morocco before; traveling with him made navigating a lot easier. Morocco's North African culture was fascinating but sometimes intimidating—many people approached us trying to sell us things or take us on tours, and they could be relentless if you refused. Still, most Moroccans were genuinely friendly and hospitable without ulterior motives. In Marrakesh, two locals we met over tea offered to show us around. The next day they picked us up on motorcycles and gave us a tour. They could easily have led us somewhere unsafe, but it was a very positive experience. In other towns, however, we had encounters where locals lured us to back areas and threatened us—so caution was essential. Overall, it was an eye-opening experience.

Q: So, this was your junior year in Europe, in Spain and traveling. Then you returned and, instead of taking a full load of classes, you worked on a thesis.

GEHR: Yes. Let me back up. In my sophomore year, a friend from the dorms and I took a semester off, bought Eurail passes, and spent two months traveling around Western Europe—UK, France, Italy, Greece, Germany. It was a wonderful experience, meeting interesting people and seeing historic sites. But living there didn't appeal to me. It felt too easy to get around—better for tourism than a place I wanted to work or immerse myself in.

Q: When you turned 18, during the Carter administration, men were required to register for potential military service—not the draft itself, but so they had your information if a draft was reinstated. Did you register?

GEHR: No. At the time, the Soviets were in Afghanistan and Cold War tensions were at a peak. I was against all the saber rattling and decided not to. Nothing happened until years later when I joined the Foreign Service. During my security clearance process, they noted I wasn't in the registry. By then I was past the age limit. That was probably my most rebellious college act.

Q: Let's go back to your senior year in college. What topic did you choose for your thesis?

GEHR: In my senior year, I had finished most course requirements and wanted to do an independent project. I chose a thesis on Argentina's democratic transition. At the time, Argentina was rotating between populist Peronist governments and military coups, with human rights abuses similar to the military regimes in Chile and Brazil. While researching, a breakthrough occurred: a moderate, Raúl Alfonsín, broke the mold and won the elections. I saw this as an opportunity for Argentina to break the cycle of populist governments followed by coups. My thesis argued that Argentina had a chance to move forward. Some of the factors that supported this were hyperinflation that was eroding the military's and the Peronist's credibility; the Falklands War defeat by the UK that further damaged the military's prestige; and a number of human rights abuses coming to light. Together, these created an opening for democratic transition—my thesis explored that potential "new path" for Argentina.

Q: Was the thesis well received at the time?

GEHR: Well, I don't think anybody read it besides my professor. He passed me, so I guess it was well received by him. Doing a senior thesis instead of a course was not very common, at least I didn't know anybody else doing it. My professor/advisor was supportive. We'd meet weekly to review drafts, and I eventually completed it. I earned honors in political science because of the thesis. It wasn't groundbreaking research or anything, but it met the requirements.

Q: Was that research useful later in your Foreign Service career?

GEHR: Yes. It deepened my interest in Latin America, democratic transitions, and development. It prepared me for graduate school after the Peace Corps, and the research process itself was invaluable.

This was also when personal computers were just emerging. I had taken early computer science classes using punch cards. Later, the University of Oregon encouraged students to try personal computers for writing, using large floppy disks. It was a new experience at the time.

Q: From your time in Chile, you had planned to join the Peace Corps. How did that take shape as graduation approached?

GEHR: Yes. There were recruiters on campus, and I applied right away. My overseas living experience and language skills made me confident I would be accepted. The recruiters seemed confident too. The application involved short essays and the usual government paperwork, which took time. Back then, you couldn't choose a specific country where you wanted to serve, only indicate a preferred region. I wanted something different; I think I chose the Pacific Islands but was assigned to Costa Rica.

Q: What year did your Peace Corps experience begin?

GEHR: 1985, the same year I graduated. I left shortly afterward.

Q: When assigned, did you also receive a specific project?

GEHR: Yes—training English teachers, despite never having taught English myself. (Laughs) And not just teaching English—I was to train the teachers themselves.

Q: Where in Costa Rica were you sent?

GEHR: I was sent to Quepos, south of San José on the Pacific coast, next to Manuel Antonio National Park—one of the most beautiful beaches in the country. I was fortunate to be posted to Costa Rica at all, and then to one of its most scenic locations. The port town of Quepos had been created by the United Fruit Company for banana production in the 1950s–60s. At that time, it was easier to go by ship to Los Angeles than to reach the capital through the jungle. When I was there narrow-gauge roads followed old rail lines. Eventually a banana blight wiped out production, so they replaced bananas with African palm for oil. Tourism was also growing, and my assignment was partly to support the sector.

Q: Did the teacher training work out?

GEHR: Yes. Before going to my site, all new volunteers received training for three months at a center outside San José, living with host families. We were grouped by assignment—English teacher trainers, aquaculture, microenterprise, health. The trainers taught English as a Second Language teaching methodology. A couple of volunteers who had actually taught ESL in the U.S. were especially helpful. The U.S. embassy's public affairs section—at the time under the U.S. Information Agency—had an English teaching program and published a monthly magazine with lesson ideas. I collected back issues, studied them, and used many of the techniques. They were a major resource.

In Quepos, I worked with four or five high schools in the area, traveling by bus to meet teachers, observe classes, and help with lesson plans, activities, and teaching methods. Sometimes I taught a class for them to observe. A few teachers spoke English well and actually taught me things; others had minimal English and were in the job simply because no one else was available. When I would do a demonstration lesson, some teachers would even leave entirely when I arrived— "Ted's here, he'll handle it"—and disappear for the period. (Laughs)

Q: Total disclosure: I arrived in Costa Rica in 1986 as a junior political officer in the embassy.

GEHR: We were there at the same time.

Q: Peace Corps volunteers usually have little contact with the embassy. Was that different for you?

GEHR: There was a Peace Corps–AID small grants program—only a few thousand dollars per grant—for projects like refurbishing schools or health posts. I used the program with one community to get a project funded, but my contact with embassy staff was minimal.

Ambassador Lewis Tambs was there at the time, during the Contra war. Most of the volunteers were against the Contra war, so there was some tension when he used to come to the training center. (Laughs)

Q: Quick story; I arrived in September '86, and by Thanksgiving Tambs was gone, recalled over Iran-Contra.

Did the Contra war affect you directly—refugees or other issues in your town?

GEHR: Indirectly. The Kissinger Commission Report (1983–84) called for increasing Peace Corps volunteers in Central America as part of countering the Sandinistas. Numbers rose sharply, and that's likely why I was in Costa Rica in the first place. Quepos was on the Pacific coast along a route from Panama northward. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers units built Bailey bridges there, sparking constant rumors that the U.S. would invade Nicaragua from northern Costa Rica.

Q: In San José, people often asked, "Are you with the CIA?"

GEHR: Yes. Peace Corps maintained a strict separation from intelligence agencies for exactly that reason. I got the question occasionally, but it wasn't a major theme. I got it more from my relatives and friends back home. (laughs)

Q: We were not allowed to visit Peace Corps volunteers in the field.

GEHR: No, that wasn't allowed.

Q: You were there 1985–87?

GEHR: Yes, 1985–87.

Q: Óscar Arias became president during your time there. Did you follow national politics from Quepos?

GEHR: Absolutely. I followed national news in the *Tico Times* and *La Nación* newspapers. I even spent a week traveling by bus in Nicaragua, experiencing the stark differences in infrastructure and meeting Nicaraguans affected by the war. I bought a Nicaraguan book about Hemingway in Cuba. When I was crossing the border on a bus back to Costa Rica, Costa Rican police officials boarded and went through everyone's baggage. They questioned me about the book, suspecting socialist sympathies, I guess. Costa Ricans took pride in their stable democracy and for not having a military. They often criticized Nicaragua and other Central American countries for being unstable basket cases.

Q: As you wrapped up in 1987, were you considering a second Peace Corps assignment, or what were you thinking?

GEHR: Like when I met a Peace Corps volunteer in Chile, in Costa Rica I was introduced to USAID through the small grants program and an AID contractor living nearby. He managed an economic growth/tourism project, lived in a beautiful house overlooking the ocean, and did meaningful development work. That experience made me think, "I want to apply to USAID when I finish Peace Corps."

Q: You also mentioned graduate school. How did that come about?

GEHR: Early in Peace Corps, I realized a graduate degree was essential for employment in the development field. I studied for the GRE, researched schools, and targeted programs in development and international relations. After returning to the U.S., I visited some schools and narrowed my list to the Monterey School for International Studies, Princeton, Columbia, and the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. I was intrigued by urban planning, although I didn't know a whole lot about what that entailed, and Princeton offered a dual degree along with development/international affairs.

Q: And you ended up at Princeton?

GEHR: Princeton was my first choice, but I wasn't accepted there. I ended up choosing Columbia. When I visited Columbia while looking at schools, the admissions dean with whom I met just happened to be from Oregon. She encouraged me to apply, saying they wanted more representation from the West Coast. She told me about the new Jacob K. Javits Fellowship. I ended up getting the fellowship, which included full tuition, a stipend, and a paying job in the U.S. Senate for a year upon graduation.

Columbia's SIPA program was very practical, aimed at practitioners rather than scholars. I specialized in economic and political development. In my second year, we participated in a practitioner workshop with CARE in Belize on sustainable agriculture—conducting analyses, visiting Belize, developing a project design, and presenting the design to CARE.

Q: Do you recall what the Belize program was?

GEHR: It aimed to raise rural incomes through sustainable agriculture with an ecotourism component, given Belize's tourism-based economy.

Between my first and second year at Columbia, I interned with the Chilean Human Rights Commission (1989–90) in Santiago, Chile, working with José Aylwin, son of then-presidential candidate Patricio Aylwin. I drafted a report on the social and economic impacts of IMF structural adjustment policies under Pinochet.

After graduating, I worked for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as part of the Javits Fellowship. Having interned for Senator Bob Packwood in college, I had some experience with congressional processes. I hoped to join the Foreign Operations Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee chaired by Senator Leahy but instead joined the Western Hemisphere Affairs Subcommittee of the Foreign Relations Committee under Senator Chris Dodd, also a former Peace Corps volunteer.

The full committee was chaired by Claiborne Pell, with Jesse Helms as minority leader. Pell was ready to retire, while Helms opposed most development and foreign aid efforts. This was just after Iran-Contra, when there was deep mistrust between Congress and the Executive Branch. Priority legislation that I helped on included the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative (debt-for-nature swaps). I prepared memos for hearings. Senator Dodd's staffer, Janice O'Connell, was my boss. She asked me to stay on after the year ended, so I worked there for another year.

I met a lot of interesting people there. I remember working with State Department congressional liaison Mark Kirk, who later became a U.S. representative, and with Peter Galbraith, who later became Ambassador to Croatia and was the son of John Kenneth Galbraith. There were others I worked with who later took high-level positions in different administrations.

Q: Even though you weren't on Appropriations, did you gain insight into USAID's funding process?

GEHR: Yes. Even though I wasn't on Appropriations, the Foreign Relations Committee participated in funding discussions. We reviewed the congressional budget justification with Appropriations, making sure that the priorities of Foreign Relations Committee members were considered. The Committee's real leverage was in confirming administration appointments, often holding up State or USAID nominees to pressure the administration on policies even when the issue was unrelated to the nominee. I also drafted memos and attended meetings with visiting heads of state and ministers, gaining firsthand perspectives from regional leaders and participating senators. I stayed for two years but really wanted to work overseas on development, so I kept applying for other jobs.

After graduating and before starting work at the Senate, I spent two months in and around Recife, on the northeast coast of Brazil, with friends from Columbia. That's where I met my wife. She later joined me in Washington, D.C. She came in January; the mid-winter cold and snow were a shock to her.

Q: While in Brazil, was your wife in development work, or did you meet socially?

GEHR: We met on the beach. She worked for the municipal government in the nearest city, visiting her parents who were renting a beach house on weekends. My friend and I met her family when they invited us in for dinner. They felt sorry for us because it was the low tourist season and no restaurants were open.

Q: After your Latin American experience, did Brazil feel distinctive?

GEHR: Yes. Brazilians seemed more open and welcoming than in many other Latin American countries. When we first arrived, we boarded a crowded bus, each with our bulky backpacks. Strangers who had seats offered to hold our heavy backpacks. The country's passion for football was striking. When we were invited to a Brazilian's home to watch the 1990 World Cup semifinal against Argentina, they started crying after Brazil's loss.

Q: Did AID hire for specialties or generalists?

GEHR: Unlike State, AID hires for specific positions—health, democracy, finance, etc. I joined as a program/project development officer, drawing on my overseas experience and language skills. The selection process included written essays and a panel interview. One interviewer was nodding off mid-interview, which I thought doomed me—but I was hired.

Q: Were you married by then?

GEHR: No, we married after I joined AID. She had no idea what the career entailed with all the moving.

Q: Describe your USAID entry.

GEHR: I entered as an International Development Intern (IDI) – a misnomer, as it wasn't an internship. The first year was in Washington doing rotations while awaiting an overseas post. Despite my Latin America background, I was assigned to Cairo, Egypt.

Egypt's program was the largest for USAID at the time—$815 million in economic aid annually plus $1 billion in military aid. I was excited, especially since my grandfather was born in Alexandria. No Arabic was required, but I took part in a pilot one-on-one Arabic program that the USAID Mission started. I worked with a professor from the American University in Cairo. I also spent a month living with my secretary's family in Alexandria for immersion. I became conversational, which helped build rapport.

The mission had about 90 Foreign Service officers, working in a commercial building near Tahrir Square in the center of Cairo. I backstopped power and telecommunication infrastructure projects—designing projects, monitoring, and ensuring compliance with strategy and regulations. I coordinated the complete project design package while engineers worked on the technical details. Projects included replacing Aswan Dam turbines. I also joined policy reform discussions tied to a $200 million annual cash transfer. The problem with the policy reform dialogue was that the Egyptians saw the aid as an incentive for signing a peace treaty with Israel – the Camp David accords. If we pushed for reforms they weren't willing to address, they would complain to the Ambassador, who often told us to let it go.

Q: Was there consideration for the downstream effect, such as tariffs, charging, and maintenance once systems were operational?

GEHR: Yes. It tied into the policy discussion on appropriate energy pricing, which was heavily subsidized at the time for stability reasons. Prices didn't reflect full costs or maintenance, which was a problem. A large part of the program included not just construction but also technical assistance and training to manage power and telecom stations. Pricing remained a political decision.

Q: But technically, there's little more you can do once it's operational. And in many developing countries, there's electricity theft—tapping lines and bypassing meters, all the way to the distribution center. I won't put you on the spot. Was this your entire Cairo tour, or did you work in other areas?

GEHR: One last point on subsidies—living in Maadi, I took the Metro to Tahrir Square for about five cents a trip, benefiting from subsidized transport. But it did keep my car off the road.

Q: Another issue was removing lead from gasoline.

GEHR: Yes. While I was there, Egypt worked on developing unleaded fuels.

Q: Cairo's pollution—

GEHR: Dust storms could reduce visibility to five feet.

After two years, I switched from project development to the program office. There, I worked on mission strategy, budget, M&E, and sectoral analyses—broadening my scope.

We designed a new country strategy with objectives, intermediate results, and metrics, and entered new areas such as the rule of law under Mubarak's illiberal democratic regime. The rule of law program provided technical assistance and training to improve judicial efficiency and reduce caseloads.

During my tour, Senator Jesse Helms pushed to merge AID and USIA into State. USIA merged, but AID stayed independent but with significant sacrifices—budget cuts, a Reduction in Force process, and mission closures. As a new officer, it was unnerving, but I was spared, likely due to my lower salary.

AID also attempted to digitize budgeting and programming—a major investment that failed. The system was slow, glitchy, and insecure, eroding Hill credibility. The idea was sound but technologically premature.

Q: State had similar failures—personnel record digitization was chaotic.

GEHR: My 2024 retirement paperwork was lost by State (at least that's what USAID HR told me), delaying my first annuity payment. Frustrating for me, though manageable—but much harder for those relying on timely payments.

Q: Back to Egypt—was your oversight broader than telecom?

GEHR: Yes, broader. I backstopped other technical offices including USAID's first democracy and governance program in Egypt.

Q: The rule of law work may have expanded from Eastern Europe programs.

GEHR: Absolutely. Post–Berlin Wall, democracy and governance became a focus worldwide for USAID.

Democracy and governance became my strongest technical area, rooted in my academic and Hill experience, although program directions were mostly driven by Congressional earmarks.

I saw firsthand that while AID is rigorous in development, it is ultimately a foreign policy tool. In Egypt, the $815 million annual assistance was primarily political—to maintain peace with Israel. Development considerations often took a back seat, and large sums pressured us to obligate and spend quickly, sometimes undermining sustainability.

Q: Were we still doing PL-480?

GEHR: Yes, there was a large PL-480 commodity import program, including wheat imports, which allowed the Egyptian government to provide significant bread subsidies. Bread—*aish* in colloquial Egyptian Arabic—also means "life." Fresh flatbread sold for pennies on the streets.

Q: Did you finish in 1995?

GEHR: I served 1992–1996.

Q: Were you planning your next career move?

GEHR: Yes. From the start, my career goal was to eventually become a mission director, and the program officer backstop was a common path. So I stuck with that backstop. Location choices were driven mostly by our daughter's schooling. Unlike many colleagues, I avoided tying my career to specific mentors or well-known officers. I found that many times they would end up moving on to another post long before you expected them to.

Q: Was post size or budget a factor?

GEHR: Not necessarily. Large budgets look good in evaluations but can pigeonhole you. For example, my energy/telecom role was unique to Egypt because those types of programs didn't exist elsewhere. While you see a broad array of sectors in a large mission, much of the focus is on obligating funds and pushing money through the pipeline. I was interested in going to a smaller post where I could be more involved in the actual development work.

This was my first time navigating the bidding process. I had started at USAID at an FS-6 grade, and by the end of my Egypt tour was an FS-4. I contacted missions in advance that appeared to have openings based on a database that showed when staff had arrived at missions worldwide. I took a Deputy Program Officer role in the Dominican Republic. It was a stark shift—from Egypt's $815 million program to the DR's $12 million budget, and a mission then under consideration for closure.

Q: In 1996—shall we pick up with Santo Domingo?

GEHR: Yes. With my academic and professional background in Latin America, I was eager to return to the region. As Deputy Program Office Director, I worked in a small program focused mostly on health and democracy. The Dominican Republic had a history of authoritarian rule under Trujillo and then Balaguer, who by my arrival was elderly, blind, and nearing the end of his tenure. To help ensure that elections were free and fair, USAID concentrated on increasing credibility in the electoral process, including training civic groups to conduct independent quick counts to verify official results. This aligned with my democracy and governance expertise, and I enjoyed the variety of roles I played and engagement that came with a small mission.

Q: How did your family adapt?

GEHR: My Brazilian wife adapted easily given the linguistic and cultural similarities to Brazil—especially compared to Egypt. Our seven-year-old daughter also settled in well. We learned a lesson in tracking shipments after our air freight was declared lost, only to be found months later in the back corner of the Embassy's warehouse—leaving us with duplicates of many appliances. USAID maintained its own housing pool then. One memorable moment was watching a crane hoist an oversized cabinet through our balcony because it was too big to take up the stairs. Our daughter's school, Carol Morgan, mixed local and expatriate students. Existing social cliques made integration challenging at first, but she quickly adapted and made friends. The security situation was typical for a large Latin American city. Crime existed, but you were fine if you took the necessary precautions. Power outages were daily, and generators were essential.

Q: How did a new party in government affect USAID's work?

GEHR: The PLD's Leonel Fernández was elected President in 1996. Having grown up in Brooklyn and studied in the U.S., he was a strong ally. We continued our democracy and civil society programs. As in 1996, election monitoring was a major focus during the 2000 presidential elections. A career ambassador was replaced before the voting by political appointee Charles Manatt, a former chair of the Democratic National Committee. He was heavily engaged in the election monitoring process. I was USAID's point person and coordinated closely with the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Federation for Electoral Systems (IFES), and the Carter Center, all of whom had received grants from us. We tried to strengthen local monitoring institutions and put them in the forefront, but some international organizations—particularly the Carter Center—wanted the spotlight. Managing that balance was a challenge. Under the Fernández administration, we also launched a rule of law program with the attorney general, providing training to judges and prosecutors and strengthening legal frameworks.

Q: Did women play a significant role?

GEHR: Women were active in civil society, including leadership roles in partner institutions such as the Catholic University, though we had no dedicated gender-focused programs.

Q: Were there other influencers—media, celebrities, sports figures—engaged in the democratization process?

GEHR: Baseball is central in the DR—major league teams recruited teens through local camps. We worked with figures like Sammy Sosa, whose foundation collaborated with our health program, and Pedro Martínez. Sosa lived on the same street as us; his house number matched his jersey number when he played for the Cubs.

The vibrant merengue music scene also intersected with consular work. To deter visa fraud, which was quite prevalent, merengue bands applying to tour the U.S. were required to perform at the consulate, resulting in Friday afternoon concerts for embassy staff. My wife worked as a consulate cashier. She became very familiar with detecting counterfeit bills and sometimes handled payments from well-known musicians and ball players.

Q: After the election, how did you help the new government sustain credibility?

GEHR: The rule of law program was crucial as corruption was a leading cause of public distrust. Strengthening of the judicial sector signaled the government's seriousness in tackling corruption and bolstered its legitimacy.

Q: What forms of corruption were most significant, and in which sectors?

GEHR: The power and electricity sector was a prime example. Chronic outages were partly due to corruption in procurement, bidding for management contracts, and the influence of diesel distributors who benefited from a weak energy system. Transparency and legitimate processes were absent, making resolution of the energy crisis nearly impossible.

There was also petty, day-to-day corruption—police soliciting bribes for alleged traffic offenses. Corruption occurred at all levels, from street enforcement to the highest levels of government.

Q: How did corruption affect the judicial system?

GEHR: The courts were deeply corrupt and dysfunctional, kept weak by design. Outdated laws, excessive pretrial detention, and case backlogs meant some prisoners served longer awaiting trial than their eventual sentences. Our rule of law program tracked arrest-to-trial times, which in the DR often stretched into years. This fueled corruption, those with the means bribed their way out rather than wait for justice.

Q: Right.

GEHR: Our justice reform program started with basics—training clerks, implementing case tracking, proper filing, and setting measurable benchmarks. Even determining how many people were in jail, and for what charges, was often difficult. Civil society played a vital role in pushing for and monitoring reforms.

Q: After the election and democracy work, what else were you involved in?

GEHR: One program worked with civil society on rights, responsibilities, and citizen oversight. Another offered small economic grants for projects such as road repairs or school improvements. Communities had to organize, monitor, and ensure funds were used properly, producing tangible benefits. You could argue that these grants fostered democracy more effectively than civic education alone, since people directly experienced the benefits of working together.

In 1998, Hurricane Georges hit the DR, triggering massive reconstruction efforts. Overnight winds shook our apartment. The Embassy required evacuations from higher floors in apartment buildings, but we stayed since we were on the third floor. We taped

windows to prevent shattering. By morning, palm trees lay flattened, revealing an ocean view we'd never noticed, and satellite dishes lay scattered over the street.
Our budget jumped from $12 million to $80–90 million for hurricane recovery. OFDA, USAID's disaster response arm, provided immediate relief. Reconstruction included housing, with coordination with HUD, and agriculture (with USDA). The DR's already strong infrastructure allowed for a much faster recovery than its neighbor Haiti. My role focused heavily on interagency coordination and donor collaboration, with UNDP leading overall donor efforts. Managing the sudden influx of funds was challenging—balancing pressure to disburse quickly with strict accountability. USDA's in-country presence facilitated coordination, while HUD's lack of international experience made collaboration difficult. Attention shifted to Hurricane Mitch in Central America a few months later, easing pressure on us but also reducing Washington's support.

Another lesson came from our long-running civil society program at PUCMM. When we started talking to them about sustainability and transition plans, some local partners reacted with an apparent sense of entitlement, opposed to ending funding despite their strong institutional capacity. This was a common problem when funding an institution for many years, they felt entitled to USAID support in perpetuity.

The rule of law program sparked debate over engaging the police. Past U.S. support for repressive forces in the DR during the 1960s–70s created credibility risks. Our democracy officer and I opposed engagement. Others saw engaging the police as essential to promoting a functional legal system. The mission director ultimately decided against police involvement.

Q: Was Y2K a concern?

GEHR: Yes—it was widely discussed throughout the USG. Personally, it was memorable because my wife was able to book a heavily discounted Caribbean cruise over New Year's, when others feared computer failures would leave the ship floating in the middle of the Caribbean or something. Of course, nothing happened.

Q: By 2000, you were preparing for your next post—Bolivia?

GEHR: Yes. We again prioritized a good school for our daughter. I had an informal agreement for a Program Office Director job in the Philippines, but HR later ruled me ineligible because the position was three grades above mine, which was beyond the allowable two-grade spread. A hard first lesson in bidding rules. After scrambling, connections in the Latin America bureau helped land a posting in Bolivia. The program office head, a former Egypt colleague, recruited me to succeed him. This was fine, as my wife preferred staying in Latin America for its proximity to Brazil. The large program focused on counternarcotics and alternative development.

Q: How large was the USAID mission when you arrived in Bolivia?

GEHR: We operated from a six-story building separate from the Embassy, shared with the Narcotics Affairs Section (later INL). Conveniently located near our house, I could drive home for lunch in under five minutes. The program was about $110 million—fairly large for Latin America. The bulk of the funding was for counternarcotics. We had an alternative development program, plus a full range of activities, including a substantial health program, a democracy and governance program focused on decentralization, which was a trend AID supported in Latin America to transfer responsibilities and resources from the national to the state and local levels of government. This was especially relevant in Bolivia, which had just passed a major decentralization law, and we helped implement it. We also had an agricultural program.

My focus was alternative development, the Embassy's top priority, and an area where we worked closely with the State Department. State/INL operated a fleet of helicopters and planes—practically its own airline. The DEA was also large in Bolivia. We often described it as a three-legged counternarcotics stool: DEA handled interdictions, INL eradicated coca, and AID developed alternative income sources for coca growers. We had little direct contact with DEA but coordinated closely with INL. They would eradicate in a given area, and we would then work with the farmers there. That required careful planning so they could start earning income from crops other than coca. We also took advantage of INL plane and helicopter transport when possible.

Q: The democracy program was also interesting. Recently, former ambassador Manuel Rocha made news when he was revealed as a Cuban spy.

GEHR: I was in Bolivia during his ambassadorship. At the time, Rocha seemed smart and very active. He supported AID, though he wasn't deeply interested in the details of our programs. He gave a speech warning that if Evo Morales, from the pro-coca socialist movement party (MAS), won the upcoming presidential elections, it would hurt relations with the U.S. and put U.S. assistance in jeopardy. The effect of the Ambassador's statement was for Evo's ratings in the polls to shoot up, even among those who disliked him, because Bolivians—like most people in post-colonial countries—resent foreign interference in domestic politics. Evo didn't win that election, but he won the next. In hindsight, with the Cuban spy revelation, Rocha's remarks make more sense. Evo was close to Cuba, and Rocha's statement boosted him. Who knows—maybe Rocha will write a book someday.

Q: The president at the time launched a major coca eradication program with farmer incentives, but it didn't seem to succeed.

GEHR: Yes. The president then was Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada—known as "Goni." He had grown up largely in the U.S., his family having been exiled during the military dictatorship. His Spanish accent was so heavily American that it was worse than mine.

U.S. support for Bolivia's counternarcotics effort was strong, but eradication failed—just as elsewhere. Coca cultivation is like a balloon: squeeze one area and it expands into another. The plant grows like a weed, needs little care, yields up to three harvests a year, and traffickers collect the coca leaves directly from farmers. Competing against that is nearly impossible. We studied viable replacement crops—pineapple, banana, coffee, and others—but challenges were enormous. These crops required much care and inputs, took years before producing a viable crop, and faced uncertain markets and poor roads. Nothing could match coca's profitability and guaranteed demand. The same was true in Peru and Colombia: as long as demand exists, coca will be grown.

Another dynamic was that most of Bolivia's population is indigenous—mostly Quechua and Aymara. The government and business elites, however, were of European descent and treated the indigenous as second-class citizens. Sánchez de Lozada's tenure reflected this imbalance.

Q: For the U.S., coca was central. But what about Bolivia's other resources?

GEHR: Yes, the U.S. was interested not only in stopping the flow of cocaine but also in supporting U.S. businesses wanting to invest in Bolivia's abundant mineral and natural resources—lithium, natural gas, zinc, gold, silver, and more. Whenever the Bolivian government considered raising taxes on extraction and export, American companies—backed by the Embassy—would threaten to pull out. But when the government did raise taxes, the businesses all stayed because Bolivia still remained highly profitable.

Evo Morales tapped into growing resentment among indigenous communities, framing coca as a sacred plant used historically in ceremonies, to ease hunger, and as part of their cultural tradition. Even in the Embassy, coca tea was served to alleviate the effects of the high altitude. (La Paz sits at around 12,000 feet.) Eradication efforts, especially in the Yungas, faced strong local resistance. Economically, coca made more sense for farmers with its low production cost and secure market.

Q: There was also torrential rain and flooding. Did that shift your work priorities?

GEHR: Floods occurred periodically, but they weren't a major program focus. In La Paz, hailstorms with golf ball–sized hail would block drainage systems, causing flooding when the rains came. It was a recurring issue, but not central to our work.

Q: At this point, Bolivia was experiencing significant political instability.

GEHR: Yes. The seeds were there. Evo Morales was emerging as a political leader in the Chapare region, a coca grower and union leader staunchly opposed to eradication. He built strong support among indigenous communities and poor farmers. He tapped into their frustration with white Bolivian elites who ignored their needs and disrespected their culture.

Q: And that's where U.S. eradication programs were concentrated?

GEHR: Exactly. That area became a flashpoint. Protests and roadblocks often shut the main La Paz–Cochabamba highway for days or weeks, disrupting logistics and field access.

Q: Was USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) active then?

GEHR: Yes. After violent protests, OTI worked on quick-impact projects in conflict-prone areas. In El Alto, on the Andean plains above La Paz, they funded street lighting, small parks, drainage, and other visible improvements to demonstrate government responsiveness.

Q: Did these projects make a difference?

GEHR: They had some marginal impact as visible improvements could ease tensions, but deep-seated political and economic grievances couldn't be solved with quick projects alone.

The decentralization effort had strong potential. In much of Latin America, power and resources are concentrated in urban centers. Strengthening local governments brought decision-making and resources closer to communities. While I can't speak to its current status, the systems and training we implemented were designed for lasting impact.

Agricultural projects offered potential as well. Even when alternative crops weren't commercially successful, farmers gained skills in improved agricultural practices.

Q: That's all my questions, but perhaps not all your answers.

GEHR: One major world event during my Bolivia tour was 9/11. I still remember exactly where I was. My supervisor in the office next to mine forwarded an email that a plane had hit the World Trade Center, wondering if it was true. Then the second plane hit. We gathered in the conference room to watch CNN. The mission director checked on everyone, and I went to pick up my daughter since her school closed. Many Bolivians expressed sympathy. My main concern was that my parents were visiting my brother in Brooklyn. Without modern messaging apps at the time, I frantically tried to call until I finally reached them. They were fine, watching from their rooftop. Personally, it was unsettling, but since Bolivia wasn't implicated, it had little effect on our programs.

Living at 12,000 feet was unique. You never completely adjust, climbing stairs or even talking could leave you breathless. I played softball and tennis; the thin air made balls travel much farther, requiring special high-altitude tennis balls. Golfers enjoyed the added distance. Alcohol had a stronger effect. Appetites were reduced, and many lost weight. Some people would literally collapse upon disembarking from a flight. Embassy cars carried oxygen because the airport sat at 14,000 feet. Fitness didn't guarantee tolerance—some athletes struggled, while some smokers were unaffected. Planes needed very long runways to take off, which was unsettling as you waited for lift-off. In La Paz, the runway ended at a cliff, and it felt like the plane didn't start climbing until it went over it.

Bolivia's geography is diverse; more than just Andean highlands. Only one-third is highlands; two-thirds are tropical lowlands and Amazon jungle. We traveled often, visiting Jesuit mission towns near Brazil, colonial mining towns like Potosí, and salt flats now known for their lithium. In Potosí, miners still used dynamite to extract silver inside the mountains that once made Spain incredibly rich in the 1500s. I was able to actually go into one of the mines to see how they worked. The miners offered coca, alcohol, and cigarettes to representations of their god for mother earth, Pachamama, inside the mines for safety.

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Q: Okay. Today is January 29, 2024. We're resuming our interview with Ted Gehr—and Ted, you're just about done with Bolivia. How did your next assignment come about?

GEHR: Well, throughout my career, especially before the Senior Foreign Service, our strategy was to look at the staffing pattern and see what openings might work for us and then match that with our daughter's schooling needs. At that point she was entering her sophomore year of high school, so we knew she'd probably graduate from wherever we went next. A good school for her was always a top priority. India came up, and that was my first choice. After eight years in the Dominican Republic and Bolivia, it was appealing to move outside the region. India had a big, interesting program, something different, and an excellent school. So that's what we bid on, and I was selected to head the Program Office there.

Q: You were working in English. Did you receive training in Hindi or any other local languages?

GEHR: No. Officially everything was in English. I took some embassy-offered Hindi classes, but I never learned much. Most counterparts spoke English, so language wasn't an issue. What struck me was India's sheer linguistic diversity. There are hundreds of languages, and many Indians naturally speak three—one from their region, Hindi, and English. It's not considered special. For Americans, most of us only speak English and hope people overseas do too.

Q: Interesting. Talk about your arrival—settling in, security, things like that.

GEHR: This was our fourth overseas post with AID, so we knew the drill—pack out, home leave, temporary housing. But India was different. For the first time, we really felt culture shock. It's overwhelming—sensory overload. The sights, sounds, smells, poverty, crowds—everything's right in your face.

Housing was complicated. The person I was replacing was still there and we were assigned to the same house, so we lived in temporary quarters for a while, and there were issues. The transition was especially tough on our daughter, moving into a new school as a sophomore, at an age when friends now matter more than family. The school itself was excellent, but the adjustment was hard. For me, going into the office gave me structure. But for my wife, navigating daily life was more difficult. She'd come back from the markets shocked at all the flies covering the food, the cow dung in the streets and shop floors, the sheer chaos compared to the other places we'd been posted. We all struggled at first. India is exhausting—so many people, so much going on. You adapt, but you never stop noticing how different it all is.

Q: Now about the job—you went in as a program officer. What programs were underway?

GEHR: India's economy was booming, especially in tech and back-office services. That raised questions in Washington—why was the U.S. providing foreign assistance to India when we were also competing with them economically? So, our programs for the most part weren't traditional aid. It was more about partnerships.

One area was renewable and efficient energy. Soon after I arrived, we met government counterparts who wanted to visit the U.S. to learn about renewables and even "clean coal"—a new term for me. I worried about how to fund such travel, but they told me, "We have the money. We just need contacts. Help us meet the right people." That was eye-opening: they didn't want financing, they wanted expertise.

Health was another major area. PEPFAR, President Bush's AIDS program, was very large. We also supported polio eradication, TB treatment and other infectious disease programs. And we worked on private-sector partnerships, which AID was emphasizing globally. For example, with agriculture we worked with fertilizer and equipment companies on no-till farming—showing farmers they could boost productivity without heavy plowing, which reduced erosion and fertilizer use.

Then the 2004 tsunami hit. Most of the devastation was in Thailand and Indonesia, but India's east coast and Sri Lanka were also badly affected. We supported recovery, especially for fishing communities that lost boats. I traveled to Chennai a couple of times with Washington visitors. India's own disaster relief agency was strong, and we worked to build their capacity further.

Q: Did PEPFAR face the challenge that India long claimed AIDS wasn't really their problem?

GEHR: Yes, messaging was key. Officially it was seen as a Western problem, but the reality was different. We worked carefully to help minimize impact while respecting sensitivities. The same was true with disaster assistance: India wouldn't request help, but they wouldn't reject it either. They wanted to show they could manage on their own, but they appreciated and quietly welcomed support.

Q: By then, were they producing their own AIDS or infectious disease medications?

GEHR: India's pharmaceutical industry was big. I don't recall if they produced AIDS drugs at that time, but they certainly produced many medicines cheaply for export worldwide. One interesting aside: India was one of the few countries legally producing opioids, so there were inspections of factories. And on a personal level, any medication—even opioids—could be bought over the counter, which was concerning with curious teenagers around.

Q: Sometimes technical assistance involves embedding U.S. experts in ministries. Did you do that?

GEHR: Not USAID, but the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) did. They had a big program and placed experts inside ministries and institutions. Our role was more about technical assistance, training and helping set up systems.

Q: And beyond health and energy?

GEHR: Private-sector development, agriculture, partnerships. A lot of our focus was on leveraging India's own resources. And of course, the tsunami response. On a personal note, we had actually been en route to southern Thailand for vacation when the tsunami struck. We were in the air as it hit. When we landed in Bangkok, chaos reigned, flights canceled. We later learned the resort we were headed to was completely destroyed. Had we arrived a day earlier, we might have been caught in it. Friends of ours from the embassy were in Thailand at the time and were injured. That close call brought the disaster home in a very personal way.

Q: You mentioned the creation of the State Department's newly created Foreign Assistance Office reforms. How did that affect your work in India?

GEHR: It was very disruptive. Around 2006, the Bush Administration created the "F Office" in the State Department—the Foreign Assistance Office. Officially, it was still under the USAID Administrator, who was dual-hatted, but the real intent was to fold AID into State without requiring legislative changes. All budget and planning responsibilities were shifted to that office. We were in the middle of drafting a five-year strategy, which was almost complete, when Washington announced that five-year plans were no longer required. Instead, they imposed a new framework with standardized strategic objectives—economic growth, environment, governance, health—and we had to slot our work into pre-set "intermediate results." It was very top-down, Washington-driven, with little communication with the field.

Then came word our budget would be slashed—from about $120 million to $30 million, only to be used for health activities. Everything else would be cut, on the argument that India didn't need foreign assistance. That forced us into planning a Reduction in Force (RIF), mostly affecting our excellent Indian staff. Morale collapsed, people started job-hunting, and many of our best moved to the World Bank, Asian Development Bank or other bilateral donors. And then, after months of this painful process, Congress restored the full budget. Suddenly, we were back where we started—same funding, same programs—but with fewer staff and a demoralized mission. It was an exhausting, frustrating period.

Q: Including layoffs of local employees?

GEHR: That was the plan, yes. We had maybe 30 direct hires and about 125 hundred FSNs. The RIF process was a complicated points system that determined who would be laid off based on years of service and other factors. It's very stressful. Fortunately, Congress reversed the cuts before implementation, but by then we had lost many of our best people to other organizations.

Q: Did the Iraq War play into this attempt to diminish AID?

GEHR: Not directly, I don't think. It was more Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's push for "transformational diplomacy." She wanted development to be a diplomatic tool, controlled by State Department officers. Training programs for them were rolled out in project management, for instance. The frustrating part was the lack of dialogue—it all just came down as a fait accompli.

Q: There was also the "Iraq Tax," where missions were pressured to release staff for Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Sudan. Did that affect you?

GEHR: Somewhat. These were called Critical Priority Countries (CPC), and everyone had to bid on them. The incentive was that service there gave you priority in onward assignments. The result was that we were sometimes pressured to accept bidders coming from CPCs who weren't always the best fit for India.

Another development was "Safe Haven" posts—families of officers sent to Afghanistan could stay at a regional post like India. So, we had families whose spouse was deployed but the kids stayed in New Delhi and went to school. That was just starting while I was there.

Q: Let's talk about the embassy. How were relations there?

GEHR: Our ambassador, David Mulford, was a banker and Bush family insider. At first, he saw AID programs as giveaways to NGOs. It wasn't until Washington threatened major budget cuts that he realized, "Wait, that's money for my embassy. Nobody discussed this with me." From then on, he became a staunch defender of our programs, lobbying Congress directly.

The embassy itself was full of high-caliber people. Robert Blake was DCM and later became an ambassador. Geoff Pyatt headed the Political Section and eventually became an assistant secretary. Delhi was a prestigious assignment, and the State officers were excellent for the most part.

Q: Were there other AID offices outside Delhi?

GEHR: No. The Embassy had consulates in Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata and Hyderabad, but all AID programming was run out of Delhi. We talked about opening a regional office in Mumbai, but it never happened while I was there.

Q: Did you travel much inside India?

GEHR: Yes. For example, our no-till agriculture program was in Gujarat, so I visited there. In Hyderabad, we supported construction of a LEED green certified "platinum standard" environmentally sustainable building, which became a model site for visitors. And in Dharamshala, we had a small Washington-funded program supporting Tibetan refugees, including those fleeing Chinese imprisonment. The assistance included housing allowances and vocational training for refugees arriving from Tibet. I traveled a couple of times to Dharamshala and even met the Dalai Lama. That was unforgettable.

Q: Really?

GEHR: Yes. One thing I remember was that when we went to meet with him on his compound, there were three of us from USAID. And accompanying us was the project manager, who was a Tibetan working in their Ministry of Health. When we arrived at his offices, they didn't want to let the project manager join us for the meeting because she wasn't on the guest list or something. We kept insisting that she was part of our delegation and needed to be with us for the meeting. Finally, they let her join us. When she met the Dalai Lama, she broke down in tears, kissing his hand while he blew on her head. It was deeply moving. The Dalai Lama was very warm, laughing a lot and joking with us. We were waiting in an outside reception area before being called into his office. Also waiting was a small Chinese delegation. When we met him, he asked, "Are the Chinese still out there waiting?" When we said yes, he chuckled, "Good. I wanted them to see me meeting with American officials."

Q: And your family—how did your daughter adjust?

GEHR: At first, it was tough. She was entering her sophomore year in high school, so it's always hard to break in as a newcomer. But the school was excellent. They offered Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses, and she thrived academically. The school also excelled at preparing students, and parents, for U.S. college applications, including college fairs, workshops, application timelines. She eventually chose the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit school she liked for its small classes and service-oriented philosophy. Because of her coursework in India, she got a year's worth of credits waived and graduated in three years, which saved us a lot of money.

Q: You mentioned the compound earlier. What was that like?

GEHR: The U.S. embassy compound in Delhi was built in the early 1960s, almost like a self-contained community. At that time, New Delhi lacked many services and appropriate housing for diplomats. The compound had housing, a commissary, bowling alley, pool, softball field, and the school across the street. We didn't live on the compound, but some embassy families rarely left it. I played softball, even joined a cricket team. And there were monkeys everywhere, sometimes raiding kids' lunches at school. To keep them away, the compound employed a larger monkey on a leash as a deterrent! It would patrol the grounds to scare off the others.

Q: Did you and your family engage much in Indian culture?

GEHR: Yes, we traveled widely, socialized with Indian colleagues, and attended cultural events. My wife found a circle of Latin American spouses and even started a small business with an Argentine friend. They bought clothing directly from Indian factories and shipped it to family in Brazil and Argentina to sell. That business took her to parts of Delhi most expats, and a lot of Indians, never saw.

And of course, the food—I loved it. You always weighed the risk of stomach issues against how good it looked. The embassy's health unit had a permanent stool-sample clinic for stomach problems. But still, the food was worth it.

Q: Did your wife work at the embassy?

GEHR: Not in India. After 9/11, security clearances became stricter. In Bolivia, she was told she'd have to renounce her Brazilian citizenship to work at the embassy, which she refused to do. That experience discouraged her from applying in India. Instead, she started up her own business venture.

Q: Throughout this turmoil in India, did you ever consider leaving AID for the private sector?

GEHR: No. It was tough at times, but I enjoyed the work and the life. I didn't want to start over with another job search. And I knew administrations come and go. The F Office still exists, but its authority has been rolled back significantly, and AID regained many of its authorities that it had lost. So no, I never thought seriously of leaving.

Q: With your daughter's education and your wife's business in India, what were you thinking of for a follow-on assignment?

GEHR: Well, there's a rule—a law, I think—that Foreign Service officers can only spend up to sixteen years overseas before they must return to the U.S. for a tour.

Q: Mm-hm.

GEHR: At USAID that requirement tended to fluctuate, depending on the administration and staffing needs. If they needed people overseas, they were flexible; if not, they enforced it. By the end of my India assignment, I would have reached sixteen years abroad. And at that time, they were enforcing it. So, I had to bid on U.S.-based jobs. I had just been promoted to FS-1, which meant I could apply for senior management jobs. I bid on positions in Washington, mostly in the Latin America Bureau and elsewhere. I would have preferred to stay overseas, but if I had to come back, I had to come back. When the assignment list came out, my name wasn't on anything. So, I called the HR officer and asked if I should start bidding on non-senior positions. He said, "Ted, I'm sorry, you didn't get anything you bid on. So we're sending you to Hawaii." (Laughs)

Q: Hawaii?

GEHR: That's what I said! They told me a new position had opened as Senior Development Advisor to the Pacific Command in Honolulu, and they were assigning me there. I couldn't believe it—working for USAID in Hawaii? (Laughs) Not exactly what I expected, but hard to complain.

Q: Not a bad consolation prize.

GEHR: Exactly. And the rule was you had to return to the U.S.—not necessarily Washington. So, Hawaii counted.

Q: I imagine your wife went with you.

GEHR: Yes. Our daughter was already in college and very annoyed we were posted to Hawaii after she'd left home. (Laughs) But it worked out—San Francisco, where she was, was just a five-hour flight away.

Q: Did you get any training for such a new role?

GEHR: Not much. These jobs were brand new. They were developed because of the very large role that the military played in reconstruction and "nation building" efforts after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq post 9/11. USAID had always had contractors with OFDA—the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance—working with the military on disaster response. But this was broader. USAID created a Civil-Military Office in Washington to send development advisors to the regional combatant commands. And the military sent people to AID, so it was a two-way exchange. There wasn't a playbook. It was up to us to figure out how to add value—how to leverage military resources for development, and how to steer them away from well-intentioned but harmful projects. Within AID there was debate: should we even be working this closely with the military? Some strongly supported it, others were wary.

For me, it was fascinating—like going to another country. My parents served a stint at the Pentagon during the Korean War, but other than that no one in my family served in the military, so the culture, language, even worldview were very different. I had to learn their acronyms, their mindset. Many military officers thought OFDA was "USAID," and the rest of us were just some NGO. (Laughs) It took a lot of education to explain how the pieces fit.

Q: This was PACOM, right?

GEHR: Yes—Pacific Command, now called INDOPACOM. Its area of responsibility stretched, as they used to say, "from Hollywood to Bollywood"—from the U.S. West Coast to the India-Pakistan border.

Q: Did they actually have disaster assistance responsibilities?

GEHR: Oh yes. Whenever there were typhoons, tsunamis, or earthquakes, they wanted to be part of the response. For them, disaster response was also about building relationships with foreign militaries and governments, and gaining access to parts of the country that they wouldn't have been able to get to otherwise. They could mobilize thousands of soldiers and resources quickly. The biggest operation while I was there was after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan that struck a nuclear reactor. PACOM played a big role as they already had bases in the country. They also had a constant presence in the Philippines and most other countries in Southeast Asia.

My job was to coordinate with USAID missions to make sure the military effort complemented development goals, including helping governments build systems, clarifying the military's "last resort" role in any humanitarian response, and ensuring schools or clinics built with military funds actually had teachers or electricity. Otherwise, you ended up with impressive buildings but no services.

Q: Where did most of these small development projects take place?

GEHR: Mainly Southeast Asia—Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, Philippines. Also, the Pacific Islands and even Mongolia. I traveled with PACOM staff to trainings, seminars, and country visits. Whenever possible, I linked them with USAID missions so both sides understood each other's capabilities, and they could explore potential areas of collaboration.

Q: Did you get involved in preserving historic sites?

GEHR: Not that I recall. That's usually the State Department's role.

Q: What about the Navy hospital ship visits?

GEHR: Yes, those were big events. The ships would dock, provide a wide variety of medical care, including vision and dental care, even surgeries. The problem was after the ship left, patients sometimes had complications and nowhere to go for follow-up. That caused bad publicity. We worked with USAID health offices to build follow-up systems, so patients weren't left stranded.

Q: Fascinating.

GEHR: Promoting better civil-military relations was a mixed experience. Some military officers didn't understand why AID was there—they saw us as "tree-huggers" and were wary of sharing information. Others, including senior officers, really got it and valued the partnership. I ended up working closely with the Special Operations Forces, who completely understood the value of development work. They even provided funding. But sometimes their motivation was intelligence-gathering—building relationships to find "the bad guys." That could be uncomfortable, and I often questioned how involved we should be.

Another frustration was rank. As an FS-1, my equivalent was a colonel in the Army or a captain in the Navy, was not high enough for certain meetings. For meetings at the higher leadership levels, expertise was less important than if you had stars on your shoulder. I'd sometimes be excluded from meetings simply because of my rank.

Q: Did governance or human rights issues ever come up?

GEHR: Not directly. Our work focused on disaster response or sector-specific governance, like strengthening community capacity to respond to emergencies. But disagreements arose—for example, during the war in Sri Lanka against the Tamils. The Sri Lankan military's actions raised serious human rights concerns. USAID distanced itself, while the military side leaned toward supporting the Sri Lankan government for security reasons.

Q: Did you work with State Department advisors as well?

GEHR: Yes. PACOM had a senior foreign policy advisor from State who served as a civilian deputy commander. There were also State advisors in each service branch or component. I collaborated with them a lot, especially on communications and public affairs. We worked well together.

Q: Good. Well, this seems like a natural place to break.

GEHR: Yes, I think so.

Q: Today is February 16, 2024, and we're resuming our interview with Ted Gehr. It looks like we're starting in 2011 in Pakistan. How did that come about?

GEHR: USAID, like the State Department, designates certain "critical post countries" (CPC) for prioritizing staffing. For USAID at the time they were Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and South Sudan. Officers had to include at least one of those on their bid list.

Q: Right.

GEHR: I'd been in Hawaii for three years, so I could just imagine the assignment panel thinking, "Yeah, he's going to one of the CPCs." (Laughs) I included one at the bottom of my list—and then I was assigned to Pakistan almost immediately.

Q: I understand. In my first assignment, I put Jamaica last, and that's where I went.

GEHR: Exactly. It wasn't a surprise. I figured I was due. And the timing worked out in one sense: our daughter was already in college. That made it easier to go on my own. What interested me was that in Pakistan USAID had recently created Deputy Mission Director positions based in provincial capitals, not just Islamabad. They wanted closer oversight of programs. There were posts in Lahore, Karachi, and Peshawar. I liked the idea of being closer to the field, away from the big embassy compound and hopefully the Washington bureaucracy. I bid on Lahore, the capital of Punjab, which people described as relatively open and livable at the time. Security seemed manageable—you could drive your own car—and Lahore was known as the cultural capital of Pakistan. It sounded appealing. But between the time I was assigned and the time I arrived, everything changed. U.S. special forces killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan without notifying the Pakistan government, which badly strained relations. Around the same time, a CIA contractor in Lahore shot and killed two Pakistanis in broad daylight who were allegedly trying to rob him. And then U.S. bombs accidentally struck on the Pakistani side of the Afghan border, killing Pakistani soldiers. Those three incidents combined to make relations very tense. By the time I arrived, security was tight, and movement was heavily restricted. It wasn't the assignment I thought I was getting, but you take what you get.

Q: Let me ask, hadn't there also been a major earthquake causing massive displacement?

GEHR: Yes. When I was previously posted in India, there was a devastating quake in Pakistan-administered Kashmir in 2005. USAID provided major assistance, and I spent a month in Islamabad helping with the response. But by 2011, assistance had ended. Instead, there were severe floods not long before I arrived—floods are almost annual, and sometimes catastrophic. USAID responded, but I wasn't directly involved in those efforts.

Q: Understood.

GEHR: So, when I got to Lahore, I expected hostility for being a U.S. official. Instead, what struck me was the warmth of ordinary Pakistanis. There's a strong cultural ethic of hospitality. People welcomed me, invited me into their homes, and made sure I was looked after. It surprised me.

I was based at the U.S. consulate. We were a small team—me, two other U.S. direct hires, and about 15 Pakistani staff. Our mandate was to oversee USAID activities in Punjab, the country's largest and most influential province. Punjab has long dominated Pakistan politically and militarily—many army officers come from there—while Sindh/Karachi is more of the business hub. Lahore itself reminded me of New Delhi, which is just around 260 miles away as the crow flies – similar architecture, pollution, and traffic. Being outside the Islamabad embassy compound was refreshing. I wasn't buried in Washington reporting and dealing with the embassy bureaucracy. I could meet more directly with partners and stakeholders, though security restrictions made field visits difficult.

USAID's Pakistan program was huge—almost a billion dollars a year at the time. A big share went to Punjab. Agriculture and agribusiness were priorities. One project I liked partnered with Nestlé to support small farmers in dairy production. We provided training, equipment, and goats; Nestlé guaranteed purchase of the milk. Women often managed livestock, so it empowered them too. We also trained local veterinarians who traveled by motorcycle to vaccinate animals and provide artificial insemination. One outreach anecdote: a communications partner produced a poster with the USAID logo, "From the American People." The photo showed a vet with his arm buried up a cow's backside during insemination. Underneath: "From the American People." I had to laugh.

We also had education programs and other initiatives, but coordination with Islamabad was difficult. I was only the second person in this provincial deputy role, and Islamabad staff often resented the consulate-based teams, worried we were encroaching on their authority. There were constant turf battles over who managed what. The one-year assignment cycle didn't help. It takes time to get up to speed, and everyone knows their next post assignment already, making it harder to focus on the Pakistan assignment. Local staff were excellent—very capable—but for Americans, a year wasn't enough to build continuity.

Security was oppressive. We lived in separate houses but moved in convoys with police escorts, sirens blaring. I thought it increased the security risk by drawing so much attention to us. When we met with contacts at restaurants, Pakistani intelligence would sit at the next table, watching. Our local staff were constantly harassed at home. If I hosted people, intelligence agents would stop and question them on the way out. Meanwhile, U.S. security staff insisted on advance searches with bomb-sniffing dogs before I could visit someone's home. I admired the Pakistanis who still worked with us despite the risks and indignities. Daily life could be absurd. If I wanted to stop at the supermarket, they insisted I take security. So, there I was, shopping with a policeman carrying a shotgun, following me down the aisles. (Laughs)

Q: Were you involved in health programs?

GEHR: Yes. Health was a big part of the portfolio—malaria, dengue, PEPFAR funding for HIV/AIDS, and especially polio eradication. Pakistan and Afghanistan were the last holdouts in eliminating polio at the time. But vaccination teams were targeted by terrorists, and rumors spread that vaccines were a plot to sterilize people. That made eradication incredibly hard.

Q: And the bin Laden raid complicated that, right?

GEHR: Absolutely. A doctor working under the guise of a vaccination campaign had gathered intelligence that helped locate bin Laden. Once that became public, it reinforced suspicions that health programs were a U.S. cover. It badly damaged trust.

Another challenge was the U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke's policy push to channel all assistance directly to local organizations. In theory, the idea was good, but in practice overwhelming. We had a billion-dollar program, and suddenly small NGOs that had managed maybe a million-dollar budget were getting $20 million grants. It was a recipe for failure.

One example was an effort to create a Pakistani Sesame Street. USAID selected a small family-run puppet troupe—talented, but with no capacity to handle a $10+ million grant. They bought state-of-the-art studio equipment and started producing shows. But auditors found irregularities, and before the group was even formally notified, the story hit the press. They were branded as corrupt. The organization collapsed; one of the brothers later died of a heart attack under the stress. It was heartbreaking—and preventable.

Politics also derailed projects. We had planned to provide neonatal incubators for a hospital, but after the bin Laden raid and other incidents, Punjab's chief minister announced he would no longer accept U.S. assistance. We had to shift to working only with the private sector and NGOs.

Still, there were bright spots. The Nestlé dairy project worked very well. We also tried to open U.S. markets for Pakistani mangos—delicious fruit, but subject to strict sanitary requirements. We worked with USDA's APHIS to get certifications and managed to send some samples. Another promising area was halal meat exports. Ironically, Brazil was a major supplier to the Middle East. It made sense for Pakistan to enter that market but setting up the necessary regulatory systems was complicated.

Q: You also served as acting consul general at times?

GEHR: Yes. It was a small consulate, and I was the senior USAID officer. When the consul general was away, I filled in. I mostly did public diplomacy: giving remarks at events, doing interviews. I enjoyed the change of pace.

Q: And security threats? Lockdowns? Evacuations?

GEHR: Bombs did go off in Lahore but not targeting Americans. We had shelter-in-place moments, but no major incidents during my tour—except on my last day. Violent protests were heading toward the consulate as I was preparing to leave. Security rushed us out, and I caught my flight that night. Not long after, the U.S. pulled Americans out of Lahore entirely, consolidating in Islamabad for quite a while.

At my residence, I had 24/7 police guards literally living in the back quarters, rotating shifts, even a watchtower in the yard. Our security posture varied with the Regional

Security Officer. One RSO was extremely restrictive; his successor believed a lower profile was safer and loosened the rules. Same environment, very different approaches.

Q: Did Washington engage you about your next assignment during this year?

GEHR: No—I already knew my next post before I even got to Pakistan. With a one-year tour, that's how it worked.

Q: Were families allowed to live nearby in safe locations, like Abu Dhabi or Qatar?

GEHR: Not at that time. The only family-friendly policy was allowing spouses to remain at their current post if the officer transferred to a CPC country. For example, in India some families stayed while spouses went to Afghanistan. But there was no "safe haven" option in a third country. My wife instead moved to Brazil, near her parents, while I was in Pakistan. We met during R&Rs—once in Brazil, once in Thailand.

Q: Did you experience PTSD afterward?

GEHR: In subtle ways, yes. At the time, you think you're fine, but my wife noticed I was "off" when I came back. There's stress on relationships—adjusting to normal life again. I wasn't depressed, but I wasn't quite right either. You're so conditioned to constant vigilance—cellphone always on, laptop always open—that it's hard to switch off. That takes a toll. The combination of being watched by Pakistani intelligence, constant harassment of our staff, and the ever-present terrorist threat—it wears on you. The impact isn't always obvious at the time, but looking back, it's clear.

Q: Well, then, let's go on then to the next assignment. It had been predetermined when they assigned you to Pakistan so how do you get there and you know, does your wife join you and so on?

GEHR: After Pakistan, I was assigned as Deputy Mission Director in Peru. I finished in Lahore, went on home leave, and then we headed to Lima for what was a four-year tour.

Q: Right.

GEHR: For me, after serving in the Dominican Republic and Bolivia, Peru felt familiar. It wasn't like moving to India or Pakistan, where everything was brand new. I knew what to expect, even the programs. Much of it was alternative development—working to reduce coca cultivation and promote licit crops—which was similar to my Bolivia experience.

So, we arrived in Lima. It's an interesting city—right on the ocean, with incredible food. We had an apartment overlooking the ocean. Traffic was awful, but otherwise, it's a very livable place. It never rains; you might get a little drizzle occasionally. Half the year is gray and overcast, half the year is clear skies. Some people found the long stretches without sun difficult, but it didn't bother me. I grew up in Oregon, so I was used to that. And it was easy to drive once you got outside the city to find sunshine.

When I arrived, there was no Mission Director in place. The previous one had left, and a retiree was covering temporarily. Debbie Kennedy had been assigned but hadn't arrived yet. She had a stellar reputation—this would have been her fourth Mission Director posting. Everyone spoke highly of her, and I was excited to work with her. I acted as Mission Director for a couple of months until she arrived. She came just as we were getting a new ambassador who had previously worked with her in El Salvador. He was thrilled that she was coming and eager to have her as part of his country team. But after just a month or so, she announced her retirement. It surprised everyone.

Q: Interesting.

GEHR: I was disappointed—I'd looked forward to working with her. The ambassador was more than disappointed; he was upset. Debbie recommended to the Latin America Bureau that I take over as Mission Director, and they agreed. It would have been my first Mission Director posting.

Q: Wow.

GEHR: The Bureau backed me, but the Ambassador refused to sign off. He basically felt that when he came to Peru, he was expecting Debbie Kennedy to lead the USAID Mission. She had been a Mission Director three times before. He needed someone with experience. And who was this Ted Gehr? He's never even been a Mission Director before. (Laughs) The Bureau pushed back, saying I had the experience and background to do the job.

But meanwhile, the ambassador made my life miserable. He questioned everything. One of our biggest programs was to assist the Peruvian government in implementing a decentralization law, part of a regional push across Latin America to empower subnational governments. In Peru it was going well, but he didn't like it and brought in a retired USAID Mission Director, John Sanbrailo, to review it. Sanbrailo had worked with him before in El Salvador. To his credit, Sanbrailo understood the situation. We briefed him on the activities, provided him with all the assessments and evaluations of the program, brought in partners, and even held a day-long conference with the ambassador and embassy staff. In the end, Sanbrailo said, "No, this program is on track. It's a good program."

Q: Okay. So, he gave you good marks.

GEHR: Yes, but the ambassador kept drilling me, even in public meetings. If I didn't have a detail at my fingertips, he'd imply I wasn't competent. Worse, he had the DCM calling Washington to see if there were "other candidates" for the Mission Director slot, which of course raised doubts about me. The Bureau continued to stand behind me, but he still refused to formally approve the appointment. Finally, they said, "Look, this fight could drag on. We'll continue to back you, but there's an opening in Nicaragua—we can also assign you there instead." So, after three years in Peru, I went to Managua.

It was frustrating, but we still accomplished a lot. Alternative development is always tough—it's like squeezing a balloon. Eradicate coca in one place, and it pops up somewhere else. But we made progress with cacao and coffee, focusing on high-quality production for premium markets. Peru began earning a reputation for its chocolate. We also had a strong environment program in the Amazon and decentralization work with regional governments. USAID staff traveled to the field to assess governance systems, and we provided direct funding once they met certain standards. Some of those Amazon regions had once been controlled entirely by narcotraffickers. In the 1990s, they used highways as airstrips to ship coca paste. By the time I was there, things had changed dramatically—local governance was stronger, infrastructure was in place, and people spoke of the difference USAID support had made.

Q: Yeah. This was during the Obama Administration's push for decentralization, globally as well as in Latin America. Were you satisfied it was sustainable?

GEHR: Yes. By then the project was already in its second five-year phase. Peru had dynamic governors and a strong legal framework for decentralization. Regional governments were organized and unified for the most part, capable of pushing policy changes together. It was sustainable. Years later, while I was in Brazil, I was at a conference in the Amazon that Peruvian governors were attending, and they described how they were carrying those reforms forward. Part of why it worked was the weakness of Peru's central government. Constant political crises and turnover paralyzed it. Presidents are easily voted out, prime ministers come and go, Congress is unstable. Regional governments had to step up, and they weren't challenged much by the center.

Q: Interesting. Was Peru a Millennium Challenge Corporation country during your time?

GEHR: No, not while I was there.

Q: Okay.

GEHR: One thing Peru was eager for was OECD membership. That required broad policy reforms, and we began helping them map out what was needed. But corruption remained a huge obstacle. I think every living former president is currently in jail on corruption charges. It's so common they had a special jail built just for former presidents. Corruption is pervasive, it makes progress difficult.

Q: Sure. And was your wife able to work while in Peru?

GEHR: Yes, she worked at the consulate as a consular assistant—taking in applicant information before interviews. She enjoyed it.

Q: Okay. All right, well, we still have a fair amount of time, or we could break here. What would you prefer?

GEHR: Nicaragua's next, right? Why don't we take a break?

Q: All right. Let me pause then.

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Q: So, today is March 15, the Ides of March 2024, and we're resuming our interview with Ted Gehr. Ted, we're in Nicaragua in 2015. Were there any aspects of how this job came about that you wanted to mention?

GEHR: I may have touched on it earlier when we talked about Peru, but basically, I left Peru after three years instead of the normal four. The ambassador there had issues with me and wouldn't give formal approval for me to move from Deputy Mission Director to Mission Director upon the retirement of the Director I was working for. The Latin America bureau said they could keep fighting for that, or I could transfer to Nicaragua where a mission director slot was open. We chose to transfer to Nicaragua.

Q: Okay. Did your family go with you?

GEHR: Yes. My wife came. Our daughter was already grown up and on her own by then.

Q: And when you arrived, what were your responsibilities?

GEHR: I was mission director. Nicaragua's mission wasn't big—about a $20 million budget, five U.S. direct hires, and maybe 30 Nicaraguan staff. Contracting, legal, and controller functions were handled out of the regional mission in El Salvador, but we also had local staff managing these functions in Managua working closely with the regional mission.

Given the poor relationship between the Daniel Ortega-led Sandinista government and the U.S., most of our work focused on democracy and governance: supporting civil society, human rights groups, business associations, and the media, and helping with election monitoring. We also had a youth program on the Caribbean coast, working with Afro-descendant and Indigenous populations that included early grade reading, vocational training, and job placement with companies. And we supported disaster risk reduction, especially around Nicaragua's many active volcanoes.

Q: What about earthquakes? Managua's 1972 earthquake was devastating, and parts were never rebuilt.

GEHR: That's true. Managua still has no real downtown area, the old center is mostly empty, with a ruined cathedral on the lakefront. Somoza and his cronies diverted reconstruction funds to develop land outside the core. During my time, there were tremors but no major quakes. The bigger recurring issues were floods, landslides, volcanic eruptions, and the legacy of Hurricane Mitch in the late 1990s.

Q: And this was a full tour?

GEHR: Yes—actually five years instead of the normal four. Since I'd left Peru a year early, they tacked that on.

Q: You mentioned disaster coordination. In Costa Rica, we had begun seismic monitoring. Did Nicaragua reach that point?

GEHR: Yes but focused on volcanoes. The U.S. Geological Survey worked with Nicaragua's disaster agency to track seismic activity, predict eruptions, and recommend evacuations. It was one of the few areas where we had constructive cooperation with the government. Later, even that space tightened, but initially it was smooth.

Q: Were there joint relief stockpiles like in Costa Rica?

GEHR: No, not in Nicaragua. But we did assist with a major forest fire on the Costa Rican border—the U.S. Forest Service came down to help.

Q: Did you send Nicaraguans to the U.S. for training?

GEHR: Yes, through the Geological Survey's programs—seminars, workshops, exchanges.

Q: Interesting. Was this cooperation relatively friction-free, despite daily anti-U.S. rhetoric?

GEHR: At first, yes. Disaster work seemed insulated from politics. Later, after the 2018 crisis, even that became harder.

Q: Let's shift to the Atlantic coast. What was happening there?

GEHR: It was like Costa Rica's Limón back when I was a Peace Corps Volunteer—Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities, isolated, with limited infrastructure. Until recently, access was by dirt road, river barge or plane. We worked mainly on vulnerable youth and education. One memorable project was a boarding school you could only reach by boat. Students from across the coast came to learn agriculture, woodworking, and other skills, then returned home to apply them. We also had strong partnerships with private sector employers such as fishing companies and car and motorcycle mechanics to ensure training led to real jobs.

Q: Did you touch environment or land protection?

GEHR: Not a dedicated environment program, but through our civil society strengthening programs we supported Indigenous groups defending their lands from encroachment, settlers, and illegal gold mining. There was growing violence on the northern Mosquito Coast. We helped them with advocacy, human rights, and visibility.

Q: How were relations with the embassy overall?

GEHR: Generally good. Because USAID worked closely with civil society, we had valuable contacts the ambassador relied on. AID had an unusually strong influence compared to some posts. Later, when protests erupted in 2018, we disagreed at times. We wanted to launch an OTI program to move quickly, but the ambassador worried about partner and staff safety. Understandable, but I felt we lost opportunities.

Q: Did you do any health programs?

GEHR: Only situationally. During the Zika outbreak we funded NGOs for public education campaigns. The main health portfolio had already closed.

Q: Exchanges?

GEHR: Not really—more technical assistance inside Nicaragua than exchanges abroad.

Q: Women's empowerment?

GEHR: Very much so. Women leaders were fearless—often more outspoken than men—and we supported their leadership and advocacy. I still remember one early meeting where women's groups ripped into me about USAID's bureaucracy and paperwork. They weren't shy.

Q: Did you do anti-trafficking work?

GEHR: Not directly. That was more under the embassy's political section and the annual TIP report.

Q: What about openings for democratic activity?

GEHR: From the start, Ortega officials told me flat-out they opposed our civil society work. They said we were interfering in internal politics. But they didn't stop us from supporting our civil society partners. We kept funding media, think tanks, human rights groups, and business associations. Unlike other donors, we didn't work through the government, so we had more room to maneuver.

Q: You mentioned 2018 as a watershed.

GEHR: Absolutely. Protests exploded after the government cut pensions and raised worker contributions. Pensioners protested, then students joined in. Many students depended on grandparents' support through the pensions to help pay tuition. The government unleashed police and pro-government thugs on motorcycles against the protesters. Videos of retirees being beaten went viral and outrage spread. Soon tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, were in the streets. On Mother's Day that year, about a month after the protests started, a massive rally filled Managua. For a moment, it looked like the end of the regime. The Catholic Church brokered a dialogue. It was unprecedented, with university students directly confronting Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, on live television. But it was a stalling tactic. The regime regrouped, deployed masked gunmen and snipers, and crushed the protests. Over 300 people were killed in just a few months.

Many of our partners went into hiding, fled to Costa Rica, or were jailed. The embassy ordered dependents out. My wife had to leave. Eventually all the other USAID U.S. direct hires left too—I was the only American remaining. The Nicaraguan staff stepped up in a big way, taking over office leadership roles and keeping programs running under immense stress. I was deeply impressed by them.

Q: By then, what was left of your programs?

GEHR: We shifted from building civil society to keeping partners alive—literally. We worked with groups like Freedom House to fund hotlines, safe houses, and quick evacuation support. OTI's flexibility was invaluable, though they pulled out after a few months, which I disagreed with. We supported independent media as they transitioned from print and TV to online and social media, while countering regime disinformation and fake accounts. We worked with business leaders, some of whom finally broke with Ortega once he started jailing their peers. But space for civil society steadily shrank. By 2019, our goal was survival—helping groups endure until conditions change.

Q: And your overall assessment at the end of your tour?

GEHR: Things kept getting worse, more repression, more closures, more exiles. We weren't building momentum; we were keeping the flame alive. But our Nicaraguan staff's courage and resilience were extraordinary.

Q: And how did your next assignment come about?

GEHR: I was scheduled for five years in Nicaragua, but after four years the Brazil mission director position opened up. With my wife being Brazilian, and after the stress of Nicaragua, I asked to be considered. The bureau supported it, and I was assigned to Brazil.

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Q: Today is April 1, April Fool's Day, 2024, and we're resuming our interview with Ted Gehr. Ted, what year are we in and where are you going next?

GEHR: We're in 2019, and I'm transferring from Nicaragua to Brazil.

Q: All right. Just one background question. Twenty-nineteen is already beginning to have some COVID concerns. It doesn't really explode until early 2020. Was that already on your radar?

GEHR: Not in 2019. I remember clearly—in Brazil, the first reports came in January or February of 2020. It was a traveler returning from Italy to São Paulo, the first publicly reported case.

Q: Right.

GEHR: And it was a big concern because it was right before Carnival.

Q: Few things more important than getting that right.

GEHR: Exactly. My wife and I were in Rio de Janeiro for Carnival. We even joined one of the samba schools that paraded, complete with costumes. But at that point, the gravity of COVID wasn't widely understood. People were aware, but no one was wearing masks yet—it was just starting to hit the news.

Q: Where were you based in Brazil?

GEHR: In Brasília, the capital.

Q: And your position?

GEHR: I was the mission director, although the title sometimes shifted. Because there had been pressure from Congress and some administrations to reduce the number of missions around the world, USAID would rebrand the smaller ones—calling the head a "country representative" or "senior development advisor" instead of "mission director." It was a way to avoid technically shutting a mission by basically just changing the name.

Q: But it's still surprising USAID was in Brazil. What were the key goals?

GEHR: For as long as I can remember, people questioned why we were in Brazil. Back in the 1960s and early '70s, during the Cold War, Brazil had one of the largest USAID programs in the world—around $400 million a year. After Castro took over Cuba, Washington feared communism spreading across Latin America. With uprisings in northeastern Brazil, President Kennedy's "Alliance for Progress" poured in resources, especially after the 1964 military coup. USAID built institutions are still operating today.

But in the Carter years, with foreign policy shifting to focus on human rights, assistance was cut off. It resumed in the 1980s, with major HIV/AIDS programming. That ended when the U.S. refused to allow funding to provide assistance to commercial sex workers. Brazil insisted those groups were critical for reducing transmission rates. Later, in the 2000s, missions like Brazil's were threatened with closure again. The counterargument was Brazil's strategic importance—like India: a huge, middle-income country still facing development challenges, where progress could "move the needle" globally. So, Brazil became a "strategic partner" mission, a sort of laboratory. Instead of traditional contracts and grants, the idea was to work with government and private sector partners on innovative approaches, with lessons for other countries. U.S. administrations, both Democrat and Republican, often zeroed out USAID's budget for Brazil. But key members and staff, especially Senator Patrick Leahy and his aide Tim Rieser, kept earmarking $12–15 million annually for Amazon biodiversity programs. By the time I arrived in 2019, conserving biodiversity in the Amazon was our central mandate.

Q: Preserving biodiversity is broad. Beyond deforestation, it includes mining and strip-mining. Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado documented miners working in near-slavery conditions. Was mining also part of your focus?

GEHR: Yes. Salgado's iconic 1980s photos showed men swarming like ants in massive gold pits in the Amazon. The Yanomami territory, along the Venezuelan border, was hit hard by illegal gold mining under the Bolsonaro administration. When I arrived, Jair Bolsonaro was president. Like Donald Trump, he was a populist who wanted to "develop" the Amazon—arguing it covers 60 percent of Brazil's land but only 8 percent of GDP. He slashed budgets for environmental enforcement, deregulated mining and land use, and tacitly encouraged illegal activity. Even the environment minister courted miners, sometimes bringing indigenous groups to testify in Brasilia that they wanted mining in their territories. For four years, enforcement agencies were gutted, and illegal mining surged.

Then Lula returned to the presidency. He created Brazil's first Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, led by an indigenous woman, and appointed another indigenous leader to head FUNAI, the agency for indigenous affairs. His government launched major military and health operations to remove 30,000 illegal miners from Yanomami lands—almost as many as the indigenous population itself. What they found was shocking: miners had taken over health posts and airstrips, seized medicines, set up makeshift towns, and used indigenous women for prostitution. They paid workers in liquor and guns, leaving communities malnourished and fields abandoned. Mercury from mining contaminated rivers and soil, devastating health, especially children's. The government cleared many miners, but they keep returning. Enforcement is difficult, the military is reluctant to get involved, and organized crime networks financially back the trade.

USAID couldn't work directly with the miners—it was too politically sensitive, seen as "supporting" illegal activity. Instead, we focused on sustainable alternatives for the 29 million Brazilians living in the Amazon—agriculture, ecotourism, value-added forest products. While some miners may have transitioned, most did not; the pull of quick profits in gold mining, like coca growing in the Andean countries, is too strong.

Q: Were you able to measure the extent of Amazon destruction?

GEHR: Yes. Satellite imagery today gives near real-time data on deforestation, fires, and even mining scars. NASA, Brazil's own agencies, NGOs, and private companies like

Planet provide detailed imagery, often free. The challenge isn't knowing what's happening, it's political will and resources to act. Under Bolsonaro, deforestation rose monthly, and when official data showed 20 percent increases, he fired the head of Brazil's space research institute for "lying." The science was clear, but politics undermined it.

Q: Aside from the Amazon work, were there other USAID priorities?

GEHR: Two main ones. First, Venezuelan migration. Since 2014 when Maduro took over the country after the death of Hugo Chavez, millions fled Venezuela, with about 300,000 settling in Brazil. They mostly entered through the poor border state of Roraima in the Amazon region. Brazil responded impressively. The military led "Operation Welcome," setting up reception centers at the border with UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM and a number of NGOs: migrants were vaccinated, registered, given legal options (asylum or residency), and housed in camps. An "interiorization program" then voluntarily resettled families across Brazil, pairing them with jobs through private sector partnerships. NGOs like Caritas mobilized local communities, providing food, showers, and laundry services. I saw Venezuelan communities thrive in cities like Rio de Janeiro. It was one of the best migrant programs I've ever seen.

Second, humanitarian assistance. When I arrived in 2019, fires in the Amazon blackened São Paulo skies. The Brazilians wanted U.S. "supertanker" planes to douse fires, but OFDA (USAID's disaster office) said no—they're too expensive and not appropriate for this situation. The issue escalated all the way to National Security Council leadership. They agreed to provide, not the supertanker plans, but fixed wing aircraft to transport firefighters in the Amazon. It all collapsed, however, over "Leahy vetting," which requires human-rights checks for any U.S. assistance going to the military. Since Brazilian military were going to be transported, the State Department lawyers said that they needed to be vetted. The Brazilian government said that that was unacceptable. Ultimately, USAID brought in U.S. Forest Service experts who had longstanding ties with Brazilian counterparts to work alongside the Brazilian firefighters and provide technical assistance. Their technical cooperation was highly valued.

Every year, floods and landslides also hit Brazil's coast. We would work with NGOs like ADRA and World Vision to provide rapid relief—cleaning kits, bedding, stoves—so families could return home quickly.

Q: And what about COVID?

GEHR: That was the hardest. Bolsonaro downplayed the virus, promoted chloroquine, and fired health ministers who resisted. Brazil ended up with some of the world's worst death tolls—over 700,000.

USAID didn't have a health program in Brazil, so we scrambled. Without any consultation or forewarning, Washington announced that they were sending 1,000 ventilators. Dealing with customs clearance and other regulatory restrictions was a nightmare, but our embassy's General Services Office, responsible for bringing in diplomats household effects and equipment for the embassy, were extremely helpful using their contacts in the customs agency and we were able to bring in all of the ventilators. The ventilators went into a São Paulo warehouse, and were distributed to state and local health warehouses, but to this day I don't know where they eventually ended up. Since they had never asked for them, the health officials didn't have a plan on distributing them.

We also used our "Partnership Platform for the Amazon" initiative—a network of some 40 companies and NGOs originally set up for sustainable development programs—to pivot into COVID response. Through co-funding with the private sector, we supported hygiene education, food kits for isolated communities, floating hospital boats, and handwashing campaigns. I visited one site where families received food baskets only after attending hygiene sessions and check-ups. It was small-scale but impactful.

The hardest moment was when hospitals in Manaus ran out of oxygen. We tried to mobilize U.S. assistance, but bureaucratic divisions between USAID's health and humanitarian bureaus in Washington stalled us. Unlike later in India, when oxygen was provided, we couldn't act fast enough. Many died needlessly. That was devastating.

Q: Let's shift to your public-private partnerships in the Amazon. How did those work?

GEHR: At the core was developing sustainable value chains. For example, multinational cosmetics companies source oils from Amazon nuts and seeds. With USAID support, local farmers' groups improved quality and processing of the seeds, while these companies guaranteed purchase contracts. That kind of anchor buyer was key. We also created acceleration or incubation programs, teaching small businesses how to develop governance, finance, and marketing plans so they could attract investors. The best graduated to "Shark Tank"-style events where impact investors pledged funding.

We also launched the Amazon Biodiversity Fund—USAID put in $15 million as anchor financing, which drew contributions from pension funds, foundations, and Brazil's Development Bank, reaching $60 million. It was risky and very unusual for USAID to put money into an investment fund, but the U.S. government's involvement gave it credibility to attract other investors. The challenge was ensuring investments truly conserved biodiversity. We explored innovative monitoring techniques, like soil DNA sampling to measure species diversity.

Q: Any memorable site visits?

GEHR: The pirarucu fish project stands out. Pirarucu is the world's largest scaled freshwater fish. It can get up to two meters and 200 kilos. It had been overfished to near extinction in the 1990s, then rebounded under a fishing ban. With scientific and traditional knowledge, communities developed sustainable quotas using a traditional technique that counted the fish as they surfaced to breathe every 20 minutes. It proved as accurate as the more time-consuming method of tagging them.

We brought chefs from major Brazilian cities and fish distributors up the Amazon to see the process. It took three days on a boat to reach the community. They met riverine communities, observed the fishing and management process by the communities, and even tested different recipes for preparing the fish. Later, they promoted it in restaurants with sushi chefs, barbecue houses, and fine dining menus featuring pirarucu. It became a sought-after dish and even began being exported. That trip showed how USAID's convening power could link communities, NGOs, the private sector, and government to promote sustainable fishing and markets.

Q: That's a strong model for development.

GEHR: Exactly. USAID's strength is to use its credibility and reputation to convene all the necessary stakeholders. Unlike some donors that were only providing assistance through government entities, we can work directly with communities and companies. That flexibility is a real asset.

Q: Before closing, anything else you want to highlight?

GEHR: There was another side to this partnership approach—this time involving mining companies rather than consumer-facing firms. Brazil, and particularly the Amazon, has long attracted some of the world's largest mining companies. Alcoa, for example, operates there because the region contains one of the largest aluminum deposits in the world. Other major players include Hydro, a Norwegian company, among others.

By Brazilian law, a percentage of mining royalties must be invested back into the surrounding communities. While well-intentioned, the way this was originally implemented often caused more problems than it solved. Mining companies would identify a local leader, hand over a lump sum and expect the funds to benefit the broader community. Too often, however, the money was mismanaged, used for personal gain, or spent without accountability, which created divisions and conflict rather than development.

To address this, we worked with the companies and local organizations to create community-based structures capable of managing these funds responsibly. This included training communities on governance, setting up representative bodies, and establishing transparent and democratic processes for deciding how to use the money. We also emphasized systems for monitoring and tracking expenditures. With these safeguards in place, mining companies could feel confident that their contributions were genuinely benefiting local communities and mitigating some of the environmental and social impacts of extraction.

Also, we collaborated closely with Indigenous communities in the Amazon. They made it clear that projects in their territories had to reflect their own development priorities, not outside agendas. One example was their decision to create guidebooks on free, prior and informed consent. They wanted to define, in their own words, the rules outsiders should follow before doing anything in or near Indigenous lands. We helped provide the support to get those guidebooks published, but the vision and content came from them.

They also sought exchanges with other Indigenous peoples facing similar challenges. Through a partnership we arranged with the U.S. Department of Interior, leaders from the Amazon met with representatives from seven U.S. tribes. It turned into a genuine peer-to-peer dialogue about land management, resisting illegal activities, and adapting to climate change. We helped make the connection, but what mattered was communities learning directly from one another.

The U.S. Forest Service partnership followed a similar path. While they offered technical assistance, it was the Indigenous and traditional communities who pushed to revive long-standing burning practices—methods that had managed the land for generations before being set aside. We supported those efforts, and over time they evolved into something new: the creation of the first Indigenous women fire brigades. That was a breakthrough, not only for fire management, but also for strengthening women's leadership in protecting their lands.

Finally, global health security. COVID made clear the need to prevent the next pandemic. USAID launched new "One Health" programs, integrating human, animal, and environmental health. Brazil was ideal for this: the Amazon is full of viruses that humans have never encountered, and deforestation increases exposure risks. We started developing a program to train indigenous and traditional communities as "first-alert" monitors. If they saw unusual animal die-offs or unexplained illnesses, they could notify labs. It was early days when I left, but I think it has enormous potential.

Q: When did you depart Brazil?

GEHR: July 2023, after four years.

Q: Did your wife work while you were there?

GEHR: No. She focused on family responsibilities—her aging parents in northeastern Brazil—and managed renovations on our apartment. That alone was a full-time job.

Q: Understood. Good place to break?

GEHR: Yes.

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Q: Okay. Today is April 29, 2024. We're resuming our interview with Ted Gehr. Ted, you're in Brazil, and you had some more programs you wanted to discuss.

GEHR: Yes. One I hadn't mentioned yet was our support for the 2022 presidential elections. That was fascinating because it echoed so much of the 2020 elections in the U.S. with so much disinformation and misinformation. During the campaign, President

Bolsonaro repeatedly claimed that if he lost, it would be due to fraud. He even gathered the diplomatic corps and gave a PowerPoint presentation allegedly "proving" that the electronic voting system was fraudulent and easy to hack.

We provided assistance on several fronts. First, we worked with the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, which manages elections. Brazil's system is entirely electronic—no paper trail. Voters simply punch in their candidates, and by 8 p.m. on election night results are final. It's remarkably fast, but of course, because there's no paper, critics say it's a "black box." The Tribunal has been using this system since the 1990s without any verified cases of fraud. They constantly test and defend it, opening the code to outsiders, inviting the military and others to try to break it. Still, to the average citizen, staring at lines of code doesn't provide much reassurance. So, they launched a public campaign to show that the system was secure.

We supported them through three organizations: IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems), NDI (National Democratic Institute), and IRI (International Republican Institute). IFES worked most closely with the Tribunal. Their technical team assessed the system, interviewed judges and IT staff, and produced a report. Their conclusion was that external manipulation would be virtually impossible. Theoretically, some internal collusion across many different offices could create risk, but it would be extremely difficult. Their main recommendation was to consider a paper receipt—not because it was technically necessary, but because it might reassure voters. The Tribunal disliked that suggestion; they were proud of being fully paperless and argued paper would actually increase fraud.

Meanwhile, NDI partnered with Brazilian civil society groups to expand domestic election monitoring. They trained volunteers across most states, used a standardized mobile app for reporting, and compiled real-time observations from polling sites. This gave the public another layer of reassurance. IRI, in turn, supported NGOs focused on tracking disinformation and misinformation. They monitored online content, issued reports, and flagged false claims as the election approached.

In the end, Lula won by a narrow margin. The speed of Brazil's results helped calm tensions—unlike the drawn-out U.S. counts. But doubts persisted with Bolsonaro supporters as he refused to concede defeat. On January 8, 2023, pro-Bolsonaro demonstrators stormed Congress, the presidential palace, and the Supreme Court, vandalizing offices.

Q: Since then, has violence or instability continued, or was that a one-off reaction from Bolsonaro supporters?

GEHR: It was more than a one-off, but not as violent as January 6 in the U.S. Protesters ransacked buildings and destroyed property. Disturbingly, many police just stood aside. The difference, though, is Brazil responded quickly. Authorities launched investigations, detained suspects, and began trials almost immediately.

The Supreme Court plays a much more proactive role in Brazil than in the U.S. The head of the Electoral Tribunal was also aggressive in shutting down disinformation—ordering websites and WhatsApp groups taken offline. That rapid response helped contain things, though it raises concerns too, since such concentrated judicial power could be abused.

Investigations still continue. Bolsonaro has had his passport confiscated while under investigation, and some allies have been jailed. Yet, just like in the U.S., many of his supporters still claim the election was rigged. Some insist the January 8 violence was staged by Workers' Party infiltrators. But authorities uncovered extensive evidence—documents, social media threads, coup scenarios—that show it was not simply a peaceful protest.

Q: Bolsonaro spent time in the U.S. right after the election, didn't he?

GEHR: Yes. He left immediately for Florida and skipped Lula's inauguration—breaking the tradition of passing the presidential sash. He was still in Florida during the January 8 riots. At first, he enjoyed official head-of-state status, but once Lula took office, he was just a tourist so he returned to Brazil after three months. It would have been politically tricky for the Biden administration if he had requested asylum in the U.S., but I suspect Washington quietly signaled that wasn't an option.

Q: And how did the U.S. handle Bolsonaro's challenges to the election?

GEHR: The State Department and White House did an excellent job. Throughout the election process, they consistently messaged that they trusted Brazil's electoral system and expected free and fair elections. High-level U.S. military officials visited to reinforce that point. That mattered because some Brazilian military leaders were reportedly weighing intervention, but the clear U.S. message—that a coup would be detrimental to bilateral relations—helped tip the balance. I think that strong, consistent U.S. stance had a real impact in keeping Brazil's democracy intact.

Q: All right. Now this was your last tour with USAID, if I'm not mistaken. It concluded in 2023?

GEHR: Yeah, that's right.

Q: As 2023 approached, what were you thinking? Were you leaning toward retirement, or was USAID talking to you about an extension?

GEHR: I'd already gotten some extensions. The Brazil tour was capped at four years, and they were clear—that was it. I felt it was a good place to retire. It was fitting, especially for my wife and our family. From the start of my career, 31 years earlier, we'd talked about someday coming back to Brazil to work. This was it. It would have been hard to top, and it was a great post. So I was ok with retiring.

A big factor was finances. I hired a financial advisor, something I'd never done before, to really crunch the numbers. Could we live off our savings if I didn't take another job? The planner put everything into a model: projected expenses, savings, investments. To my relief, the answer was yes. We were in better shape than I realized. Once I saw that, the decision was easy. I even thought, "I wish I'd known this earlier."

Q: Right. And now that you're retired, are you happy with that choice? Have you looked for post-USAID work?

GEHR: I officially retired at the end of September. We're living in northeastern Brazil, where my wife is from, and she's helping her aging parents. It's a beautiful place, with great beaches. I don't mind being here.

I haven't really gone out on the job market, but a couple of offers have come my way for short-term consulting in missions. The problem is the one-year "cooling-off" rule for senior officials. Even if a contractor hires me, I can't engage with USAID staff for that first year. So I had to turn down some opportunities. In the meantime, I've been mentoring incoming USAID junior officers. And I just lined up my first real consulting gig. I'm traveling tomorrow to Mississippi to role-play in military exercises for Marines preparing to deploy overseas. In these scenarios, there's a natural disaster or crisis in a fictitious country, and the Marines must work with the U.S. embassy. They don't always know what an embassy does, so retired Foreign Service and USAID officers play the ambassador, DCM, USAID director, and so on. I'll play the USAID director.
The exercise is in Mississippi. I've never spent much time in the Deep South—I'm from Oregon—so I'm looking forward to it. The schedule is one week with a group, then a week off, then another week with a different group. That middle week I'll explore the Mississippi Delta, eat some barbecue, and listen to blues. It should be fun, and it'll be my first paid consulting gig.

Q: Yes, a lot of State Department and USAID retirees do that kind of work.

GEHR: Exactly. It's role-playing, but it's valuable. There are many across the military who've never dealt with embassies or USAID. When I was with the Pacific Command in Hawaii, I used to do these types of exercises often. For me, working with the military is like living in another country—different culture, different language, different mindset. I've always found it fascinating.

Q: Lovely. Alright, so is this a good place to conclude? Because what I usually do at the end of an interview is ask: as you look back on your career, what advice would you give USAID? Its role has clearly changed. The world has changed since you entered. But what advice would you offer the organization in terms of efficiency or looking at development differently?

GEHR: You mentioned this earlier, so I jotted down some random notes—sort of lessons learned—based on the different posts I've had. As I thought it through, certain takeaways stood out.

One is about hiring and expectations. When I started, maybe it was the same for you, I thought, *I'll never leave this job.* They fly you to a foreign country, they give you housing—it felt like a dream job. But that attitude has shifted. Expectations are different now. I think before people join, it's important to ground them better in what USAID really is about.

For example, my first post was Egypt in the early 1990s. It was a massive $815 million program, but the whole thing was premised on Egypt signing the Camp David Accords with Israel. It was essentially a political reward for making peace. We did huge infrastructure projects—water, sanitation, power, telecom—and they had impact, but whenever we pushed on how money was being used, there was a limit. If the Egyptian Foreign Minister complained to the U.S. Ambassador about "these AID people," we were told to back off. For me, that was surprising. Not that the peace accord wasn't important; they were historic. But some people were disillusioned: *this isn't development, this is payoff.*

The reality is that USAID is part of the national security apparatus of the U.S. government. We're one of the three Ds—defense, diplomacy, development. We implement U.S. foreign policy; we're a tool in that toolbox. That can clash with the idealized vision of development that I think many come in with. USAID hires for technical expertise—health, environment, governance—but doesn't emphasize enough the diplomatic side of the job. We don't get taught how to navigate embassy politics, or how to respond when the political or economic sections tell you, "Work with these people because we want to develop a relationship with them." That can create friction. I think USAID needs to institutionalize that training, not just at the entry level, but throughout a career, because the relationship changes as you move up the chain of command.

Q: While you're on Egypt—just a quick follow-up. You mentioned the Camp David Accords. Were you there when the Oslo Accords began to take effect?

GEHR: They were signed when I was there but didn't really have any impact on our work that I recall.

Another lesson learned has to do with elections. We've always had credibility in supporting elections abroad. USAID was in the forefront of providing elections assistance. But it's harder now given what's happened in the U.S. with our elections. I hope we don't lose that credibility. It's a delicate line: promoting free and fair elections without interfering in another country's internal politics. It's a gray area, and we need to keep walking that line carefully.

Also, USAID sometimes underestimates the importance of its convening power. People tend to equate impact with money. In Egypt, yes, it was about big money. But in most places, it's not the size of the budget—it's that if USAID shows up or supports something, others take notice. Even with little or no funding, simply bringing people together can have a huge impact. We should value that as much as financial assistance.

Then there's the issue of counternarcotics. In Bolivia and Peru, so much policy revolved around coca eradication. The DEA focused on interdiction, State on eradication, and USAID on alternative development. But we need to be very careful. When you destroy people's livelihoods, you create enemies. And when the demand side is largely in the U.S., that hypocrisy is noticed. In Bolivia, it backfired—indigenous communities, not all tied to coca, were mobilized by leaders like Evo Morales who argued that elites and the U.S. were trying to take away their livelihood and their culture. Those grievances fueled political movements. We risk alienating key groups if we rely too much on a "hard power" approach without recognizing the broader context.

Q: Let me ask about the broader context. USAID doesn't have major programs now in places like Ecuador, but we see instability across the region. Haiti is a mess. Ecuador and Peru have political crises. Venezuela is practically a failed state. How do you see USAID's role in that environment?

GEHR: Development is hard. Haiti is the obvious example—billions of dollars invested over decades and look at it now. Ecuador has gangs and drug trafficking networks destabilizing society. You can only do so much from a development standpoint. Still, I think USAID must stay engaged, even in fragile contexts. If there's no internal political will, outside assistance won't transform a country. Ultimately, it's their country and their responsibility. What we can do is support local leaders while trying to avoid making things worse. Sometimes in Haiti, for example, our well-intentioned interventions—backing one president, then another—ended up aggravating instability. We need humility. Recognize that we can't fix everything, and sometimes restraint is wiser.

That said, working with civil society is still critical. In Nicaragua, we couldn't work with the government, but we worked with NGOs and community groups. Many were shut down by the Ortega-led Sandinista government. But if we could help them survive—even barely—you keep the possibility alive for when the window of opportunity cracks open a little bit. Someday Ortega will be gone, and there'll be a vacuum. If those groups are still standing, they'll be poised to step in. The same goes for Haiti and elsewhere. In these conflict states often it's not about immediate results but keeping organizations afloat until opportunities arise. If we stop supporting them, they disappear, and rebuilding later is far harder.

Q: Right, I totally agree. Alright, continue — you've talked about Egypt, and a bit about Latin America.

GEHR: Yeah, India. The big lesson I took from India was realizing that sometimes being aware of what you don't know is just as important as understanding what you do know when it comes to leadership and making decisions. You need to accept that some things you'll never fully understand. In India, I had to accept that there were social and cultural dynamics there that I wouldn't figure out in four years, maybe not in 400.

There was an American expat writer, Paul Bowles, who after traveling to India wrote, "I've seen a lot of people and places, and at least I have a somewhat more detailed and precise idea of my ignorance than I did in the beginning." That really resonated with me. You can be a technical expert, but these aren't your countries. You didn't grow up there. You don't live the culture, languages, caste systems, religions. India made that crystal clear. Sometimes you must accept that you won't have all the answers, nor even know what questions to ask for that matter. That was a big lesson.

Then came my time at PACOM in Hawaii — the Pacific Command. That was a big change from everything I'd done before. I'd never really worked with the military except peripherally in natural disasters. Suddenly, I was a senior development advisor. I had no budget, no projects to run — just a seat at the table. My job was to persuade military leaders to think about development as part of national security. It taught me how to influence without formal authority. How do you lead and have others follow you when you have no money, no formal power — just ideas? It's a real skill, and it goes back to convening power: showing people you can help them succeed even if you don't control resources.

Q: Can you give an example of that?

GEHR: Sure. When I arrived, it was a brand-new position. Washington assumed I'd take direction from PACOM; PACOM assumed I'd take direction from Washington. In reality, I was pretty much on my own. I had to find niches where I could add value. Humanitarian assistance was one — disaster response is USAID's lane, so there I had some credibility. Another was with civil affairs units. Their job was to go into communities, spend small amounts of funding on things like building schools, and gain goodwill. But often they'd come back a year later and find the school abandoned or being used as a goat shed. That's where I could add value: showing them how to think beyond construction — about teachers, electricity, sustainability. I built relationships, like with the officer managing the Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) funds. Eventually, he wouldn't approve projects unless USAID had looked them over. What started informally became institutionalized: embassies now require AID concurrence before OHDACA projects go forward. That influence was built not on authority, but on demonstrating usefulness.

Then Pakistan. Today there's a big push for localization at USAID — working more directly with local organizations. I support that, and we've always endorsed it, but in Pakistan I saw localization on steroids. Around 2011–2012 the budget was massive — about a billion dollars a year — tied to Pakistan's cooperation on the war in Afghanistan and counterterrorism. Richard Holbrooke was the Afghanistan–Pakistan "czar," and he insisted most funds go directly to local organizations, not the usual Washington contractors. In theory it made sense. In practice, groups that had previously managed a couple million dollars or less were suddenly handed $20, $50, even $100 million contracts and grants. They simply didn't have the capacity to absorb that much money. One example I mentioned earlier was the Sesame Street project. A small family-run puppet troupe suddenly received tens of millions to set up a studio and produce a

Pakistani Sesame Street. Auditors later found irregularities. The organization's reputation was destroyed, and USAID's took a hit too. It was sad — and predictable. So, while localization is the right direction, Pakistan taught me the risks of overdoing it. You can't force funding on groups before they have the systems and experience to manage it responsibly.

In Peru, I had real friction with the ambassador. Part of it was that I was new — I'd never been a Mission Director before. The person originally slated for the job, someone with deep experience, retired unexpectedly. I think the ambassador resented that change. But part of the problem was me. I didn't do a good enough job convincing him of our role and showing that USAID knew what it was doing; that I knew what I was doing. Because I could sense his hostility, I backed off. I avoided confronting him, thinking that minimizing contact would be safer. That was the wrong approach. The key lesson I took from Peru is how critical the relationship with the embassy front office really is. Even if it feels like time taken away from managing your team and programs, you *must* engage the ambassador and the DCM. You have to explain what you're doing, show how it fits into the embassy's overall strategy, and get their buy-in. It's tempting to put up a firewall to protect your programs from interference, and yes, sometimes ambassadors meddle, but the relationship is too important to neglect. I didn't invest enough in that, and I paid the price.

Q: But if you're out in the field and having trouble with the front office, can't Washington step in? Can't high-level USAID officials tell the ambassador, "This person has our full confidence. If you have substantive program concerns, fine, but don't undercut them personally"?

GEHR: Actually, they did exactly what you just described. I had full backing from the Latin America Bureau. What happened was the DCM started calling around, looking for someone else to take my place. When the LAC Deputy Assistant Administrator found out, she called me and said, *"What's going on down there?"* I explained the situation, and Washington stepped in. They contacted the ambassador directly and said, *"Yes, this is his first Mission Director post, but we have total confidence in him. He's been with us for nearly 20 years, and he's the right person for the job. We're not replacing him."* Unfortunately, it didn't resolve the issue. Ambassadors must formally sign off on Mission Director assignments, and he simply refused. Washington told me: *"If you want to stay, we'll fight for you and keep you on as Acting Director. But your reputation might take a hit if people hear that the ambassador's shopping around for a replacement."* They gave me a choice — stay and fight it out or take another Mission Director position in a different country where the relationship would be healthier. In the end, I decided to move on. Washington was fully supportive, but the situation in-country wasn't going to get any better.

Q: Sometimes relationships with an embassy front office just become toxic, and there's nothing you can do. Was your ambassador a career diplomat or a political appointee?

GEHR: Career.

Q: That's surprising.

GEHR: Yeah. It was difficult.

Q: Because usually a career ambassador will make an effort, but, okay, yeah.

GEHR: This ambassador had worked in countries with USAID programs. Part of the problem was that he expected to work with someone he already knew — the person originally slated for the job, who had been a Mission Director three or four times before. She was a star, and he was excited to have her. When she retired unexpectedly and I showed up instead, I think his reaction was basically, *"What the hell?"* I don't blame him for being disappointed, but I do think most ambassadors would have made the best of it and at least given me a chance. That relationship is so critical — if it's not there, it can really complicate the job.

Another big lesson for me came in Nicaragua, where I saw just how critical our Foreign Service Nationals — our FSNs, our local staff — are. I always understood their importance, but in Nicaragua it was undeniable. Under the Ortega regime, protests were met with brutal repression; more than 300 people were killed in just a few months. Our FSNs were under constant threat, accused of working for the CIA, putting their families in danger. All the Americans had left post, and our local staff rose to the occasion. They were stressed, they were worried about their families, but they kept the Mission running and did an extraordinary job. It gave me tremendous respect for them.
Most FSNs are incredibly capable and dedicated, often more than we appreciate, because Americans arrive with their titles and official roles, and many times FSNs end up pushed into the background. But in crises, they prove they can step up and lead. I think USAID has made real progress in empowering FSNs, but we need to do even more.

In Brazil, I also saw how powerful it is to work with a diverse range of partners. Back in Egypt 30 years ago, we funneled most funding through the government and big contractors. In Brazil, by contrast, we were working with not only the government, but also private sector firms, institutional investors, local NGOs, and community leaders — a much broader array of stakeholders. Our job became piecing those different stakeholders together, finding common ground, and building partnerships.

It really showed me how many different types of organizations and actors can play meaningful roles — sometimes ones you wouldn't think of at first. Too often, USAID gravitates to the same few organizations, usually those with English-speaking leaders who know how to handle U.S. grants. That's fine, but it leaves out a huge pool of capable partners. Many don't know who USAID is, or how to engage, but with the right support they can contribute a lot. USAID is trying to address this — streamlining procurement, opening space for new partners — and I think that's critical for the future.

Q: In this regard, in Brazil your effort to bring in other capable local organizations — is that part of localization?

GEHR: Absolutely. It's localization, but not in the purest sense that some talk about — handing out dozens of tiny grants to small groups directly. That just isn't realistic from a management perspective. In Brazil, for example, there were 14 of us at USAID covering the entire Amazon — an area the size of over half the continental United States. We couldn't possibly manage hundreds of direct grants ourselves. Instead, we worked through intermediaries — capable, mostly Brazilian, organizations that could manage sub-grants and help build the capacity of smaller groups. That way, we were still channeling resources to local actors, but in a sustainable, manageable way. It's localization, but it has to be structured so that missions can realistically oversee it.

Q: Is there a brief example that sticks out — a success story of bringing in organizations USAID might not have worked with in the past?

GEHR: One of the most interesting was with institutional investors — investment management firms handling pension funds and other capital. At first, it felt like a completely foreign world. These guys lived in spreadsheets, structuring deals, calculating returns. Their focus was purely financial. But when we connected them with conservation groups and development organizations — the ones insisting that investments also deliver biodiversity benefits, or work with local communities — suddenly it clicked. The investors brought financial expertise and scale; the NGOs brought legitimacy and development know-how. It was like learning another language, but it worked. I never thought I'd be working together with investment firms on conservation, but that collaboration turned out to be really powerful.

Q: Sorry — let me go back to that skill you mentioned: bringing together all the different players — local organizations, conservation groups, financial companies, maybe even venture capitalists — and structuring deals with loan guarantees or other tools. That's not something I imagine USAID was doing much of at first. Is it now expanding? It sounds a bit like rainmaking.

GEHR: At the time, it was relatively new, but not entirely out of the blue. USAID has always liked market-based approaches — microenterprise, SME development, that kind of thing. This was an evolution of that mindset. We worked closely with experts in Washington and with lawyers to figure out what was possible, what was legal. What really changed was the emphasis on scale. The Agency was increasingly asking: how do we move beyond small projects that help a single community, to approaches that can really shift systems and be transformative? To get there, you have to take risks. And I give USAID credit — we were allowed to try new things, even if some failed, as long as we had thought them through and gotten buy-in. So, yes, it was new, but it built on a long tradition of experimenting with market-based solutions.

Q: And in terms of Congress — do they have the patience for that kind of approach?

GEHR: They watch it closely. In the biodiversity and impact-investment work in Brazil, for example, we had to show clearly how every dollar contributed to conservation outcomes. As long as we could make that case, there wasn't much pushback. Of course, the level of scrutiny varies. In Central America, with migration issues, Congress was all over every program — because it was front-page news. With biodiversity, fewer members were engaged. Still, we made sure to cover our bases: supporting traditional communities, engaging groups that had ties to congressional staff, and demonstrating results. That way, even if biodiversity wasn't at the top of the political agenda, we had allies and evidence ready.

Q: So the exogenous factors — issues that may have little to do with development directly but can create major problems, like migration.

GEHR: Exactly. Migration is a perfect example. In Nicaragua, when I went to the Hill with colleagues from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, they were hammered on migration. It didn't matter how good the programs were — the message from Congress was, *"It's not working. Migrants keep coming."* Nicaragua was a bit of an outlier at the time, because most migration was to Costa Rica, not the U.S. But it showed how political drivers outside the development sphere could dominate the conversation. If migration is the issue of the day, that's what Congress cares about — not biodiversity, not governance, not health systems. Those broader goals get drowned out.

Q: It's interesting. Just a quick word about Nicaragua and migration. I worked in Costa Rica from '86 to '88 at the height of the Contra war, and Nicaraguans were fleeing into Costa Rica by the tens of thousands. Costa Rica was genuinely worried—this was a nation of 3.5 or 4 million people suddenly taking in 150,000 Nicaraguans. What do we do with them? Well, it turned out they absorbed them pretty well. It took time, but they integrated. When I went back 20 years later, Nicaraguans weren't at the top of society, but they were part of it.

GEHR: Yeah, I agree. I think now Costa Rica is kind of reaching its saturation point, and you see the usual dynamics—crime gets blamed on Nicaraguans, they become scapegoats. But you're right, they're everywhere in Costa Rica. Go to a restaurant and most of the waiters, servers, or hotel staff are Nicaraguans. They fill that employment niche. It's interesting.

Q: Sorry to interrupt, but it just struck me—the whole immigration question, and the fact that Nicaraguans are finding other solutions.

GEHR: Yeah, exactly. And that brings me to my final point: the need for humility. We don't have all the answers. Sometimes we make things worse before we make them better. And we must recognize the influence the U.S. carries around the world. People don't always realize that a single decision—a funding choice, supporting one group but not another—can have huge ripple effects. It's a big responsibility. That influence can be positive, but sometimes in our desire to do good, we bulldoze ahead without thinking through all the consequences. We need to be more conscious of that, and humbler about the limits of what we can achieve.

Q: That makes sense. Let me close with one last question. For people thinking of getting into international development as a profession, what advice would you give? Should they try for USAID, work with an NGO, or something else?

GEHR: First, people need to understand what USAID really does. You're not going to spend all your time in the field "doing development." You're mostly funding others, strategizing, monitoring projects, overseeing implementing partners, writing reports, answering to Washington and the ambassador. And you'll sometimes have to follow policies you don't personally agree with. So, if someone wants to be on the ground, getting their hands dirty, USAID probably isn't the right fit. But if you're interested in broader policy issues and shaping the direction of programs, it can be a great place. USAID has reach and resources that an NGO never will. You can have an impact at scale. On the flip side, working for an NGO has its own challenges, always scrambling for money, constantly writing proposals. So, there are tradeoffs either way.

Q: What about Corporate Social Responsibility? Is that an avenue people should consider?

GEHR: Absolutely. It's a growing field. Some companies just want the PR— "look, we built a school." But others are deeply engaged because their bottom line depends on it. In Brazil, cosmetic companies like Natura invest heavily in Amazon communities. They need those natural inputs for their products, so they work directly with local people to sustain supply chains. And if the Amazon is completely deforested, they can't have a profitable business. It's self-interest, but it also supports livelihoods—and because it's tied to their business, it's more sustainable than a five-year donor project that ends when funding runs out.

And then you've got the giant foundations—Gates, Buffet, Bezos. Some of them are bigger than USAID in certain sectors, especially health. They operate like development agencies but with a business mindset and massive resources. Increasingly, USAID partners with them. And now you see things like voluntary carbon markets, where companies want to offset their carbon emissions by investing in carbon credits. That's another area where private-sector money is shaping development.

Q: Well, I've run out of questions. Unless you have any final thoughts?

GEHR: No, I think that covers it. Nothing else comes to mind.

Q: Great. Then I'll end the interview here. On behalf of ADST, thank you for doing this. We'll talk about the next steps offline.

End of interview