

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

WILLIAM HARBIN

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INTERVIEW

[Note: William Harbin died October 18, 2006 before reviewing this transcript.]

Q: I am in the company of Bill Harbin, a long-time labor attaché, and we're going to record his thoughts for the Labor Diplomacy Oral History Project. Bill, can we begin with your background, where you came from, and where you were raised?

HARBIN: It is always difficult, I think, for a Foreign Service Officer to say where he came from and where his home is but I was born in Youngstown, Ohio. I grew up there until I was 15 years old, then my family moved to California. I was educated at UCLA

and attended the Trade Union Program at Harvard University. My grandfather was from Wales, and he had been a labor organizer for Samuel Gompers. He actually knew Samuel Gompers. He was working in the iron workers strike early in this century and, for his pains, he was black balled. He was never able to work in his profession again when the strike failed. As a result of that, my own father had to quit school in the eighth grade and go to work to support the family. Of course, he was never able to go beyond the eighth grade himself for that reason, so there was a labor element in my early childhood that affected our lives. My mother was a college graduate, so it was an interesting marriage.

Q: Did your father become anti-labor as a result of his experience?

HARBIN: He became a businessman. He did have his own business, and I would say that the family, maybe as a result of our grandfather's experience, was not pro labor because we had suffered, in effect, from participation in the labor movement. That was my early background as far as labor is concerned. I really didn't personally have much to do with the labor movement until getting into the Foreign Service and being assigned abroad.

Q: What was your major at UCLA?

HARBIN: It was American History.

Q: Did you go directly into the Foreign Service after graduating?

HARBIN: I was in the army in Korea in the 7th Infantry Division during the Korean War. I was there for a year and, then, I think that re-stimulated my interest in international affairs because it was the first time I was overseas.

Q: Was this before you completed your degree at UCLA?

HARBIN: No. It was after I completed my degree.

Q: So you went in as an officer then?

HARBIN: No, I was a buck private. I hoped, by being in there for two years, I would get a chance to see Europe. Unfortunately, I wound up in Korea the whole time I was in the army.

Q: What year were you in the army?

HARBIN: It was the early 1950s, either 1953 or 1955.

Q: What did you do after 1955?

HARBIN: After 1955, I was a high school teacher in Los Angeles both before and after I was drafted. Then I took the Foreign Service exam, and I entered the Foreign Service at the beginning of 1957.

Q: Were you an American History teacher?

HARBIN: I taught history and English at a junior high school in Los Angeles.

Q: Then in 1957, you joined the Foreign Service?

HARBIN: That's right. The way I got into the Foreign Service was not particularly – I'm not sure of the proper word. What really happened was this: when I went to UCLA I had been a lifeguard in Santa Monica every summer and, when I finished at UCLA in 1956, I discovered that I could take the Foreign Service exam in June. You didn't get the results until September, so that gave me one more summer on the beach.

Q: That sounds pretty good, actually.

HARBIN: I was extremely relaxed when I took the Foreign Service exam in June, and that probably helped me. I know a lot of the fellows from UCLA who took it with me were the kind who pointed their whole life toward the passing of the Foreign Service exam. That wasn't my particular interest at all when I took it, so I had no pressure on me while I was taking it. Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on your point of view, I passed. I was lucky, I think, in that when I took the oral exam in the fall, the secretary of the panel that had to grade the exam had just returned from Korea herself, and I had been in the army in Korea. We immediately struck up a conversation. She relaxed me very thoroughly before I went in to face the panel, which was head by a chairman named Irv Failes, which should have scared anybody. Again, others would have been intimidated but, since I wasn't all that anxious, I passed.

Q: Then you joined the Foreign Service?

HARBIN: Yes. I was in the only Foreign Service class that produced a secretary of state, Lawrence Eagleburger. He was my classmate, and we came in together. Curiously, when we had an election for class officers, Eagleburger was not elected class president.

Q: Did he run?

HARBIN: I don't think anybody ran. A consensus developed, and we voted. Phil Dupree was elected president of the class. He then became ambassador and later assistant secretary for management, or something like that. Eagleburger was not. In fact, I think in our mock events that we did at Front Royal, I played secretary of state and Eagleburger played something else. He obviously had better connections than I did since his mother had been the first chairman of Melvin Laird's election campaign in Wisconsin when he ran for Congress. That explains a lot about Larry Eagleburger.

Q: You say some connections there.

HARBIN: It helped.

Q: It does help. Where was your first assignment?

HARBIN: My first assignment was in Dacca, then East Pakistan, and now Bangladesh. I went there as an administrative officer, a general services officer. I deliberately did what everybody else advised me not to do. I tried to work in all functions overseas, and I did in fact: admin, counselor, economic, commercial, and political as well as labor. I had regular assignments overseas in all of those functions, and I also served in every geographic region of the world except for Africa.

Q: That is amazing.

HARBIN: I deliberately did this against the advice of all career counselors. I did it because, first of all, I thought I would have a more interesting career. Second, because I thought, beginning in admin as I did, I wanted to know basically how all the Foreign Service is administered. I thought, as a junior officer, I would never have an important position in a substantive area, so I wanted to learn administration first. I did that in Dacca. In fact, I found out after a while that administration was the only substance they had at the post.

Q: What were the main challenges at Dacca at that time?

HARBIN: There were lots of challenges. It was a 25 percent hardship post. We were setting up the post. In fact, when I arrived, we were in a hotel. Not only were we living in a hotel but we also had our offices in the hotel. My first job as general services officer was to move us from the hotel into a regular office building that was newly constructed. One of the greatest challenges, certainly, was that the State Department was the tail wagging the dog. AID was by far the largest organization in Dacca at the time. We had a shared administrative staff. I was responsible for keeping all of the AID people happy in administration and in the administrative field. They were very conscious of their administrative rights and privileges and wanted their life to be just like it was back in McLean, Virginia, or Chevy Chase, Maryland. That was a real challenge.

Q: I can imagine.

HARBIN: I later compared notes with our general services officer in Paris, who I happened to meet a couple of years later, and I discovered that I had more resources and more people to take care of than he did, in terms of providing them housing and providing them transportation.

Q: Did you get into the political side of things there or labor in any way?

HARBIN: No. It was labor in a sense as I was the immediate American supervisor of almost 300 employees.

Q: Three hundred employees! That's an army of people.

HARBIN: I was their immediate supervisor, so I was really the boss of a lot of people as a very junior officer. It was a challenge because we provided guards for every residence, we provided gardeners for every resident, and we, of course, guarded all the government facilities. We had a complete maintenance area. We repaired and did anything that needed to be done at the house. I was on 24-hour call because things were happening all the time in that tropical climate where there was not much experience in maintaining American equipment.

Q: Air conditioners broke down, automobiles needed new tires or fuel pumps or something. You had to fly them in from somewhere.

HARBIN: It was very difficult finding them and keeping everybody happy. My boss had been a general services officer himself in Hong Kong before he came to Dacca. He was a wonderful guy. _____ Macko was his name. He was one of the few Foreign Service Officers who never went to college. He advised me, "You'll never be a good GSO until you have flowers on the table and food in the refrigerator when they arrive at post." We actually achieved that.

Q: That's amazing.

HARBIN: We had a housekeeper there waiting to answer all of their questions, we had servants on boards, we had the house cleaned, we had food in the refrigerator, and we had the beds made. It was like moving directly into a hotel or home so that they could immediately start to work instead of going through the usual routine that we find in the Foreign Service when you go into temporary quarters before you go into your permanent quarters. These people were all assigned permanent quarters before they arrived.

Q: They got furnished permanent quarters?

HARBIN: They got everything including government furniture.

Q: What years were you in Dacca, Bill?

HARBIN: I was there from 1957 to 1959, two years. We accomplished a lot, I think, in those two years. When we got there, my boss and I together discovered that there was corruption in the administrative area, and we were sent there to clean it up.

Q: What kind of corruption did you find? Kickbacks? Contracts?

HARBIN: There was a lot of padding of bills. The local employees, the FSNs, had really taken it over. It was too big for my predecessor, and he wasn't keeping track. There was a lot of tension between AID people and—he was AID it so happened—the State Department people. We had to resolve that. The State Department policy was to make shared administration that would work, so we had to keep AID people happy. They were more difficult. I guess I shouldn't use the word "difficult," but they were more demanding than

the State people and USIA people because they had signed a contract. Often AID was not a career. These were people who had signed a contract saying what they would be given while they were there on their assignment. In fact, a lot of them were contract employees from Texas A&M University. They had never gone out of the States before, and they had no idea about living abroad. They were supposed to get the same kind of facilities and quarters that they had in the United States. That was a real challenge providing it.

We had an even more difficult problem because they were assigned technically to Dacca, the capital, but a lot of their projects were up country. My job as GSO was to go out into the boondocks and locate suitable housing for them up country. We had to provide air conditioning, generators, and everything they needed so they could live out at their project. I had demonstrated that we could do that and, at the same time, they didn't want to do that because, first of all, they had been assigned to the capital city, Dacca. That's what their orders said and, second, they got per diem by going up country. They got extra pay every time they went from Dacca to their up country project, and they would lose that if I demonstrated that they could live at their project. I did demonstrate in every case that I could do it. Throughout East Pakistan I found housing, and I provided the furniture and air conditioner, and I made local arrangements. A few of them were really dedicated people who wanted to do their jobs, and they accepted that and did move out into the countryside and do their work. Others resisted. So, it was a challenge.

Q: I can imagine. Was this when AID was still called ICA (International Cooperation Administration) and before they had the career service that they do now?

HARBIN: I think so. They had almost no career people there, and they vastly overpaid the Foreign Service Nationals who worked for them. I recall the AID director's chauffeur was making more money than the prime minister of Pakistan. It was very embarrassing to the U.S. government.

Q: There was a lack of proportionality there.

HARBIN: There were always a lot of health problems. A lot of the people were single and on their first assignment. You could not even go to a restaurant. There was no restaurant. You couldn't go out anywhere at night. There was no place to go. There was one movie, I think, where only men were allowed. It was a local movie house and showed pretty old movies. No female members of the American staff could go there. We had to think up things to do to entertain ourselves. It resulted in a pretty close knit community. It was a real challenge to find things to do to have fun and to give you some release from the terrible climate. It was extremely hot, of course, and in the monsoon period there was lots of flooding and that kind of thing.

Q: Did you have problems with illness there, like dysentery?

HARBIN: We had lots of problems with illness. I almost died because I landed in a hospital. Pakistan was divided at the time. I had gone into the hospital, and the doctor gave me some antibiotic. There were so few local doctors that he was called back to treat

somebody in West Pakistan. The nurses in the hospital kept treating me with the antibiotic and, by the time the doctor got back to East Pakistan, I was so sick that I was almost dead. All I could recognize was that I had an overdose of the antibiotics. Finally, when the doctor got back, he got me off that, and I did recover. Cholera was endemic and a very serious illness in East Pakistan. It was a very unhealthful post.

Q: But you survived to go on to your second assignment?

HARBIN: Yes. My second assignment was Lyon, France. Before leaving Washington, I had been given French language training before I was sent to Pakistan, which didn't prove to be particularly useful in Dacca. Of course, it was quite useful in Lyon. I was the vice counsel in a two-man consulate in the center of France.

Q: Was that a consular assignment, then?

HARBIN: Yes. First, I'd been an admin officer and, then, I was a consular officer in Lyon.

Q: That must have been like night and day.

HARBIN: It was a good indication of the challenges that we all face in the Foreign Service because of new faces, a new language, a new culture, new people, and new geography. Everything is new. It is like beginning a new life. In fact, I think in the Foreign Service that the greatest privilege is that you have a chance to lead nine lives instead of just one. The life in Dacca and the life in Lyon were unrelated.

Q: It's like a rebirth almost or a new culture.

HARBIN: Right. You have to be very adaptable, obviously, to do that. I think that's where a lot of people fail in the Foreign Service. I think it is extremely hard on families, and that probably had something to do with the fact that I did not marry until very late because I just felt it was too much to ask a family to go into those kinds of extremes. We always have the same kind of an atmosphere in the embassy or the consulate ourselves that we deal with in the daytime, but they have completely new situations where they are at home, at school, in the streets, and in the market, and you don't have to worry about that.

Q: That's very true.

HARBIN: It is very difficult for families in the Foreign Service.

Q: What were your main responsibilities in Lyon, issuing visas, protection work?

HARBIN: It was nice in that Lyon was such a small post with just two of us that I would do everything including principal officer for two long periods of time when the principal officer was back in the States on home leave. I was the American presence in the center

of France. I did political reporting, I issued visas, and I did protection of welfare. That was often the most interesting and challenging side because sometimes you had to run from one end of the district literally to the other end of the district. I remember one time I was in the southern part of the district and an American aircraft crashed in the northeast part of the district. I was called up there to the crash site to help the U.S. military who came in to investigate.

Q: That was a military aircraft?

HARBIN: It was a U.S. military aircraft. It was important because the French villagers nearby all came and told me how impressed they were by that American pilot. The jet had flamed out, the engine had flamed out and, instead of parachuting, he rode the plane down because he was over a lot of villages, and he crashed it in a field between the villages instead of just taking care of himself. He died, of course, when the plane crashed. The villagers were so grateful because they saw what happened.

There were other cases. I remember one where I was called to Grenoble, which is a city about 100 miles away. I went over there, and I discovered an American in jail who had been picked up by the police. The police called us, and he looked like a rag picker. He was a big, bulky guy, a bear of a guy, and he was drunk. They picked him up out of the gutter, and he was a very sad case. His brother was a very prominent physician in New York City. His daughter was sort of a piano prodigy, and he had brought her to Paris for her musical education. He was not able to provide for her, and he was an alcoholic himself. He'd finally sent the girl back to the States. She was very small, and he had wandered off and was just in a drunken stupor. I had to get him out of jail, and I had to persuade him to contact his family in the States. I particularly had to persuade him to get out of my consular district.

Q: Did you arrange for repatriation?

HARBIN: No. I bought him a ticket to the next consular district. He didn't want to go home.

Q: So you didn't wire his rich brother in New York and ask for funds?

HARBIN: There was no answer.

Q: What years were you in Lyon?

HARBIN: It was from 1959 to 1961. That was a very interesting time in France because, at one point, the Lyon airport was closed because they were expecting paratroopers from the French army in Algeria to land. Lyon was going to be their first landing to take over France. The French army was in rebellion in Algeria, and they were going to land at Lyon and take over the airport and create an uprising against the government in Paris. Lyon is the center of anti-Paris feeling in France. Charles DeGaulle disliked Lyon so much that, when anytime he drove south to Grenoble or to any city in southern France, he by-passed

the City of Lyon. He always went around it. One of the reasons was that the City of Lyon was the only foreign city in the world where the municipal holiday was the 4th of July. A French army band was standing in front of the American consulate at eight o'clock in the morning on the 4th of July, playing the *Star Spangled Banner* and raising the American flag in front of the American consulate.

Q: Is that right? Didn't they observe Bastille Day on the 14th?

HARBIN: They did that as well but the 4th of July was a municipal holiday. They had a band of honor at noon for the American people in the city. In turn, I think we had a cocktail party in the evening for the French officials. Lyon was very pro-American, which Charles DeGaulle did not appreciate.

Q: I think DeGaulle returned to power in 1959 roughly?

HARBIN: I think he was just back in power at that time.

Q: That was the time of the Algerian problems.

HARBIN: That, of course, was why he was returned to power, and it was a very interesting time to be doing political reporting in France.

Q: Did you have any contact with labor while you were in Lyon?

HARBIN: I only remember coming down to Lyon driving the embassy car from Paris one day. We were have trouble with our own car, and I took it up to Paris, and the embassy gave us another one. I was driving down in a big American car, and I think we were in Dijon. I got to a road block, and I discovered that the French communist trade union was having a demonstration. There were hundreds of marchers walking right across the street from my car, which was clearly an American embassy car. I was a little bit nervous because I was driving the car alone.

Q: That was the CGT, then?

HARBIN: Yes. It had the CGT right but I had diplomatic plates on the car you know and, of course, it was obvious that it was a big American Ford sedan.

Q: Did they bother you at all?

HARBIN: No. They didn't but I thought it was challenging. I did reporting on everything happening in the district. In Lyon, commerce is very important so our dealings were with the French businessmen. There was a famous Lyon international trade fair that we would participate in, and I would deal more with business people in that capacity. As you pointed out, the largest union was the communist union. They weren't particularly friendly.

Q: After Lyon where did you go from there?

HARBIN: After Lyon, I came back to Washington for my first Washington assignment. I came into the Operations Center on the 7th floor of the State Department when it was brand new. I was one of the first people in the Operations Center. Although famous writers have said that the president's brother-in-law, Stephen Smith, was the only member of the family who never worked for the government, he was, in fact, the first de facto head of the Operations Center in the State Department. President Kennedy had been disappointed during the Bay of Pigs because he discovered that there was no 24-hour operation in the State Department. So he sent Steve Smith there to set up the Operations Center at the State Department in late 1962.

Q: So you were there from 1961 to 1962?

HARBIN: I was there from 1961 to 1962 in the Operations Center, and I was there for a year. From that first year of the Operations Center, I went into the line of SS, which is the action offices of SS very briefly. Then I moved up to the White House. I became the aide to Governor Christian Herter, former Secretary of State, in the White House.

Q: What was he doing in the White House at that point? He'd been the Republican governor.

HARBIN: He was a Republican governor, and it was very interesting that he was appointed. Actually, I was involved in the two most important achievements of the Kennedy administration. The first was the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, and Herter was the first special trade representative of the president. The second was the Test Ban Treaty. I'll mention that later. The Trade Expansion Act of 1962 was passed by the Congress because the Congress did not trust the State Department to be suitably indulgent of the U.S. commercial interests in dealing with foreign countries. They felt that State leaned too much in the direction of the foreign countries in making trade agreements.

Q: It's called client-itis.

HARBIN: Exactly. So they passed a new law, the Trade Expansion Act of 1962. It was intended to get the White House itself to take the responsibility for negotiating trade agreements. So they established the Office of Special Trade Representative in the White House. Kennedy appointed Christian Herter as his first special trade representative, and I was sent over by the State Department to be the liaison. My job was, particularly, to get Herter plugged into the State Department communications and bureaucracy and to make sure that we didn't lose the predominate position that we had always had in negotiating trade agreements abroad.

I, in effect, established what is today the USTR. One of the first things that I had to do in the White House was to decide how we were going to get communications to Herter. There was only one White House channel at that time, the NSC. State Department traffic would all be sent to the NSC. The question was, would we continue to use that channel or

would we establish a new channel. Inadvertently, I was asked, as an FSO-8 (the lowest rank there was), "What are we going to call this new office?" So I said, "I think we need a new slot, and we'll call it STR, Special Trade Representative." I named the office and established that slot on the telegram. If I had said, "No, we'll get our telegrams through NSC like everybody else in the White House does," then there would have been no special office, no USTR, if you will. Inadvertently, I created a monstrous bureaucracy.

Q: What was it like working with Christian Herter? He'd been secretary of state, I think, at the end of the Eisenhower administration.

HARBIN: He was Eisenhower's secretary of state after Dulles passed away [April 1959-January 1961]. He had been out of office for two years, and one of my first duties was to plan and escort him on his first trip to Europe to meet all of the players in the Kennedy crowd in Brussels and elsewhere in Europe. It was interesting to me. Herter, of course, was a man with a physical disability and always walked with two canes almost like crutches. He had severe arthritis and, when I went to Brussels for the first time and talked to people there, they were shocked by the appearance of Christian Herter. The last time they'd seen him was two years before. They said in those two years he had aged ten years. I thought it was an interesting observation. What they meant was that, for someone in the position of Secretary of State to suddenly be out of a job and to go back home, it was like deflating a balloon. The pumping up you get from a job like Secretary of State becomes so important in your life that, once it is over in a very sudden way as it was in Herter's case, you suddenly deflate and age. The Europeans were shocked by his appearance.

At the same time, I was very impressed by him. On this trip, we stopped in Paris, and you may recall that the main reason for the Kennedy Round Trade Expansion Act of 1962 was to get Britain into the Common Market. There was an important element there because they said that under the Act, if Britain is not in the Common Market, we could reduce tariffs 25 percent. If it is in the Common Market, we could reduce them 50 percent, or twice as much. That was intended to get Britain into the Common Market, and DeGaulle vetoed this. We made a last ditch attempt in Paris to get DeGaulle to say yes. I was impressed because Herter had a secret appointment approved to [Editor's Note: meet with DeGaulle ?] _____ when he went to Paris. He was to make the pitch, and he was very reluctant. Herter himself had been educated in France at the Sorbonne and spoke French. He knew the French too well. He knew the situation too well. In any case, very reluctantly, he had this meeting in the ambassador's residence. I set it up with the ambassador's office, and we met late in the afternoon with [Editor's Note: DeGaulle?] _____, and he came out of that one-hour meeting, one on one. I had a secretary sitting nearby, and he dictated the most beautiful telegram, reporting on that meeting. He didn't change a word. He was so impressive to me because I knew how the White House was waiting for this message. Everybody in Washington was waiting for this message. He just did a great job. His mind remained very clear. He asked me to stay in his office but, if I stayed, I would have had to go Civil Service and become a GS. I said, "No, I want to stay in the Foreign Service." I returned to SS and, at that time, Averell Harriman was being promoted to Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs [April 1963-March 1965]. I

became Harriman's staff assistant. That's where I got involved in the Test Ban Treaty.

Q: Oh, I see. This would have been 1963?

HARBIN: I went into Harriman's office at the beginning of 1963.

Q: What was it like working for a legend like Averell Harriman?

HARBIN: He was just a great guy. He was fun to be around. He was a man who personally, I think, trained or effected the career of more Foreign Service Officers than any other statesman in the post-war era certainly. It was always a privilege to work for him. When we set the office up, it was kind of a problem because we discovered that everybody in the office was named Bill. There were about five of us in the office. Harriman's first name was also William, W. Averell Harriman. That proved kind of an interesting challenge. Bill Sullivan was my immediate supervisor. Bill Stolsfis was senior staff assistant, and Bill Jordan who later became ambassador to Panama was the speech writer. He was a former *New York Times* correspondent. Harriman was just great. I could write a book on Harriman himself. There are lots and lots of anecdotes about Harriman, which would take a long time to tell but I would say that he was very good with his staff. He was not a demanding person at all. He just expected us to do our job, and he did know what our job was.

I think maybe there is one aspect of him that not many people are aware of. He was very interested in young people. He realized that what was in the minds of young Americans in terms of the future of our foreign policy was extremely important. Anytime a bus load of high school kids drove up to the C Street entrance of the State Department, and they walked in and said to the receptionist, "Can we talk to some big shot here in the State Department and have a briefing?" they would call Harriman. If he could fit it in his schedule, he would always say yes. I realized after a while that it wasn't that he wanted to pontificate to them about American foreign policy, it was because he wanted to hear their questions.

HARBIN: Maybe I'll just tell one anecdote.

Q: Yes, tell at least one. We'll get a feel for the man.

HARBIN: Bill Sullivan often accompanied Harriman on his trips abroad. On one occasion, they were flying into Geneva regarding negotiations on Laos to make a peace agreement back in the early 1960s. The plane couldn't land in Geneva because of bad weather, so the plane was diverted to Paris. They landed at the airport and an embassy car was waiting to meet them and take them into the city in the evening. They started in and, fifteen minutes after they got on the road, the driver turned around and said to Harriman, "Would you like to go to the embassy now or do you want to go to the ambassador's residence?" Harriman said, "Oh, no, I want to go to my own townhouse in Neuilly. So they continued on for another ten minutes and then suddenly Harriman, who had been talking to Sullivan, jumped up and said, "Oh, my God, I sold that house!" He had about

five residences around the world at that time, and he hadn't remembered that he didn't have that one anymore.

Q: He had sold his house! If you have another one to match that, go ahead.

HARBIN: There was one where Sullivan, again, told me that he had gone with Harriman to meet Khrushchev, and Harriman was very well known in Russia. He was one of the few Americans the Russians knew.

Q: He had been ambassador there early on in 1944.

HARBIN: Right, so they all knew Harriman. They also respected him because of his age. He was up in his 70s then. He had a hearing problem and wore a hearing aid. As they finished their conversation with Khrushchev in his office in the Kremlin, Harriman suddenly realized that he had lost his hearing aid. It was very small and had fallen off his ear. He couldn't find it, and so he said to Sullivan, "Where's my hearing aid. I can't find it." Sullivan got down on his hands and knees in this thick carpet in Khrushchev's office. He started crawling around looking for the damned hearing aid. Harriman, of course, wasn't going to get down looking for it. Suddenly, to Sullivan's surprise, he bumped heads with somebody down there, and there was Khrushchev down on his hands and knees, too, looking for Harriman's hearing aid.

Q: It's a great story. What were your responsibilities in Ambassador Harriman's office?

HARBIN: I was his staff assistant, which meant that I really controlled the substantive paper going in and going out of his office. The personal correspondence, his personal assistant took care of. My job really was to make sure that he saw everything that he needed to see. I would come in early in the morning and read State Department telegrams and show him what he should see. I made sure that he followed his schedule.

I remember one time I had to take him to a speech he was giving at the National War College at Fort McNair. I went to his house in Georgetown and picked him up. He came out of the house still putting his tie on. He obviously had had a long night. We got in the car headed downtown, and we went right past the State Department. He said, "Where are we going?" I said, "Governor, you have a speech this morning at the National War College." He had forgotten completely. So he went and gave what he called his "Blue Plate Special," his reminiscences of the War. That was the kind of thing I did. I was with him all the time.

One time when, perhaps, I wasn't in his presence enough, I guess, he said to Bill Sullivan, "Why don't I see more of Bill Harbin?" Sullivan came and told me, "The Governor wants to see you more often." Frankly, I found the experience of just watching him and studying him and learning from him just such an important educational kind of thing that I didn't want to be talking myself. I was such a junior officer that I wanted to be listening. I did listen in. We were required to monitor all of his phone conversations, and we made records of those because some decisions were made over the telephone.

Often, while working on papers, I was listening to what was going on, on the telephone. He talked to Bobby Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and people like that.

Q: This is when he was Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs?

HARBIN: No. He was Under Secretary for Political Affairs.

Q: He'd moved up then.

HARBIN: By the time of the Test Ban Treaty, he was clearly in for bigger and better things. There was talk that he might even be the next secretary of state but the assassination of President Kennedy ended that. He and LBJ did not hit it off and did not establish any rapport, I would say. Harriman said to his staff, "Don't worry. I am used to going back and starting at the bottom again and climbing up."

Q: That's almost funny!

HARBIN: He did, of course. He was eventually put in charge of the Paris Peace Talks negotiations on Vietnam.

Q: You were going to mention the Test Ban Treaty.

HARBIN: I went to Moscow. That was, for me personally, a great experience because the Test Ban Treaty was negotiated in August of 1963. President Kennedy was so proud of it that he sent Air Force One to pick up Harriman and the delegation. To my surprise, someone came to me and said you have to get your visa for Moscow because you have to fly over in Air Force One and take the latest telegrams and messages that we have for Harriman and deliver them so when we pick him up, he'll be able to read them on his way back. He had to report back directly to Hyannis Port. The president was in Hyannis Port. I suddenly found myself in Air Force One taking off from Andrews, sitting in the president's chair. I was the only passenger. I was sitting in the president's chair and living it up.

We had to stop in Copenhagen and buy supplies. We had to pick up a Russian navigator and another Russian crew member to fly over Russian territory. To my surprise when we took off from Copenhagen, all of the U.S. Air Force personnel started to take their clothes off. It looked like a locker room almost. Apparently, the Russians had told them that they could not land in Moscow with U.S. Air Force uniforms. So they had to put on civilian clothes. They did that before we landed.

I was only in the Soviet Union for two hours of my whole career. But I must say, in those two hours, I could tell that this was no superpower. I really wasn't surprised at the breakup of the Soviet Union. We couldn't land at the regular international airport because Fidel Castro was coming in, and they thought it would be a little too humiliating to have Air Force One sitting on the tarmac when Fidel Castro was there. So we were sent to an airport, which apparently was used primarily for internal travel between Moscow and

other cities within the Soviet Union.

Q: It was probably Venucla.

HARBIN: Maybe that was it.

Q: The international one, I think, is Sherimativa.

HARBIN: It was interesting because for us it was an education. You normally didn't see that airport. I discovered when we landed that there was no traffic, no planes coming in, and no planes leaving. They had all these planes that looked like DC3s, brand new, parked around on the grass off the runways. The Five-year Plan had said, I guess, that they were supposed to build so many DC3s and sell them to Block countries, and Block countries didn't want to buy them, I guess. They were all there and the old ladies in their babushkas had the job of climbing into the planes, dusting them off, and cleaning them out inside every day. Then they would climb down and that was it. There were hundreds of these planes sitting there.

They would not let Air Force One come too close to the terminal because the apron was not large enough for jet engines. They had to cut off the engines, and we had to be towed to the terminal. They brought out what looked like a 1936 dump truck to tow Air Force One. I thought, "God, this is a superpower?" It was incredible.

Q: Anyhow, the treaty was signed.

HARBIN: The treaty was signed.

Q: Did Governor Harriman return?

HARBIN: Governor Harriman returned in all his glory. His face was on the cover of *Time* magazine. He was obviously moving up and doing very well. Then Vietnam, of course, came along and that became a preoccupation of everybody. I went from Harriman's office to Vietnam.

Q: When did you arrive in Vietnam and how long were you there?

HARBIN: It was 1964. I was there for two years.

Q: Do you want to describe your assignment to Vietnam?

HARBIN: Actually, when I left Washington, I was assigned to Hong Kong as political officer. It was my dream assignment. It was something that Sullivan and Harriman arranged so that I would get really what I always wanted. I arrived in Hong Kong, and a friend of mine met me at the airport and said, "I have bad news for you, Bill. We are both under direct transfer orders to Saigon." So I spent three weeks in Hong Kong going to my friend's farewell parties and working very briefly in the political section.

When we arrived in Vietnam I succeeded Dick Holbrooke, who is in the newspapers these days. Dick and two other FSOs had been the first sent out into the field to work in the provinces in Vietnam. We were the second group of FSOs sent out to work in the provinces. We were on loan to AID; we were not in the embassy. I was sent up to Minh Da Nang Province in the central part of Vietnam. Are you familiar with Vietnam?

Q: Not really, no. I have flown over it, and that's about it.

HARBIN: You saw all you needed to know from there. I was in Vietnam. In fact, right now we are looking at the files on Vietnam in 1965. That's what my job is.

Q: Is that regarding declassification?

HARBIN: Yes. I was in Vietnam, in effect, when the conventional forces, or troops, arrived in 1965. I had been working up country, and I came back to Saigon. Dick Holbrooke by that time was in charge of what they called the National Self-help Program whereby we provided materials for villagers to use for small projects on their own in the villages. I was given that responsibility for about a year. It was probably one of the best AID programs that we had going at that time in Vietnam because the whole problem was that all the money was going into Saigon but it never got out to the provinces.

Actually, when I had arrived in Hong Kong, I had congratulated myself because I had avoided Vietnam. I knew very well from my experience in Washington what was wrong in Vietnam. It wasn't Vietnam, it was Washington. The problem was not in Vietnam. The problem was in Washington. The reason I say that is because, when I worked in Herter's office in the White House, Henry Cabot Lodge who had succeeded Herter as the head of the private organization called the Atlantic Council was a frequent visitor to Herter's office. As the former vice presidential candidate, of course, under Nixon, I sensed that he was obviously looking for a job in the administration, like Herter had just gotten a job in the administration. They weren't talking entirely about Atlantic Council business, I was sure of that. It was kind of interesting because Arthur Schlesinger, who should have known something about Massachusetts politics, in his book on the Kennedy administration said: "Nobody in the White House knew Henry Cabot Lodge or how he got that job." I knew because I could see what he was doing with Herter all the time. Almost every week he was in talking to Herter about something.

Q: How did he get the job?

HARBIN: He got the job, I think, because Herter made it known to President Kennedy that Lodge was available for an appointment. At that time, it was the very time that Kennedy himself realized that Vietnam could be an issue that could cost him the election in 1964. He decided wisely that he wanted to have it a bi-partisan problem rather than strictly his problem. He appointed a Republican, Henry Cabot Lodge, to be ambassador in Saigon. That defused the issue as far as Kennedy was concerned, I think, for a while. Unfortunately, after Kennedy's assassination, that left LBJ suddenly with Henry Cabot

Lodge on his staff in Saigon.

Q: They must have been a strange pair.

HARBIN: It was interesting in that I was able to see all the traffic on Vietnam in Harriman's office, of course. It was clear that within a month after coming into office _____ . LBJ met in Hawaii with Henry Cabot Lodge to talk about Vietnam. This was like December of 1963. He said, "Tell me what you need in Vietnam to win. I want a weekly report from you as to how things are going and what you need to do your job." Lodge made it very clear to those of us in Harriman's office that LBJ had his mind on the New Hampshire primary in February. You'll recall that Henry Cabot Lodge won that primary as the Republican candidate. These weekly reports from Lodge-- Lodge was not a terribly energetic ambassador--clearly were coming from MACV [U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] in terms of what he needed to win the war. MACV would come up with all sorts of new military toys and personnel that they needed to carry out their role in Vietnam. LBJ was in a position, as he received these weekly reports from Lodge, to only say, "Yes," if he did not want a presidential candidate who could say that "you didn't give me what I needed to win the war in Vietnam." I think LBJ was greatly concerned that Lodge might resign and use his relationship in Vietnam against LBJ.

Q: So it was domestic politics driving escalation?

HARBIN: Exactly. That's my point that it was domestic politics. I'm glad you asked because that's what I was really saying, that Washington not Vietnam was the problem. When I arrived in Vietnam, I knew what the problem was. I felt very sympathetic to the Americans who were working in Vietnam because they didn't have that perspective that I had. Having just come from the seventh floor, I knew that there wasn't much they could do out there that would be successful. LBJ's focus was on the 1964 election.

Q: Was there any civilian check on military requests for hardware and people?

HARBIN: That also became interesting when I was in Vietnam. When I came back to Saigon and joined the staff of AID in Saigon, the director of AID at that time was a guy named Jim Killen who was a very outstanding AID director. He had a good record around the world. I had known him before. Actually, he had been in Pakistan with me. Killen was one of the few civilian voices on the mission council in Saigon. He challenged Westmoreland on all his requests for more troops and more of this and more of that. When the mission council came to a disagreement between the civilians and the military about what we do next and do we need this or don't we need this, if challenged, the usual result was that they would decide to send out a committee. They would send out two representatives, one of the military and one of the civilians, to the countryside.

Q: This was the embassy who would send them?

HARBIN: It wasn't the embassy. This was AID because Killen was the AID director.

Q: The embassy was not in the loop, so to speak?

HARBIN: Not really, because it was Killen who was challenging Westmoreland. Killen had these people in the countryside. We had a major AID presence in the countryside. What we were seeing was different from what Westmoreland was seeing. I would often be sent out with a Colonel or Major from MACV to go to various areas and report back to the mission council on whether or not this was indeed needed. For example, district advisors like MACV said they needed the military advising every district in the country. I went out with the major, and we talked to people in the provinces and came back and said, "No, we don't need it. We don't need more advisors in the provinces at the district level." Westmoreland was very unhappy about that. It was also very clear to those of us who had been on the 7th floor that the Pentagon was using a back channel on this stuff. Before MACV in Saigon asked for anything, the Pentagon told him what they had and that they could deliver and what they wanted to send. So in effect, every time Westmoreland asked for something, the Pentagon would say, "Oh, yes, we have that, we can do that." The president would be buffaloed; he didn't know that. Harriman caught on quickly to what was going on. It was really the Defense Department running behind the back of State and the other public affairs agencies in the government.

Q: Was State totally out of the picture at the embassy in Saigon?

HARBIN: No. I wasn't in the embassy so I can't really say, but I have been reading, now, the embassy reporting from Saigon, and it confirms more or less what I have been saying.

Q: In what respect does it confirm it?

HARBIN: For example, Max Taylor succeeded Roger Feng to run for president and Max Taylor succeeded him in Saigon. He became ambassador. Taylor, of course, had been the four-star general who some might say had been partly responsible for us getting involved in the first place. He had written a book. The worst thing you can do is have somebody important read your book and be influenced by it. President Kennedy read the book, *The Uncertain Trumpet*, and the whole idea was, we can no longer engage in nuclear war, obviously. We have this tremendous capacity but wars aren't going to be fought that way anymore, or there's no way to fight a war that way, and so the challenge will be counter guerrilla warfare. Max Taylor was the guru of counter guerrilla warfare. In Saigon, Max Taylor ran the army, and when the Pentagon decided they wanted to come in real big with major forces in Vietnam, Max Taylor wrote a telegram saying-- this was a month after the Marines landed in Danang--that we don't need any more ground forces here in Vietnam. We don't need any ground forces in Vietnam. We don't need any military. The Marines are the wrong military anyway. It's not what they are trained for. The embassy had come to that conclusion, obviously, under Max Taylor, and Max Taylor got fired for his report.

Q: What did he see as the solution, then?

HARBIN: He was the architect of the special forces approach, the Green Berets. He said

that you had to have a very small force of Green Berets who would be trained in the language, the culture, and all of that, and not living like American soldiers are accustomed to living. It had to be a very small, highly trained, highly motivated force well prepared. When things started to go bad in Vietnam, Kennedy decided the special forces were a good idea so let's double the amount of special forces we have in Vietnam. Special forces can't be doubled over night. It takes at least a year and maybe two to train them for a specific place to carry on guerrilla warfare. The special forces themselves were very unhappy. I was in Danang when this happened.

Q: Were you there when the attack on Danang occurred?

HARBIN: No. It was when the leaders of the special forces were saying that there was no attack at the airport. When the decision was made to double the number of special forces in the country over night—their headquarters was in Danang—they were very angry because they knew that the new special forces that came in did not have the preparation that they had.

Q: What was the level of the special forces at that time?

HARBIN: I think originally it was only about 10,000.

Q: So they wanted to double it to roughly 20,000?

HARBIN: Yes. Kennedy made the decision to double, and there was no way they could do it over night. So they brought in people who didn't have the training, who weren't prepared to fight that kind of warfare. In any case, Max Taylor had clearly lost the president's mind but by this time there was a new president.

Q: By this time had President Johnson taken office?

HARBIN: Yes. Johnson proceeded, and it was ironic in terms of Pentagon politics. Before he retired, Max Taylor had been an airborne general. He was head of the 82nd airborne. I think he jumped into Normandy. The Pentagon and U.S. Army sent the 173rd airborne brigade into Vietnam as the first regular military conventional forces, and they didn't even bother to tell Max Taylor in advance that they were coming. That was a real special turning of the knife into a guy who was Mr. Airborne. In fact, his telegram said that the airborne weren't the right troops either for this kind of warfare. But they sent them anyway.

Q: Did he resign about that time?

HARBIN: It was clear from the telegrams that we are looking at now that Washington knew that he wouldn't ever approve what they were going to do.

Q: So they did it anyway.

HARBIN: They did it anyway even though I hear we had an ambassador who was a four-star army general. He was one of our most respected former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He said, "Don't send any ground troops here." He said that happened earlier when I was in Harriman's office in the operations center when Paul Kottenberg who was the State Department desk officer for Vietnam had objected in a meeting, where Bobby Kennedy was present, that we should not send any ground troops to Vietnam. Bobby Kennedy fired him. He lost his position. In McNamara's book about Vietnam, he said, "Well, the problem was that we didn't have any experts in Washington who knew anything about Vietnam." Of course, they didn't have any because they had fired them.

Q: The ones that didn't agree with them were fired.

HARBIN: Yes, also our ambassador in Saigon. The Korean ambassador in Saigon who was very close to Diem and who thought it was a wrong policy to overthrow Diem.

Q: Who was that? Was that Ellsworth Bunker?

HARBIN: No. It was long before Bunker. This was Fitz Milton. He had advised that we stick with Diem, and he got fired. It was ironic because I think *Parade Magazine* in 1962 on the cover had a picture of all of the wonderful ambassadors that Kennedy had appointed. Most of them, of course, were people like Galbraith and Kennan and very famous people. But Milton was the career officer who was pictured on that cover of *Parade Magazine* as the best that had been appointed. Then they pulled the rug out from under him. That why I say the problem was in Washington.

Q: You were there then in 1964 to 1966?

HARBIN: Yes. When the troops arrived in mass, I was there. There were indications almost immediately that the troops weren't going to succeed because they had not been properly prepared. Marines landed in Danang and, two weeks after they landed, their company commander gave them a pass to go to the beach at Danang. They were getting bored, of course, because there was nothing to do at the airport where they were dug in. They went to the beach, and there were no commercial facilities at the beach. In the old days, the French had built weekend cottages on the beach at Danang. They would go down there on Saturday and Sunday. The Vietnamese had taken over the cottages after the French left. The Marines got bored after playing in the sand. They couldn't buy any soft drinks. So twenty-five Marines wandered into one of these houses which they saw was occupied. They went into the kitchen and helped themselves to beer and soft drinks that were in the refrigerator. The owner of the house let them do it and didn't make any fuss.

Then they started to go toward the bedrooms and the owner said, "What are you looking for in the bedrooms?" They said, "We are looking for girls," and his wife was taking a nap in one of the bedrooms. At that point, he kicked them all out. He was the mayor of the City of Danang. Monday morning Lt. General Walt who was the commander of the Marines in Danang was called in to the mayor's office and told to discipline his troops

and they wanted a report on what discipline he took. The general said, "Yes, I'll do it." He called in a company commander and said, "When they are on pass, they are the responsibility of the shore patrol. They are not my responsibility. Sir." The Shore Patrol said, "Well, we weren't at the beach in Danang on Sunday so we couldn't worry about this. We had nothing to do with it." No discipline was applied to the Marines who did this. You can image that from that day forward the relations between the U.S. military and the authorities in Danang were zero. There were other incidents in Vietnam that I won't go into but, within the first few weeks, it was clear to us who were in Vietnam that they weren't going to win.

Q: Was there any grand strategy on the field, or was it all back in Washington?

HARBIN: Well, General Westmoreland was supposed to be coming up with a strategy. His typical day was to get up in the morning and fly out to some base where the American troops were stationed, line them up, and walk down the ranks with them. Pete Dawkins, a very upcoming officer and from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and a Rhodes Scholar, was his aide. Pete Dawkins' job was to follow General Westmoreland when he walked out to get his picture taken shaking hands with G.I.s. Dawkins would get their names, their addresses, and their home towns. Next morning, a letter would go out signed by General Westmoreland, saying, "I met your son, Charlie, out here," to Mrs. So and So from Dubuque, Iowa. "He is doing a great job out here. You really should be proud of him. He's a wonderful soldier." That was Westmoreland's job. Westmoreland was clearly preparing for a political campaign. Some saw him as another Dwight Eisenhower. We are going to win the war in Vietnam and we are going to get elected president. As you know, when the war ended, the senator from South Carolina lost. So that was our grand strategy.

Q: What was really needed in your opinion? What would be your historical conclusions?

HARBIN: John Vann, who was probably the most famous hero of the Vietnam War, was the subject of *A Bright Shining Lie*. John was a friend of mine. In 1966 when he knew I was leaving, he was in charge of the Third Corps, which is the area around Saigon. He said, "Bill, you can have any province here if you'll stay. I'll make you the province senior advisor for any province you want." I said, "John, the only thing wrong with Vietnam is that there are too many Americans here. The only thing I can do about it is to leave."

Q: You reduced that number by one.

HARBIN: Once we made it clear to the Vietnamese that we were more anxious to win the war than they were, the war was lost, because there was no way we could win that kind of war alone.

Q: What suggestions would you have made at the time?

HARBIN: Well, I think what I concluded myself in 1965 when the troops arrived was

that we would have 50,000 dead here. Fifty thousand Americans are going to die and a million Vietnamese are going to die. I asked myself if it is all going to be worth it? The answer was, it is worth it if, as a result of Vietnam, the American public grows up and that they abandon this sophomoric idea that the U.S. military can go anywhere and do what President Kennedy had said, "Go anywhere, anytime, and win any war for any reason that they want to." In effect, I think that has been the outcome of the Vietnam War. The American public is a lot more mature in attitude toward involving American troops overseas. Maybe it was worthwhile, but a lot of people had to die.

Q: Americans are certainly a lot more skeptical.

HARBIN: Yes. It is a healthy skepticism. I think the press did not do a very good job in Vietnam. Early on they could have been more honest in their reporting. David Halberstam was, of course, one of the early correspondents in Vietnam, and he said, "I wonder if there was anything I could have done, which would have made a difference." That was a very interesting statement for a journalist to say because there was something he could have done and didn't. I think that Vietnam was the first war where there was no censorship of the press. In the Korean War and World War II, the press was controlled.

Q: What could he have done that he did not do?

HARBIN: Now we get to some FSOs but I don't want to mention any names. He had two sources, two young FSOs who had been out in the countryside. At least one of them had gone to school with Halberstam, and he knew him from college days. Halberstam, like many of the generalists, was also young and brand new to the press as a foreign correspondent. He was looking, obviously, for something to get his by-line on the front page of the *New York Times*. They helped him because they were, like me, on loan to AID at the time, and they were not reading the embassy traffic of telegrams to know what was going on in Saigon from the embassy's perspective. They were unhappy about that. They were working down in the Delta in the Fourth Corps area. They would come into Saigon every weekend, and they would get together with Halberstam and people like him and say that the people in the Fourth Corps don't like Diem. It's not that this government can't succeed but that the president is not popular. He doesn't have the respect of the people in the Fourth Corps.

These young FSOs and Halberstam didn't know anything about the history of Vietnam. Diem was a Buddhist and wasn't a Catholic from central Vietnam. [Editor's Note: Harbin probably meant to say the opposite as Diem was a Catholic.] In the Delta in the south part of Vietnam, they don't like people from central Vietnam, and they sure don't like Catholics. Those were the reasons that Diem never was popular in the Delta. Halberstam started to write that everybody out in the countryside doesn't like Diem. He was taking those reports and making them appear as though all of the people in lower Vietnam didn't like Diem, and that wasn't true.

Q: Were you there when Diem was assassinated?

HARBIN: No, I came in right after that. I think that his sources were unfortunate. First of all Halberstam didn't know the history of Vietnam that well and, second, he didn't have accurate sources.

Q: The two young FSOs will be nameless, I would presume?

HARBIN: You have already named one of them but there is no point in mentioning their names now. They had an important role, but they failed to play it just because they weren't in the loop as far as embassy reporting was concerned. They were giving misinformation to a *New York Times* representative, and President Kennedy, after a while, started to pay more attention to what he was reading in the *New York Times* than what he was hearing from the State Department on Vietnam.

Q: Do you have any other observations about Vietnam you'd like to make before we move on to your next assignment?

HARBIN: I have a Vietnamese wife. I know Vietnam is something which has always affected my life, of course, right up to today. That's really why I feel that Vietnam was a very important part of my life. I came back to Washington not immediately after Vietnam. I went to Stockholm, Sweden, for two years. I was the first American defector to Sweden in a spiritual sense. I didn't formally defect. While in Vietnam, the *Los Angeles Examiner* wrote a story, saying I was a hero in Vietnam, which made my mother happy, but it wasn't really accurate. Professionally, it had been a useful assignment.

Q: Where is your wife from in Vietnam?

HARBIN: She is from the Cambodian border area. Her father was a half-French planter in a rubber plantation on the Cambodian border. She grew up on the plantation. Her father was murdered by the Vietminh because he was half French so she grew up pretty much without a father. She is not really typical. She is half Chinese, one-fourth French, and one-fourth Vietnamese. She grew up being discriminated against in Vietnamese society because she was a mixture. She is not all that fond of her native country. We have not been back.

Q: She is happy to be here in the United States?

HARBIN: Yes. She doesn't want to go back to Vietnam ever.

Q: Is that right!

HARBIN: Her family came with her. She had just a brother and her mother. We still have our ties to Vietnam. Later on I served in Thailand.

Q: But your assignment after Vietnam was Sweden?

HARBIN: I was assigned to Stockholm.

Q: Were you given your choice of posts as a result of Vietnam?

HARBIN: I could have had any assignment I wanted in 1966, and I asked to go to Scandinavia. I was assigned as commercial officer in the American Trade Center in Stockholm. My wife and I were married in Stockholm, and she was the first Vietnamese woman to live in Sweden.

Q: Is that right?

HARBIN: Yes. She was quite a sensation in downtown Stockholm because the Willapalma and the Social Democrats were very anti-Vietnam, leading all kinds of demonstrations against the American embassy. We had demonstrations almost every day across the street from where I worked at the Trade Center, which was right in downtown Stockholm. My wife would delight in coming downtown wearing her Vietnamese national dress in the summertime. She would come downtown and she would walk down the street and literally stop traffic. Cars would stop and people would jump out of the cars and want to talk to her. Then, police would always keep the demonstrators on the other side of the street, so when they saw her the first time, they thought she was coming to join them. They were all in an uproar and waving at her, you know, and she waved back and turned and went in the U.S. Trade Center. They were kind of shocked.

It was a very good time in our life, I think. We liked Sweden very much. We liked Stockholm. In fact, it's a strain but people ask sometime, "Do you have a favorite post?" I don't see how any of us could really answer that question. Apparently, people do have favorite posts but I really think that I liked every post. I don't have a favorite *per se*. I found something good and useful out of every post, something that becomes a part of you, I believe.

Q: You were in Stockholm from 1966 to 1968?

HARBIN: Yes.

Q: Were you ever asked to defend U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam?

HARBIN: I asked our ambassador about it when I first arrived. After all, I arrived direct from Vietnam, and it was the number one issue in Sweden. Graham Parson was our ambassador who had been the assistant secretary for the Far East. I volunteered when I arrived, in my spare time outside my regular official duties in the day time, that my wife and I would be happy to go and talk to student groups and do whatever we could to explain and defend U.S. policy in Vietnam. He said, "That's a wonderful idea. You'll have to do that, good idea." But I never heard a word.

Q: Were you prepared to defend the policy?

HARBIN: I was prepared to explain it and to talk about Vietnam. Swedes were obviously

very interested in subject but didn't know anything about it. My wife and I knew an awful lot about it. So I thought it would be useful as an American embassy officer to appeal to student groups—I was young at the time, comparatively young—and my wife was very young, and I thought we might make some favorable impression as far as at least understanding between Sweden and the United States. But the ambassador, obviously, wasn't prepared to do that. The bureaucracy within the embassy, the political section, I suppose, and the public affairs officer thought that was their job, so they didn't take any advantage of my presence. I was a little bit disappointed but I figured we were going to lose the Vietnam War anyway, so let them go down the drain.

Q: The USIA people didn't want to give you...

HARBIN: The public affairs officer.

Q: Did you have any contact with the labor movement while you were in Sweden?

HARBIN: Well, again, I was there as commercial officer and if one has contact he doesn't advertise it. No. I did not have contact with labor there. Because I married a foreigner, I came back in 1968 to Washington for her to become an American citizen, so we were stationed here in Washington for four years from 1968 to 1972 where I was Vietnam desk officer.

Q: That must have been quite an experience. That was right in the midst of the Vietnamization of the war, I think was the term.

HARBIN: It was rather funny because at one point the Georgetown University used to have on television the *Georgetown University Forum of the Air* on Sunday afternoon. They would take up an important topic, and usually one of their professors had dreamed this topic up. One of them decided that what we needed in Vietnam was Asianization, not Vietnamization. So they started trying to plan for a television show on that subject. I think they asked the Secretary to appear, and he declined. They asked the Deputy Secretary, and he declined. They kept going down the line, and the Assistant Secretary wouldn't do it. Bill Sullivan who was then Deputy Assistant Secretary didn't want to do it, and they went to the very bottom of the Vietnam Desk, and that was me. So I had to appear to defend the State Department on television along with a member of Congress from Louisiana and this professor from Georgetown.

I had had a very interesting experience while I was working up country in Vietnam because the whole idea was Asianization instead of Vietnamization. When it became my turn to talk, I said that my assistant out in the country was a Filipino. I had an agricultural advisory team from Taiwan who were working with me out in the country. Guarding our airbase in Pham Rang where I was working was a battalion of Korean troops. I said that our supplies coming in from Saigon that we were using in the province arrived on an Australian airplane. I said, "So what do you mean by Asianization?" Obviously, we had tried that one already and it hadn't been all that successful. At least it was in place in Vietnam. That was one of the things I had to do.

Being the economic officer on the Vietnam desk was probably my most important job. I was responsible for being the State Department representative on a committee in the Pentagon that was established to address illegal activities that came out of our presence in Vietnam, because the Congress was always fishing around looking for terrible things that are happening because of our being in Vietnam. One of those things, of course, was narcotics. As a result, I am the author, actually, of a document that I never expected was going to be the declaration of war on drugs. I actually wrote the telegram that was what I would call the declaration of war on drugs. I had to get all the agencies of the government to sign off on that telegram and all of the geographic bureaus. We instructed, for the first time, the American ambassador in every country of the world to get himself informed on the drug scene in his country. He was to become familiar with the drug market in the country and how it affected the United States in exploiting an illegal drug. He was to appoint a narcotics coordinator in every embassy, to establish a narcotics committee in every embassy, and to report back regularly to the Department on drug matters. It was the first time that the State Department and the ambassador, personally, was given a responsibility for the international war on drugs. In effect, it was the declaration of the international war on drugs. Again, I mentioned before creating that bureaucracy in USTR. Unknowingly, not deliberately, I had created a bureaucracy. In effect the telegram that I wrote created a new bureaucracy here in Washington, the INM in the State Department, the Bureau of International Narcotics Matters. Obviously, if all these ambassadors were going to be reporting to Washington, someone had to read their reports.

Q: Was this the first time the State Department had ever sent a message to the field requesting information on the status of drugs?

HARBIN: They not only requested it, they ordered the ambassador and set up a mechanism to take charge of all U.S. government efforts in that country to fight the war on drugs.

Q: And you initiated this idea?

HARBIN: No. I was on the committee, and it came out of our committee meeting. Frank Barnamo was the assistant general counsel at the Pentagon, and we met once a week in the Pentagon. We had representatives from Treasury, from Justice, from DEA, from all of the agencies—AID was there, CIA was there, all of the agencies of the government. Because I was the State Department representative, after the discussions in the committee, they asked me to write a telegram and clear it with them and all the geographic bureaus of the State Department to, in effect, give the responsibility to the ambassadors. I sent it out in the name of the Secretary to direct the ambassadors to do this. I wrote it. In effect, these were my words. I had put all these things in about what the ambassadors were supposed to do.

Q: Did you get involved in any of the other major decisions regarding Southeast Asia at the time? Things like the Vietnamization program and declaring victory and drawing

down?

HARBIN: No. As I explained, Bill Sullivan was my boss on the Vietnam desk, he had been my boss in Harriman's office on the 7th Floor, and so we worked together pretty well. By that time, Vietnam had reached a policy level in the State Department. Henry Kissinger was involved, of course, and Kissinger didn't share his thoughts with anybody.

Q: So things were really kicked upstairs?

HARBIN: Yes. We did the grunt work pretty much on the desk, doing all the kinds of things that a desk had to do. I was involved in all of that. The war was lost at that point. It was just a matter of turning it over to the Vietnamese.

Q: Was your office involved in something like the incursion into Cambodia?

HARBIN: I was not involved.

Q: I guess Jonathan was involved.

HARBIN: Like I said, I was the economic officer on the desk, so I wasn't really involved. I was reading, of course. I saw all of the material but I was not in a policy making position certainly. Like I said, I was the low man on the desk when it came time to go on television. I knew Vietnam well enough, of course, even when Ambassador Bunker came in. I used to be very impressed by Bunker. I had a modest office of my own in the State Department on the 5th floor, and there was an empty office next door. Ambassador Bunker would be right next door when he came in from Saigon. He was a very modest and wonderful man. I'd had enough of Vietnam by that time. In terms of policy making, I knew it was really not the State Department at that time that was making the policy; it was the White House. I approved of the idea of our getting out. In effect, we were creating a fig leaf, and it was the second time we created a fig leaf. In 1954, of course, we created a fig leaf, which we thought got the West out of Vietnam.

Q: Do you want to define that and expand on it a little bit?

HARBIN: The Geneva Agreements of 1954 provided that there would be only in South Vietnam a very small French military advisory group. There would be an election between both parts of Vietnam, and the winner of the election would become president of the country and there would be a single Vietnam. That was just a fig leaf for the West to withdraw, and everybody knew that. The population in North Vietnam was larger than the population of South Vietnam, and the communists were certainly not going to allow the people in the south and any other democrat that ran in the north to win. The election would clearly be a victory for Ho Chi Minh. He would get the majority of the votes. It was as simple as that.

Q: So that was fig leaf number one, and fig leaf number two was Vietnamization.

HARBIN: Fig leaf number two was that all U.S. military would withdraw from Vietnam, that the United States would, instead, establish four new consulates in the countryside that would still do the kind of civilian work that we had been doing when I was there. The military side would be all Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese would have the responsibility for that. That was a way to get the military out, the presence of the U.S. military was the real problem anyway from the beginning. Once they were gone, then it was just a matter of days before the civilians would have to go, too. That's how the Vietnamese tested inhabitants as far as their ability to resist the North Vietnamese army. Especially, when dear old Congress turned off the spigot literally. They refused to allow any petroleum products to go to Vietnam. Here we had the Vietnamese army, created in our own image, dependent on truck transportation, dependent on gasoline, and Congress decided that no more gasoline would be sent. The army can't function very well without gasoline. Congress did it deliberately. I thought that was probably the nastiest thing that the U.S. Congress ever did. They created an army and hope for people, and then they made it impossible for them to win.

Q: Where did you go after the Vietnam desk?

HARBIN: I went to Bangkok, Thailand, from 1972 to 1974, and from 1974 to 1976, I was in Chiang Mai as principal officer.

Q: That must have been a delightful time.

HARBIN: Yes. It was an interesting time because, of course, Vietnam was falling in the Chiang Mai portion of the assignment. The first two years 1972-1974, I was in Bangkok as an economics section and one of my responsibilities was labor reporting. That's the first time I was involved with labor reporting. At that time, labor was about 5 percent of my responsibility because there was no labor movement in Thailand. I mean there was no effective labor movement. While I was there in Bangkok, the government changed. The military stepped aside for a while and civilians took over and a local labor movement started to develop. Suddenly, labor became about 50 percent of my job.

Q: So this was the democratic experiment as it was called.

HARBIN: I got to know the labor leaders early on, and I did a lot of reporting on Vietnam. As you mentioned, Glen Holme was there with me.

Q: Do you mean Vietnam?

HARBIN: No, I meant Thailand. Glen Holme was a U.S. AID labor advisor, advising the Ministry of the Interior. Labor, as typical Thai, was under the responsibility of Ministry of the Interior, which meant the police. They had a director in the Ministry of Labor, and Glen was the advisor to the director. He was working on something that sounded very innocent. He was setting up a scheme for unemployment insurance, or a Social Security kind of scheme with old age benefits and that kind of thing. He was doing something in a non-controversial area of labor. When it became politicized, I was the guy in the embassy

who was doing the labor reporting. In that capacity I came to the attention of Harold Davies in the Labor Department. That's how I got roped into labor.

I first met Harold Davies at the New Delhi Labor Attaché Conference in 1973 or 1974. Davies invited me to join the labor attaché cone. He promised me that he would send me to Harvard for a year for the Harvard Trade Union program. That was enough to persuade me to accept. In the meantime in 1974, our new Consul General, Frank Tutu, was suddenly medically evacuated to Washington. The DCM decided that I was the best person for the job as principal officer in Chiang Mai. Thinking about it myself, I decided the only reason he did that was I was probably the only one who had been in Bangkok and had never been to Chiang Mai.

Q: It's a delightful city up there, isn't it?

HARBIN: It was a delightful city. The ambassador sent me up in his plane and his aide went with me, Ed Cour. I did not know until I was in route to Chiang Mai in the ambassador's plane that this wasn't a one- or two-week assignment.

Q: It was a two-year assignment. Who was the ambassador at that point?

HARBIN: The DCM was Ed Masters and he was really making the decisions.

Q: Was Unger still the ambassador?

HARBIN: I had three ambassadors. I had Unger, then I had Kittener. Kittener might have been the ambassador. Kittener was political. Then, Whitehouse followed Kittener. It was Ed Masters who really decided that I was the guy to be the principal officer at Chiang Mai. So I arrived in Chiang Mai, almost in a state of shock, because I thought I was only going up there to fill in the gap. I left my wife and kids in Bangkok, and then I discovered that I had more than 300 official Americans in northern Thailand that I was responsible for. It was a huge American presence that I was very much unaware of because a lot of it was clandestine.

Q: Was it AID and the drug war?

HARBIN: There was a lot of military.

Q: Now, it should be unclassified.

HARBIN: Anyway, we had U.S. Air Force, we had U.S. Army, we had U.S. Navy, and we had U.S. Coast Guard. We had every branch of the military except the Marines, and those were the ones that I probably really needed. When the consulate was attacked, I wish I'd had Marines.

Q: The consulate was attacked while you were there? What happened there?

HARBIN: Well, President Ford, maybe you recall, was wonderful or terrible, depending on your viewpoint. Picture Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford chortling over their Mayaguez caper where the American merchant ship, *Mayaguez*, ran ashore in Cambodia with 40 odd merchant mariners, and we sent in a force to rescue them.

Q: That was an intelligence ship, I believe.

HARBIN: No. Under instructions Ed Masters, the DCM, went in and promised the Thai government that this attack on Cambodia would not be mounted from Thai soil. Having been told that from Washington, he was confident in saying that to the Thai government. In fact, one of the helicopters taking off for the operation out of northeast Thailand crashed, and 40 U.S. airmen died in the crash. It became public knowledge that the operation was being mounted from Thailand without the knowledge of the U.S. Chargé d'affairs. Ed Masters was furious, and the Thai people were even more furious. The Thai government was furious.

Q: What a loss of face for the Thai government.

HARBIN: So the university students in Chiang Mai attacked the American consulate. Happily, when it happened, I happened to be looking at the refugee situation up near the Laotian border. I was not in Chiang Mai. But my family was in the consulate because the house and consulate were co-located in the same compound. One of my FSN employees, Bradit, was so dedicated that when he saw that the demonstration was headed toward our house, he came in his own car and rescued my family and took them to a hotel. Not much damage was done to the consulate as it turned out. They made a lot of noise, and they tore down the sign and a few things like that but no real serious damage to the consulate was done. I am no friend of Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger as a result of that experience. Actually, I met Gerald Ford in a later assignment.

Q: Are there any other memorable things from Chiang Mai?

HARBIN: I think maybe the most important from a professional perspective was, I said. I was off looking at the refugee problem. When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the Hill Tribe people who had fought for us in Laos on the CIA payroll came across into Thailand. Several thousand of them came across into northern Thailand in my consular district. I had to go up to see how they were being received. I reported back to Washington after visiting the camp. I discovered that these Hill Tribe people in Laos are the same people on the Thai side of the border in the hills of northern Thailand. They were, in effect, going to their own kins-people when they came across the border.

Q: There were Hill Tribes in Thailand?

HARBIN: I discovered that the Thai government was doing a pretty good job of receiving these Hill Tribe refugees, thousands of them. They were establishing primitive camps up in the highlands of northern Thailand, and they were feeding them. They were establishing basic health precautions, and I reported back to Washington what I found.

Again, this is an illustration of how Washington has its own ways and ignores what is going on in the field. The CIA in Washington, I think, felt very responsible for these people. Many of them had been on their payroll. They had put a lot of pressure on the Congress and the State Department to establish a refugee program and to bring those people to the United States. When I heard about it, I objected very strongly to it on the grounds that these are people who are not even living in the twentieth century and to put them in Orange County, California, was going to mean failure. I felt very strongly about this, and I sent messages to the embassy and to Washington, indicating that I was very much opposed to it and it wasn't the right thing to do. So Washington sent out a representative from the refugee office in the State Department to meet with me. It just so happened the guy they sent was a personal friend of mine, Shep Loman. I don't know whether you know Shep or not.

Q: I don't think so.

HARBIN: He'd also been in Vietnam. In fact, he got my wife's family out of Vietnam. He was in the political section in Saigon. Shep came, I took him out to show him the refugee camps, and he agreed with me. He said he would go back to Washington and, as long as I was consulate in Chiang Mai, he would not take any Hill Tribe people out of those camps. They would take any lowland ethnic Lao who had some U.S. government connection. They could come out of the camps but not the Hill Tribe people.

Q: These were Hmong?

HARBIN: Yes, they were Hmong.

Q: Did they come primarily from southern Laos?

HARBIN: They came from northern Laos but, if you know anything about the Hmong, most of them are, in fact, in south China. It's a huge Hill Tribe and most of them live in China. A lot of them live in Laos and some of them live in Vietnam even. A lot of them live in northern Thailand, too. The agreement was that as long as I was consulate in Chiang Mai, there would be no Hmong taken. I was pleased that Shep at least went back and got Washington to accept that agreement. Of course, that sort of numbered my days in Chiang Mai.

Q: There was a good part and a bad part.

HARBIN: Right. I was in Chiang Mai for just two years. That was a normal tour. Anyway, I still see Shep from time to time, and he said I was right and that anybody in the refugee program today admits I was right. They should never have brought the Hmong here who are still living in dire straits in places like Fresno, California.

Q: Can they function in a modern society?

HARBIN: They are not doing it very well. Most of them are still on welfare, and they are

very unhappy people.

Q: Who took over the labor portfolio in Bangkok when you left there?

HARBIN: That's a good question.

Q: Did you have any more contact with labor after going to Chiang Mai?

HARBIN: I didn't in Chiang Mai because you see even though I was committed to go back to the Harvard Trade Union Program, I was sort of diverted to Chiang Mai for two years and had nothing to do with labor. When I was in Bangkok, there was one labor story while I was there. A guy seemed to come out of nowhere during this period of experiment in democracy. He became the head of the hotel workers union. The hotel workers went on strike. His name was Ted Kungchidee, he was accused of being a communist, and he might have been. They closed down all the major hotels in Bangkok, and tourism was a very important industry, particularly at that time. Its percentage within the gross national product of Thailand was very important. In effect, the tourism industry was stopped. I was able to make contact with Ted Kungchidee. I even got him to come to my house, and I established a pretty good relationship with him, then the strike ended fairly soon. I guess that was my baptism of fire as far as handling labor problems because a lot of the hotels were either American-owned or full of American tourists.

Q: Did you get to know Pizan, the head of the Thai Labor Federation?

HARBIN: I did get to know him, yes, but at that particular time in history, it was the hotel strike that was important to hotel workers. That was the important thing. A lot of the organized workers in Thailand worked for the national railroad. I think Pizan came out of the national railroad, which was a government enterprise. Like everything else in Thailand, nothing comes from the grass roots up. It all comes from the king down. If the king is interested in labor, then they'll have a labor movement.

Q: After Thailand, where did you go?

HARBIN: In Chiang Mai, we actually got to know the king and queen personally.

Q: You did?

HARBIN: That was a very unusual experience for a Foreign Service Officer, especially one of a modest rank, to have dinner, to stay at the palace, and have dinner with the king and queen.

Q: Did you learn the King's Thai?

HARBIN: No. It is a very special language. Certainly, it was shocking to me, at this time in the twentieth century to see distinguished members of the aristocracy or the nobility. When we were in the dining room, they were at other tables, and my wife and I were with

the king and queen at the main table along with the American ambassador and his wife. When someone sitting at one of the other tables had to leave for any reason, they had to get down on their knees and crawl backwards out of the room because they could never let their head be higher than the king's head and the king was sitting down. So they had to crawl out of the room.

The king was very interested in agriculture, and the new head of AID's agriculture division from Bangkok came up to visit Chiang Mai, and the king, because of his interest in agriculture, invited him for dinner at the palace one night. In fact it was the next night after I was there. This fellow was a farmer type from Midwestern America and a very unsophisticated guy. He knew everything about agriculture but not much about the world. He was invited alone, the only foreigner invited for dinner that particular night. When the king and queen came back from their afternoon duties at Chiang Mai University, the king had an illness and wasn't hungry and couldn't eat, so he didn't come to dinner. The courtiers told my colleague that the queen would be the hostess that night for dinner. He was standing typically before the dinner. They have a cocktail hour where you stand around and talk to all the other people who are going to have dinner that night, and he was the only foreigner and didn't speak Thai. He was standing there minding his own business waiting for the queen and suddenly looked around and everybody in a matter of seconds had all disappeared. He looked down, and they were all down on the floor with their foreheads on the rug, so he got down on the floor, too. He put his forehead down on the rug. No one was saying anything, so he didn't know how long he had to stay there. While he was there, he started very slowly to raise his head to peek to see what was going on. He said that right in front of him were two of the most beautiful legs he had ever seen, and he was looking up the skirt of the queen of Thailand, who had recognized him as the only foreigner there, so she'd gone up to him greet him.

Q: That's a funny story.

HARBIN: Anyway, the king was a very interesting person. He was promising to die back in 1974 while I was there but he is still not dead. He is a hypochondriac. He always thinks that he's sick.

Q: He was educated in America, wasn't he?

HARBIN: When I was at Harvard at the Trade Union Program, I had dinner at the house where the king lived and was born. An American doctor who lived in Massachusetts owns the house now, and it is on Prince Street. The street is named after the king. He was born at Harvard in Massachusetts. His father was on a Fulbright Scholarship or something like that.

Q: After Thailand, you went to Harvard and attended the Trade Union Program with Joe O'Donnell?

HARBIN: Yes. It was an interesting experience, I must say. I think the FSOs were invited to participate because we became the cultural interpreters for the foreign labor leaders

with the American labor leaders who were participating in the program. I was sort of the Asia expert at that time. A Korean came to me one night and told me very seriously that one of the American labor leaders from the labor union had been so insensitive and made him so mad that he was going to get his knife and kill him. We always felt like these foreign guys were being ignored because they were really having a terrible time understanding not only the United States but the American labor leaders. Then, we had the wonderful experience of inviting the foreign students over. We happened to live on Commonwealth Avenue where the Boston marathon was run; it went right by our house. That day we had drinks and lunch for them, and they were so happy to be invited to an American home because almost nobody did it. Nobody invited them anywhere. When the runners started to come up—we were on Heartbreak Hill where we lived actually—the hill, it was getting pretty exciting and suddenly a Massachusetts State Police station wagon pulled up quickly and stopped in front of our house. From the back of that station wagon, out jumped Paul Newman who was making a movie about some woman running in the Boston marathon. All these foreign labor leaders were so impressed. Somehow I had arranged for them to see Paul Newman in person right in front of our house. He jumped out and grabbed his cameras and started taking movies.

Q: That's interesting. How did you find the program at Harvard?

HARBIN: For me it appeared as though Harvard was having a little joke on the American Trade Union movement. They had brought in these mid-level American labor leaders and tossed them to the young tigers in the Business School. The idea was that you would get into problem solving in a labor-management dispute. The MBAs had their chance to face real labor leaders and to try to resolve theoretical disputes with real labor leaders before they had to do it in real life. I thought it was like throwing raw meat at this guy, MBAs. I think the Business School felt they were putting something over on the American labor movement. Certainly, I enjoyed the year. My family enjoyed the year we spent at Harvard. It was not a wasted year. We learned things. I visited the Korean labor leader in Seoul many years later. I had a good visit with him when I was the regional labor guy for East Asia.

Q: Did you also spend a semester at the Kennedy School?

HARBIN: Yes. I spent the first semester at the Kennedy School, and it was very useful because I took Modern Japan with Ed Reischauer. I took a class with Joe Nye who later became Assistant Secretary. I took American Foreign Policy with Stanley Hoffman, and he talked about Kissinger, which was quite interesting. He and Brezinsky and Kissinger got their Ph.D.'s in the same ceremony at Harvard. So he talked about them. They were all rivals in effect from that time. Talking about Brzezinski, he said, "Remember he got the Columbian and Kissinger got the Harvard share." Hoffman indicated their intellectual capacities, he thought. He got the Harvard share later after Kissinger. He was a very interesting guy. Joe Nye was a very interesting guy. It was very good for us because, as graduate students, when they broke the big class down into sections, we were always in the section with the professor, rather than the graduate assistant. We got to talk to them and get to know them personally. That was very useful, I think. It was a big mistake to

move the labor training to FSI and not let us go out into a place like Harvard to get a different perspective not only on labor but on life. Training everybody in Washington all the time is not a good idea. Incestuous kinds of relationships develop.

Q: You might be interested to know that I am interviewing Joe O'Donnell on the 17th up in Plymouth, MA.

HARBIN: Really! How old is Joe now?

Q: He must be in his early 80s anyway.

HARBIN: It was almost a joke that he was sort of incompetent the way he ran the program. His secretary really was the only one who knew what was going on.

Q: Libby.

HARBIN: Yes, right. Joe was obviously a good representative of Boston because he was on the firefighters or something like that...no, the postal workers.

Q: He certainly had great stories to tell.

HARBIN: I don't remember the stories so much. I remember that one of my classmates, one of the American trade union guys, was from the California Firefighters of the Los Angeles Fire Department. He was a very sophisticated and nice guy. He was invited, of course, as a firefighter to visit the Boston Firefighters Union and went to their fire stations and all that. Because I was from Los Angeles, too, he used talk to me privately and say, "I can't believe these guys. They are sort of dumb Irish. They are so macho. The idea of putting all the equipment on to protect themselves when they get into a fire is a matter of honor for them not to put it on." They were obviously exchanging views as to how you fight a fire, and he said that these guys think you are not a tough guy if you don't go in and fight the fire with your bare hands. He was shocked.

Q: What did you do after Harvard, which takes you up to about 1977?

HARBIN: I went to Central America and became a regional labor attaché for the five Central American countries. This was my first full-time labor job. I was the first and maybe only one to have all five countries.

Q: Where were you stationed?

HARBIN: I was stationed at Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

Q: How long were you there?

HARBIN: I was there three years.

Q: Then that was until 1980.

HARBIN: Yes, and that was a very important time. That was during the overthrow of Samosa, the rise of the Sandinistas, the civil war in El Salvador, and the on-going troubles in Guatemala. In effect, I had three wars going on at the same time, and labor was involved in all of them. It was a very interesting time.

Q: What were some of the highlights you would like to share?

HARBIN: The first week I arrived in Honduras, I met the most famous labor leader in Honduran history, Oscar Flores. Unfortunately, he was dead. I went to his funeral and saw his body but he wasn't communicating very well. Oscar Flores was a very important guy because he was a personal friend of President Kennedy. He could go to the White House, and they had instructions to let him in any time. He had a rocking chair presented him by President Kennedy. The reason was that Oscar Flores had played a very important role in the history of the Honduran labor movement in making it a real on-going democratic movement. I was sent to Honduras because it was the only country in Central America that, in fact, had a valid labor movement. Oscar Flores really got the credit for a lot of that.

Andy McClellan whom we mentioned before, the AFL-CIO guy, was Oscar Flores best American friend. When the labor movement was created in Honduras, they needed help and cried out for help from wherever they could get it from overseas, and they got AFL-CIO to send Andy McClellan down to Honduras to give them advice. They had a strike going on. They in effect created the country of Honduras in the process because until that time, Honduras was run by the American banana companies. It is the quintessential banana republic. The banana companies operate on the north coast of Honduras, and the capital is in the highlands inland but it is a very weak government and they did whatever the American banana companies told them to do. The American banana companies ran the telephone system in Honduras, they ran the railroad in Honduras, and everybody worked for the banana companies on the north coast. The banana companies paid their workers in U.S. dollars, not in Honduran currency.

Q: Oh, is that right?

HARBIN: That was almost the only thing in the economy of Honduras. Flores was the leader of the strike against the banana companies, and they wanted—typical Latin America—their dignity. Being paid in U.S. dollars and being treated like people on a southern plantation before the Civil War wasn't exactly their idea of dignity. They conducted a strike. The government of Honduras was against it but the student movement at the university supported the workers. The AFL-CIO with Andy McClellan advised them how to go about winning the strike, and they did win the strike. By winning the strike, they created a modern government and society in Honduras. The unions become very important. Oscar Flores got President Kennedy personally to give them money through AID to build a whole large worker housing community, a suburb in effect of San Pedro Sula on the north coast of Honduras. It was very much against AID policy to build

private housing. Worldwide, that was their policy but President Kennedy wanted that.

Q: I thought that during the Alliance for Progress that there were other housing projects for workers.

HARBIN: This was the first one, I am sure. I gathered that there were other housing projects but they were done in a different way. I think that President Kennedy gave the money and got the union to be the key element in building the suburb. It became a union-administered housing area. In fact, I talked to the mayor of San Piedras when I was there one time, and he told me it was the most responsive suburb that he had. It was part of the city and if the city government needed anything done and needed the cooperation of the citizens, they always got it best from the union suburb.

Q: What were the major issues while you were there?

HARBIN: Are you talking about Honduras?

Q: Yes.

HARBIN: Well, there was a military government while I was there, and the unions were always at odds with them, of course. The issues at the banana plantations were often local issues, not so much national issues. The national issue that was perhaps the most important really wasn't exactly at my time but the so-called Soccer War—Do you remember that?—between El Salvador and Honduras. Soccer was the trigger that caused the war but, in fact, the real reason that the war broke out was that on these plantations—you see the country of Honduras is under populated and El Salvador is very over populated—the Salvadoran workers are very good and hardworking people because they have to be to survive. The banana companies in Honduras over the years had imported Salvadoran workers, and some of them were with the company for years. When they reached retirement age, the company promised to give them small plots of land as part of their retirement bonus where they could live out their lives on small farms. The Honduran workers were very upset about this, because they thought that because they were not Honduran that they should not have land in Honduras and should not be allowed to live there. There were a significant number of them, I guess, and the number of Salvadoran workers kept growing in the north coast. Finally, a real conflict broke out between the Salvadorans and Hondurans, and the Salvadorans were all forced to go back to El Salvador even though they lived their work life in Honduras. That was the reason. When the workers came back to El Salvador, the Salvadoran government and Salvadoran people were very angry when they heard all these stories about what the Hondurans had done to the Salvadoran workers. That was the real reason why El Salvador attacked Honduras. It wasn't the soccer game.

Q: When did that occur?

HARBIN: I think it was 1969.

Q: How about your regional responsibilities?

HARBIN: That was probably the more important part of my work when I was in Honduras because the real action was in Nicaragua and in El Salvador and, to a lesser extent, Guatemala. It took me about a year before the State Department bureaucracy finally agreed to give me money to travel. I was the regional attaché but I was only in Honduras. Our embassy was in Tegucigalpa so there was no advantage in giving me travel money. The DRA in the bureau took a year to get his act together and provide travel money.

When I finally got the travel money, I went to Nicaragua, particularly, and that was a time near the end of the Samosa regime. I was there just a few days before Samosa fell. I went back soon after the Sandinistas took over, and we had a labor program. We were trying to get a labor program in Nicaragua but Ambassador Larry Pezzullo had been a labor officer, so I was very fortunate in that respect. Fortunately, Pezzullo was required almost by Washington.

The policy of the Carter administration after the fall of Samosa was that we were going to turn a new page in our relations with Nicaragua. We are going to somehow get along with the Sandinista regime that had just taken over. They didn't want to hear any bad news in effect from Ambassador Pezzullo as to what was really going on when the Sandinistas took over and established their regime in Nicaragua. I had an advantage in that I was a regional labor attaché. I didn't live in Managua.

Ambassador Pezzullo was perfectly happy to have me come in, and I had a desk in the political section. I went out in the field all the time talking to people, visiting factories, talking to labor leaders, finding out what was really going on, and then coming back. I'd spend a few days in Nicaragua and, on my way out, I'd tell the ambassador what I'd seen and what I'd learned. I would then go back to Tegucigalpa and write my report from Honduras. I could say what was really going on in Nicaragua, and the ambassador could not. I early on recognized the sign that the Sandinistas were not going to play the game as far as labor was concerned. They intended to have a communist-style labor movement and that's all. I reported that all the time that I was there on the things that were happening. I was actually commended by CIA in Washington, because I was the only one reporting from the embassy as to what was really going on in Nicaragua.

Q: Didn't the ambassador want to report these things?

HARBIN: He wanted to but he couldn't. He had clearly been instructed by Washington not to send them any bad news about the Sandinistas.

Q: Was that by the Assistant Secretary?

HARBIN: I don't know who but the people in the political section were very frustrated. They knew what was going on also, but they couldn't report bad news about the Sandinistas. They couldn't report that there was no way ever that the U.S. government

was going to get along with the Sandinistas because the Sandinistas had no intention of getting along with the U.S. government. They had been trained by Fidel Castro. Thomas Bore, the grand old man of the Sandinistas, was a buddy of Fidel Castro's. He was just going to put a Cuban-type regime in Nicaragua. Those were his instructions, obviously, from Fidel. I was able to report on what I was finding out in that field. For instance, they took over the brewery, one of the biggest private enterprises there. They took it over despite the fact that the owners were willing to do whatever was required of the law, but the Sandinistas intended to expropriate it. The workers' union at the brewery that was already there had to be phased out and be replaced by a communist union. They told me in factories that I went into that when the Sandinistas took over the government strangers that didn't even work in the factory came in. They said that they were going to have a new election for officers and that they were going to be elected as leaders of the union. They were not even workers in the factory. They were part of the CST, the Sandinista Trade Union. Plant after plant that I visited, told me about these kinds of things happening. The democratic unions that were there were not allowed to participate in the elections. Outsiders came in and announced that they were going to be the leaders of the Sandinista union, and they would be only allowed to endorse the new leadership.

Q: Didn't you have to get a clearance from the embassy for your reporting on what was going on in Nicaragua?

HARBIN: Our ambassador in Honduras couldn't care less about what I said.

Q: Didn't you have to go back to Managua?

HARBIN: I reported orally to Pezzullo, the ambassador, about what I found.

Q: There is something wrong when the post gets, basically, restrictions on factual reporting.

HARBIN: Yes. What is the point of having an embassy if you don't want them to tell the truth. It's like the Chinese thing—cut off their tongue if they tell you what you don't want to hear. That was an interesting experience in Nicaragua.

Q: How about the other countries?

HARBIN: El Salvador was a very violent society. I remember the first time I called on the leader of the UCS, the *Compesino Union*, or the farmers' union. He was a very well respected guy. He was a leader in a little town outside the capital, and when I sat down there was one of those grills, a store-front kind of thing. They had a grill entrance, and the street was open outside. He said, "You know why we're sitting here? Somebody may throw a grenade in here. It could happen any time." Indeed, a year later he was killed.

Q: Someone threw a grenade?

HARBIN: No. It was worse than that. He was killed in a coffee shop at the Sheridan

Hotel, and he was sitting there with two of my colleagues, including Mike Hammer. Mike Hammer was the AFL-CIO guy who was in El Salvador and, in fact, had created this union with Jose Rodolfo Viera and one of his colleagues, Mark Pearlman.

Q: Was that after you left?

HARBIN: No. Actually, it happened in January 1981. I left at the beginning of February, and I normally would have been there at that meeting where they were killed. Because I was leaving the first of February, I was back home in Honduras getting ready to leave. It was extremely fortunate for me that I left at the time that I did. Otherwise, I would probably have been with those guys in the hotel coffee shop at the time. Another one of my contacts there, Philippe Valdera, was concerned with the industrial side rather than the *Compesino* side, and he was always difficult to meet with. He was really skittish. I did meet with him occasionally, and he also was murdered. A lot of my contacts in El Salvador really bit the dust.

Q: Then there was Costa Rica?

HARBIN: Costa Rica was a joke. It violated the George Meany rule of law that you cannot have a free democratic society without a free democratic labor movement. Costa Rica had a free democratic society but they didn't have a real labor movement. I think the AFL-CIO was always unhappy with the trade union. The head of the labor movement in Costa Rica was a bank worker.

Q: A bank worker?

HARBIN: He wore a suit and tie and was a banker. At the time when this was the most so-called democratic union or confederation, the communists were out in the banana fields and they were organized out there. They were unions. The democratic union was just losing the battle because they had this white collar image. They were proud of their white collar image, and they didn't want to be bothered with blue collar workers.

Q: Were they independent of the government?

HARBIN: Yes. They were independent of the government but the banking sector was very close to government. It was very much regulated by the government. I remember going into a Firestone factory in Costa Rica and talking to the workers there. I went to the Firestone plant because there had been strikes there. I said, "Why are you striking here? The American manager tells me you get paid higher than any other workers here in the industry. You are doing very well financially." I thought their answer was very interesting. "Well," they said, "the American manager never comes into the plant, he never comes around and pats us on the back, and he never comes around and talks to us. Even though he pays us a lot of money and he gives us everything we want in terms of monetary benefits, we want him to be a father, paternalism." They actually wanted the father image. They wanted to be able to tell him about their family problems and all that sort of thing. They wanted him to be father-like to them.

I think that's a basic problem the AFL-CIO has with the rest of the world, particularly the Third World. I found that in Thailand and other countries. Paternalism is alive and well in the Third World. The impersonal approach of American labor unions to their management is something that the foreigners don't understand. Third Country people, Asians particularly, and Latin Americans generally, don't understand. They think their boss should be their friend, their advisor, concerned with their family problems, coming to weddings and funerals, and all that kind of thing.

Q: So they don't understand the arms-length, equal-partner-at-the-bargaining-table kind of mentality; they want the old father image.

HARBIN: Yes, so a company union is not a dirty word. In Guatemala, for example, they had a very fine union, the Brewery Workers' Union. It had benefits, which no American union provided. For example, the management gave me a tour of the brewery, and we went into the dispenser at the brewery. They had big boxes in one room about the size of this table. I said, "What are those boxes for?" They open one of the boxes for me. It was a gift that was to be given—it was in the labor contract—every time a worker's wife had a child. The box had in it all of the diapers, all of the formula, all of the baby food, and all of the other goodies that the mother would need to take care of that child for the first year, or something like that. That was written into the labor contract.

Q: That's interesting.

HARBIN: I was astonished because I was sure that in the United States, despite all their chest thumping about how great the American labor movement was, there wasn't one that even had the inventory of everything that was in the box. They had to have exactly what was in the contract in the box. There's a different mentality. These guys gave me a tour of the factory, not the management. I didn't even meet any of the management people. They were allowed to come in and give me a tour. They didn't give me any samples. Indeed, they seemed to have a very constructive positive relationship going. The workers in the factory were very well paid.

Q: We covered four of the five countries. The fifth was El Salvador?

HARBIN: El Salvador was a tough one. I would drive in there early in the morning—I'd arrive by plane from Honduras—and on the drive into the hotel from the airport, there would be bodies tossed up on the medium that had been killed over night. People were being killed all the time. People were being killed indiscriminately in El Salvador. Personally, I never felt unsafe in El Salvador because they were not looking for Americans to kill.

But in Guatemala, every time I arrived at the airport, there was not only a driver but there was a security guard with a machine gun on his lap sitting in the front seat to drive me to the embassy and drive me any place. Because the difference was that in Guatemala, if you got killed, you got killed because they were looking for you. They only killed people

that they wanted to kill. I remember I went to a meeting in a hotel with a group of labor leaders in Guatemala. They said they wouldn't come unless I brought the ambassador with me because he was their safe conduct pass. They were sure that the Guatemalan government would not kill them if I had the ambassador with me in the room.

It was that kind of situation, a very different situation in Guatemala compared with El Salvador, even though there were more bodies lying around in El Salvador than there were in Guatemala. In Nicaragua there was a war going on but the only time I felt unsafe was the last night I was there before Samosa fell. They said it was dangerous to take the road early out to the airport. I said, Well, I'll stay at the motel across the street from the airport." It was a sort of ratty motel with individual cabins, like not one building. I discovered after I checked in that I was the only guest. There were about 80 cabins around, and at night I heard people walking around. I heard noise, and my cabin was the only one that had a light on, on the porch. I didn't sleep all night because I could hear people moving around. I sure was glad to get out of there the next morning.

Q: Any general observations on the advantages or disadvantages of a regional officer?

HARBIN: It was a tough row to hoe because our DCM in Costa Rica was very upset when I made a routine trip to Costa Rica and I told him, "There are so many important things going on in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala that I have to give Costa Rica a lower priority." He got very upset. Just by a lack of luck, the next ambassador in Honduras happened to be the DCM from Costa Rica. His name was J.R. Binns. I think I was right in my observation but he took it out on me when he became ambassador. There was no way you could keep all of the DCMs happy who were your bosses. In effect, you had five bosses, and there was no way you could keep them all happy. When I left, they assigned two guys to cover the region.

Q: I think more recently, it's been Honduras and Nicaragua.

HARBIN: It was reduced further after that but when I was there I had all five. That was the most challenging time, I suppose.

Q: I can imagine. You were there when things were really blowing apart. After Central America, where did you go?

HARBIN: I went to Canada for five years from 1980 to 1985.

Q: That must have been quite a switch after being in a war zone.

HARBIN: I couldn't get away from it because my main job was explaining our Central American policy to the Canadians. For five years, I had to do that. That was a constant problem because our policy in Central America had become one of the major issues between the United States and Canada. There the ambassador and the DCM particularly approved of the idea of my going out and talking to student groups and to other groups that wanted to debate U.S. policy in Central America.

Q: Was this during the Contra controversy?

HARBIN: Yes. I told them that the Contras were not something we had created. They were there already. In fact, when the Sandinistas took over in Nicaragua, a lot of the Nicaraguan army—Samosa's army, the lower-ranking part—fled across the border into Honduras. They were sort of moseying around near the border area. They didn't quite know what to do, and the Honduran army didn't know what to do with them. They didn't want to shoot them. They disarmed them. Then the Sandinistas passed a law that they would control prices of beef in the market in Managua and throughout Nicaragua they would control the prices. They established the price at a level that made it impossible for a farmer or rancher to make any profit at all. He would lose money by selling the beef at that price. So the ranchers, mostly in northern Nicaragua, started to drive their herds across the border into Honduras and sell them on the open market in Honduras so they could live. The Sandinistas started to chase them. They would come right into Honduras shooting and firing at them. There were some incidents starting there. The Honduran army didn't quite know how they were going to handle this one, so they started to rearm or let the Samosa troops have their weapons back to help defend themselves from the Sandinista insurgents into Honduras. That was the beginning of the Contras.

Q: So that was the beginning. I see.

HARBIN: The U.S. government was not involved at all at the beginning. I learned this when I visited down in Telatec., which is the nearest Honduran town to the Nicaraguan border.

Q: So these were the remnants of the Samosa army.

HARBIN: It was the Samosa national guard. Even all that talk here in Washington, all that business about Iran Contra and about the Contras, it never really got through to the American public who these people were and why they had been armed originally.

Q: In Canada were you the labor attaché?

HARBIN: I was counselor for labor affairs, and in that capacity, I also had the responsibility for reporting on the New Democratic Party, which was the socialist party of Canada. I spent a lot of time on that. I spent a lot of time with the Canadian unions. I was there when the Canadian Auto Workers broke off from the UAW in the United States. I got to know Bob White who was the leader of the Canadian Auto Workers Union.

Q: What were the basic elements?

HARBIN: I think Bob White was a very ambitious man. At the time, he was regarded as the future leader of the NDP, the New Democratic Party, and even a future prime minister of Canada. He saw himself in that role, and others saw him seriously as a future

prime minister of Canada. He had political ambitions of his own, which were pretty well known. Doug Frazier was not up to dealing with Bob White.

Canada was very unusual. Every major American union calls itself an international union because they have a Canadian component. As I indicated from my experience at Harvard, the American leaders, especially at the mid-level, are not very diplomatic in their dealing with foreigners. They just didn't recognize that the Canadians were not Americans. They used to mistreat them a lot. I was always being told stories by Canadians about how they had gone to the convention in Pittsburgh or they had gone to the convention in Detroit and how the Americans had treated them. It was quite obvious that the Canadian unions' components would break off. UAW was, I think, the first big component that broke off.

Q: What were some of the other issues that occupied you while you were there?

HARBIN: There was one but it was on the security side and I guess I'd better not talk about that. Canada is a very peculiar country in many ways. Americans have the idea that Canada is our best friend, and it is not. Remember, Canada is the regional anti-American country. Canada was founded by people who were the losers in the American Revolution. They went to Ontario and Nova Scotia and places like that. They don't like the United States. That's why their ancestors went there. Ironically, despite this distaste for everything American, when they travel, they all go north and south, they don't go east and west.

Q: They like Florida.

HARBIN: You are right. In fact, there are thousands of Canadians today living illegally in Florida. We talk always about Mexican illegals in California and Texas. Florida is full of thousands of Canadians who have sold their homes in Canada, bought a condo in Florida, and retired there and made their home in Florida. They never bothered to go through American immigration.

I was just sort of trailing off on one thing. I believe I found a way to word it because I want to be a little careful here. That is, when I was in Canada, the U.S. was coming up with the Trident program, the Trident submarines. They are extremely large, about two-football field lengths, or something like that. We were going to base them in Bremerton, Washington, and they have to go out through Puget Sound. There is a very narrow strait there, apparently, going out to sea. There has always been a prohibition pretty much by AFL-CIO against contact with communist union leaders. But it so happens that the leader of the fishermen's union in British Columbia is a communist.

Q: Wow. I didn't know that.

HARBIN: I had to go out there, meet him, talk to him, and find out what his views were. I had to find out what kind of personal relationship we could establish because there could have been incidents involving fishing boats with these large submarines going back and forth. That was the kind of issue that I had to deal with as a labor officer. It was kind

of unusual because you don't think of us as being involved with submarines but, in fact, I was in Canada.

Q: How about trade issues?

HARBIN: Just one thing. I mentioned Central America as the big issue when I was in Canada. I actually had established and was fortunate to establish a personal relationship with a member of parliament who was quite supportive of our policy in Central America. The embassy in Ottawa is right across the street from the House of Parliament, so I found myself, at one point, providing information to him on something that had just happened in Central America. Then I went back to the embassy, looked at the Canadian C-Span, and watched him get up in the House of Parliament and read what I had just written. I received a meritorious honor award while I was in Canada, based on what I did on Central American policy.

Q: Oh, very good.

HARBIN: That was my only meritorious honor award. I thought that I earned it, actually.

Q: Are there any other things about your tour in Canada that were noteworthy?

HARBIN: The Canadian labor unions were always breaking up in some direction, of course. Finally, there was a break up between the pro-American and the anti-American labor leaders. It came out, particularly in the building trades. A guy named James McCambley was from one of the building trade unions, and he broke with the Canadian Labor Congress over relations with the American counterparts. He established another national confederation in Canada. That was a bit awkward for me because I had to, of course, maintain contact with the CLC, the Canadian Labor Congress, which was the big equivalent of the AFL-CIO. Also, I had to not discourage or maintain, certainly, contacts with this breakaway group, which was pro-American by definition. The Teamsters got involved, and the Teamsters were pro-American. It was kind of interesting. I got to know the Teamsters Union president. I think Pierre Trudeau, of all people, appointed him as a senator in the Canadian senate. The head of the Canadian Teamsters Union is a member of the senate in Canada. The unusual thing was, he was the only Canadian senator who had his own executive jet.

Q: That's like Jackie Presser.

HARBIN: I knew Jackie Presser here, too. I thought it was amusing when you think of the U.S. senators and how many millionaires we have in the U.S. Senate, and the only member of the Canadian senate who had an executive jet was the Teamster.

Q: What about the unions in Quebec? Were they part of the CLC or did they have separate unions?

HARBIN: They are interesting in that a guy named Louis LeBerge was the president of

the Quebec Federation of Labor. They were part of the CLC but Louis was a very independent fellow, and Dennis McDermott who was then the head of the Canadian Labor Congress was very deferential to Louis. Quebec, as you may know, is just across the river from Ottawa, the national capital. When they would have a rally in Ottawa to demonstrate about something or other, McDermott who was from Toronto, Ontario, had to make sure that Louis LeBerge was going to bring his troops and participate in a major way. Louis knew how to play the game very carefully and played his cards very well. It's kind of interesting in that you see today that Quebec always seems to get more than it deserves in terms of its numerical size in Canada. But Louis LeBerge has managed to always get a little bit more than he deserved in terms of membership in the Canadian Labor Congress. I did get to know Louis LeBerge, and had frequent visits to Montreal, and I did get to know them. The labor movement in Quebec is not particularly close to any of the political parties there, I don't believe. It tends to be a more bread and butter kind of thing. They are effective. It is a substantial movement. In Canada, generally of course, the percentage of organized labor is higher than here.

Q: Is labor active in some of the maritime provinces like Labrador and St. John's Island up there as well?

HARBIN: It's there but the unemployment rate is so high in the maritime provinces that labor has a hard time maintaining its membership and its influence in the society because there are so many unemployed people. They had very strange laws. For instance, if you are in the Maritimes and because of this unemployment problem, the Government of Canada would pay young unemployed workers to relocate to areas of Canada that were labor short. They would pay a substantial amount of money for people to relocate. Here, if somebody is unemployed in New York, they'll go to Pennsylvania or something on their own, move the family, and get a job. In Canada, no. The government pays to move you from one province to another province where you can find work.

Q: Do you have to pay the money back if you leave?

HARBIN: No. I don't think they check. That's an example of the Canadian deficit. The Canadian public debt is greater percentage-wise in terms of population than our own public debt. A lot of it is these kinds of welfare benefits, and workers are major beneficiaries of this there in Canada. Whereas here, we tend to have benefits based on labor contracts, collective bargaining contracts; in Canada, the tendency more is to have benefits based on public law. A lot of these good things, like I was saying about the relocation, is because laws have been passed in the parliament providing these things, not because of some collective bargaining contract.

Q: Is the labor movement very political there? You mentioned that the labor movement in Quebec was relatively apolitical. How about the CLC?

HARBIN: The CLC is the major founder of the New Democratic Party. The Socialist Party was founded by the Canadian Labor Congress. It is the most important element in the Socialist Party of Canada. You may have noticed in the recent election [1997] the

NDP got 21 members of parliament; before they only had 3, I think. The NDP means New Democratic Party and that is, in the European term, the Socialist party. Bob White was born in Northern Ireland, and Dennis McDermott, of course, is Irish. There seems to be a large element of people from the British traditional labor movement who reach the highest level of the Canadian labor movement, and they are often born in Britain. Our people in the early part of the century, like Gompers, were born in Britain. Today in Canada, you still have people who were born in Britain who are leaders of the labor movement, and they are more militant because of that. NDP won 21 seats, and I think their previous high had been 20 seats. Our conclusion, generally, was that they were never going to get much more than 20 seats. Right now they are at their high tide, in effect, which is kind of interesting. They always aspired to be the official opposition. They became actually the government of Ontario about 15 years ago. I knew the people who were there. For the first time, the Socialists took over the whole province of Ontario, which is by far the most important part of Canada. They ran afoul of corrupt charges, womanizing, and stuff like that.

Q: Do you have any summary observations about Canada you'd like to make before we go to your next assignment?

HARBIN: I think Canadians are darn lucky. They got a front row seat to the biggest show on earth, and they don't appreciate it.

Q: In 1985 then you came back here, didn't you?

HARBIN: Yes. I came back here as the regional labor advisor for East Asia and the Pacific and was in that position for a couple of years. I then moved up to Tony's in SIL, I think, for a while. Then, I went to study Italian and went to Rome. Rome was my last assignment as a labor officer.

Q: Okay, do you have any special issues you focused on, EAP for example?

HARBIN: In EAP I had the opportunity to visit all of the countries of the region that I had not known before. I visited Australia, New Zealand, and I got back to Korea where I had been in the army in the early 1950s. The experience in Korea was probably the most interesting in that, as a G.I. in the army back in the 1950s, Korea was a country that had 40 miles of paved roads total. There was one bridge over the Han, which was in our rear, and we were scared to death that if that bridge ever went down, we were cut off. The Han River is about as big as the Mississippi. It's huge. When I went back in 1987, there were so many bridges across the Han that I couldn't find the original bridge. Of course, the streets of Seoul were filled with Hyundai and other cars. The standard of living was obviously high, almost as high as that of Japan. To see a handful of G.I.s in fatigues sort of lost on the streets of downtown Seoul, to me, was like seeing Willie and Joe from World War II suddenly showing up in downtown Washington. In a way, I was very proud of it because I realized that the sacrifices that we had made in Korea had been really worthwhile.

Q: People benefited from our involvement there.

HARBIN: It was an unbelievable success. I couldn't have dreamed of it when I was there. When I was there, people were walking around with A-frames on their backs. I don't know whether you have ever seen an A-frame but it is like the letter "A" with a cross thing across there, and they carried everything but the kitchen sink on it, and they walked. Nobody had a bicycle. Nobody had anything except their own feet to move them around. I was just astonished to see what a change had occurred in those years.

Then, I met my old friend the labor leader. He told me some interesting things. He said that the problem in Korea—and you see it even today—is that his own children—he used them as examples—had to live in Seoul to attend university. He lived outside of Seoul but if you wanted a child to go to university, all the universities were in Seoul. That means, at age 18, he had to send all the kids to Seoul. The city was just full of 100,000 or more college students and easily manipulated because of this nationalistic reason, because of the division in Korea. With all these agitators, it was just like having a big box of matches they could play with. It was very difficult to have a democratic society. Just imagine if all the universities in the United States were here in Washington.

Q: Why don't they spread them out a little more?

HARBIN: Somehow it happened this way, probably because the country had been so poor. When I was there, no one would dream of having a university at any of the other places. They just started off, and they kept adding and adding and they all stayed in Seoul.

Q: What about the other countries in your area?

HARBIN: I got to New Zealand, which was a very strange place. I remember that the leader of the New Zealand trade union movement was a fellow traveler. Literally, was he a fellow traveler. Not only was he pro-communist but he traveled all the time. He was always on the go somewhere, and he always was showing up. He was a thorn in our side, I guess. He was always very anti-American. When I got there, I was very surprised that the labor attaché made an appointment for me to meet this guy. He said that half the time he doesn't show up if you go to meet him, but he showed up. I had flown halfway around the world, and I guess that had something to do with it. I did get to meet the guy. I think his name was Knox or something like that. He was indeed a pretty sorry sight.

The reason that New Zealand was important was because we had this NCND problem, neither confirm nor deny nuclear weapons on navy ships. We in the regional affairs office of the bureau were obviously concerned about New Zealand going this way and establishing a model policy, which we would regard as real problems if the whole world adopted it. The unions in New Zealand were very much out in front on the policy of keeping U.S. nuclear ships out. When I came back from my talk with this guy, I realized what a knuckle head he was. Maybe it was about the time when it was a big anniversary of the signing in Tokyo Bay of the peace treaty with Japan. That would have been 40 or

50 years maybe. Anyway, there was a big event coming up. In connection with that event, the *USS Missouri*, which was still activated, was going to Australia. It had been invited by the Australians to come. Oh, I know, it came because some important thing was happening in Australia. I think it was the 100th year of Australia's commonwealth status. We were sending the battleship, the *USS Missouri*, to Sydney. We came up with a scheme in our regional affairs bureau that we would get our naval attaché in Wellington to offer the USS stop by the *USS Missouri* to the New Zealanders. Of course, we would neither confirm nor deny that there were nuclear weapons on it. We wondered how in the world the New Zealanders who had been present in Tokyo Bay in 1945, could refuse a visit by the *USS Missouri* to their dinky little island. I don't know how it worked out eventually but we thought that was worthwhile.

Q: ...way to handle New Zealand. And what other countries did you visit?

HARBIN: I was in the Philippines several times. That was an important time. The trade union movement in the Philippines was very friendly to the United States, of course, and very much influenced by AFL-CIO. A guy named Herrera won the George Meany Award for humanitarian, you know the annual award that they gave. Herrera was the winner of that award for human rights. He was one of the leaders to bring down Marcos in the Philippines. He had been one of the very few people to stand up to Marcos and get away with it. He had actually been injured but I did get to know Herrera, and I visited both Clark and Subic Bay, our big navy bases. At Subic Bay, the guy was the head of the union of base workers there. It was an interesting situation because Filipinos, generally, wanted the U.S. to get out of the bases but the head of the base workers union was, in effect, inviting putting himself out of business.

Q: Did he want us out of there?

HARBIN: No, he didn't. The general Filipino public wanted us out. In fact, it was interesting because official Americans, privately, wanted the military to get out. They felt—and I think rightly so—I felt it certainly—that the Philippines was never going to grow up as a country as long as we insisted on that major military presence there. We were sort of like a father unwilling to let his child grow up. Indeed, it's worked out that way. I thought it was typical. The Filipinos know us too well. It was amusing to see as I came out of the Subic base. The labor leader had invited me to lunch, so he picked me up inside the base and we came out. I'd had a tour of the base by the base commander. As we came out under the public's feet, as we passed the MPs at the gate, the Filipinos had a huge sign that I could see all the way across the street. It said, "Welcome to Subic Bay, Bill Harbin." That was pretty impressive. They were just obviously flattering us. They are too good at flattering us.

Q: Anyhow, about 1987 you moved to the SIL office?

HARBIN: I think I was just there sort of in between because I was slated to go overseas. I was only there for a very short time. I was filling in for somebody.

Q: Maybe it was Jim Mattson when he moved?

HARBIN: Yes, maybe Jim Mattson. Then I went to Italian language training and went to Rome for my last assignment.

Q: How long were you in Rome?

HARBIN: It was about three and one-half years.

Q: That was from 1987 to 1990, roughly?

HARBIN: No, it was 1989 to 1992.

Q: Did you retire from Rome?

HARBIN: No. I came back here for one year. I was in the ILO office in Washington.

Q: Do you want to tell us about Rome and the issues there?

HARBIN: The Italians are just wonderful people. I must say it was pleasant dealing with Italians after five years of dealing with Canadians.

Q: I am not sure your Canadian friends would like to hear that.

HARBIN: Well, you are recording it. The Italians are very friendly, and one of the things that I did while I was there, for the first time and probably against the AFL-CIO's wishes, I was to establish relations with the communist union confederation, which is the largest one in Italy.

Q: That's the CGIL?

HARBIN: Yes, it is the CGIL. I went to their convention, and I felt strongly that you can't ignore the biggest labor organization in the country, which was the union that had broken with the Soviet Union. It was not a member of the World Federation of Trade Unions. It was not part of the communist international organization. It was opposed to the international communist movement. It had a pretty good reputation in Italy and, indeed, some of the Italians I spoke to said that they often elected, when they had elections in the unions, a communist because the employers were more afraid of the communist leadership of the unions. As a result, they did better in negotiation and collective bargaining than the non-communist unions.

Q: So they had more credibility than either the WEIL or CHISEL, the Christian Democrats?

HARBIN: The communists already were successful in their negotiations and they, indeed, curiously tended to be less concerned about ideology and more about bread and

butter issues and things that were important to the membership. It was a legitimate union movement. It was very large and very successful. It was interesting to me that, early in this decade, the Italian political organization completely flopped. The whole system failed because all of the political parties were corrupt. The public finally got fed up and threw them all out. The unions came off smelling like a rose.

Q: Was that true of even the CHISEL and the WEIL?

HARBIN: The reason was, curiously, the Italian law, which made the Italian public administration was so bad. The peculiarity about the Italian system was that the Italian government could not deliver checks like the Social Security Administration does here in the United States. They could not deliver the benefits that workers earned and, as a result, unions had, in effect, contracted out with the government to provide those services. If you wanted to apply for a social security benefit in Italy, you didn't go to the government, you went to the union. The unions get a percentage, sort of a contractor's fee, from the government for doing that. Because of those fees and the membership dues, the unions were clean and had enough money to do what they needed to do with cheating or being corrupt.

Indeed, they also had a significant amount of money, like AFL-CIO does, for working overseas. The Italian unions do provide assistance to unions in other countries. When the political system collapsed, the unions were among the few institutions in the country that were still clean. The head of WEIL, George Benvenuto, was invited by the Socialists to become the secretary of the Italian Socialist Party. He had a clean reputation. After about two months, he quit. He said, "There's too much corruption in this party. I can't stand it." So, he quit. It was interesting to see that the unions maintained their dignity and their reputation during all this period when the whole political system collapsed.

Q: Everybody else was caught with fingers in the till. You mentioned that the Italian trade union movement provided labor assistance to other countries. Which countries were they active in and which of the three federations were involved?

HARBIN: They typically provided funds through their counterpart confederation, like if it were the Christian Democratic Union (CHISEL), they would provide to a Christian Democratic Union in Venezuela or someplace like that. The communist union would provide, too. The communists were not so active, actually, in the international field. I know the Christian Democrats and the Socialists were.

Q: Where were the Christian Democrats active?

HARBIN: I know they were active in Venezuela, and I think they were in Central America, also. We always had difficulty with them because they weren't very reliable in terms, if you agree, well will you do this or do that.

Q: Did the AFL-CIO cooperate in any joint projects with the CHISEL?

HARBIN: I'm not sure about that. I know the AFL-CIO cooperated a lot with Histadrut a lot in Israel but I'm not sure about the Italians. Frankly, I think I was not very impressed by the work they did. I knew what country they were working in, I knew how much money they were putting in, but the results were not very good. In fact, I think what happened was, most of the money was going for travel of the Italian labor union leaders to the countries. They were traveling abroad visiting all of these places and more frequently than they needed to.

Q: It was the little payoff, not the big payoff.

HARBIN: Yes, I think so. One other thing happened in Italy of which I am proud. I was there when the Persian Gulf build up occurred, and we were getting ready for the war in the Persian Gulf. One day I was called in to the Ministry of Labor by the vice minister. The vice minister of labor wanted to see me, which was very unusual. He said he had a problem. He said that all of the unions were threatening to go on strike. The reason was that an American PX manager in an American military facility in southern Italy had fired several members of the union in his PX. He had humiliated them by calling them in, collecting all of their ID cards, and all of the things that allowed them to move around the base. He marched them to the gate, parading them in front of everybody and throwing them out. One of them, of course, was the son of the union leader. He said he caught them stealing, or something, from the PX. I don't know what. Anyway it caused an uproar because of the public humiliation. It had gone up to the vice ministry level, and the Italian ministry in Rome.

As a result all of the unions were going to go on strike. Particularly, they were going to stop all the trains in the country. That week, the trains were in a classified period. The armor from our armored divisions in Germany was coming by train to Italy and was going to go out through Italian ports to the Persian Gulf. That was the most critical time in the movement of these tanks, and they were going to go on strike. They were going to stop it. I was really backed into a corner. I told the vice minister that I was very sorry to hear about the incident, and I thought that the behavior had not been appropriate. I said that we would conduct a full investigation, and I would report back to them but I needed time, I said, to do all of this. And he said, okay, how much time do you need? I said ten days. He actually prepared a notice that was posted in every American base in Italy with my name on it, saying the American labor counselor has promised there will be a full investigation of this incident and that appropriate measures will be taken, depending on the results of the investigation and all that. At a result, they canceled the strike.

Q: You knew that the equipment was being shipped at that time?

HARBIN: Yes. I knew all I was doing was fighting for time. Ten days was all I needed to finish the shipments.

Q: Did the shipments go out all right?

HARBIN: They went out okay and got to the Gulf.

Q: What about the investigation?

HARBIN: It sort of petered out. All they needed was ten days.

Q: Did the army understand why you were getting involved in their PX-es?

HARBIN: This was not the army. It was more the PolMil section of the embassy. It was very angry because I was doing this. I was taking the responsibility for what they regarded as a PolMil section problem. But, they weren't called in by the vice ministry of labor.

Q: Did they have an alternative?

HARBIN: No, they were just typical. They gave a superior honor award to the PolMil counselor. There is no justice! To really rub my face in it, I was the chairman of the awards committee, and they said I *would* do it.

Q: Anything else in your tour in Italy that you want to mention before we turn to the Department?

HARBIN: I don't think there's anything else in Italy that important. I could talk for a long time about it but I don't think it's all that important.

Q: Your final tour, then, was in the Department from 1992 to 1993?

HARBIN: I was the first FSO loaned to the ILO office in Washington. Steve Flossberg was the director of the ILO in the Washington office, and I was on loan as an experiment because I had one year left. They couldn't give me a regular assignment. Tony Freeman arranged for me to be loaned to ILO for one year.

Q: How did that work out?

HARBIN: I think it worked out pretty well. I got an excellent efficiency report from Steve Flossberg, which I wrote myself. I think it really turned out pretty well. After all, they assigned Tony Freeman there. I must have made a pretty good impression. I suppose the most important thing I did there was they asked me to set up a seminar for Latin American ministers of labor. Not only ministers of labor but labor union leaders and management representatives attended the seminar.

Q: So it was a tripartite meeting.

HARBIN: It was a tripartite meeting in Santo Domingo to discuss current new trends in labor relations in the hemisphere. That required, of course, getting a lot of people to participate and getting some experts from the academic field, also, to come and talk about what they saw as the trends.

Q: Did you attend the seminar?

HARBIN: Yes, I attended. It was funny because I had really been brought in at first as sort of a minor player in all of this because AID was funding it. As time went on, AID turned to me more and more to actually run it. I went to Santo Domingo and did participate. It turned out pretty good, I thought.

Q: Did the other members of the office also participate?

HARBIN: I was the only one from Washington. We had some ILO experts from Geneva and also from their hemisphere headquarters in Santiago, Chile, I think. The guy from Santiago came up and spoke. They had some very good people participating. It turned out to be a very useful experience.

Q: Did secretary Wright attend?

HARBIN: No, I forget who came from the Labor Department. The Latin American guy came and area specialists and other people, I think, came from the Labor Department.

Q: Did you retire at that point?

HARBIN: I retired at the end. I went to Geneva for some orientation when I first came in, so I did get to know a lot of the people in the ILO headquarters in Geneva, and I must say I was very impressed by the quality of the people that I met there and the individual experts that ILO had in Geneva. I have always been very skeptical, like many Americans, of the U.N. I must say that the great majority of ILO people that I met in Geneva were dedicated, professional, quality experts, and doing a good job, I thought. That was, for me, very useful to know. I felt comforted by all of the money that the U.S. spent on the U.N.

Q: After you retired, I believe you stayed in Washington for a while working on the Freedom of Information Act.

HARBIN: I have been working on that for the past couple of years but the first year, I don't know what I did. I guess I moved back and forth because we have a house in California, and we've had that house for 13 years. My wife and I went out and started to fix up the house and, gradually, we finally decided we would settle in California. I would come back here just to work occasionally. I was appointed as a consultant to the State Department in WAE, so I come back here about five months out of the year.

Q: And you rent this apartment here?

HARBIN: I own this apartment.

Q: You own this apartment. It's a condo.

HARBIN: That's pretty much what I've been doing.

Q: Any generalizations about the labor attaché program?

HARBIN: I am very sad to hear that so many of our positions are being downgraded in embassies around the world. I gather that the labor counselors will probably be out of business and that the rank is lower. They won't have the same access to the same high levels that I had access to in places like Ottawa, Rome, and so on. You can't go in if you're a second secretary. You can't go in and see the minister or vice minister of labor if you are ranked that low.

Q: It is probably better to call someone a labor attaché than a second secretary.

HARBIN: Yes. That's the only way to get around it, I suppose, but labor counselor sounds better, certainly. I guess my concern is that the important thing about the labor attaché is that they had and should have, certainly, a grass roots kind of position where they are talking to people who are not from the same social class as the people that everybody else in the embassy is talking to all the time. I think that it's very important to know the people. I remember Jim Shay's story where when [Australian Prime Minister] Bob Hawk came to Washington and made his first visit to the White House. He saw the dinner list for the White House dinner, he said, "Where's Jim Shay's name on here?" Jim Shay was the only American he knew.

Q: Jim "Shy."

HARBIN: Jim "Shy," okay. So they had to grab for Jim Shay about two hours before the White House dinner. They grabbed him out of his home, dressed him, and put him in the White House. I think, after all, most people are working people around the world, and the labor attaché's job is to have contact with them and their leaders. I always, to the distress of some of my commercial attaché friends, thought we ought to make joint visits to plants. They could talk to management, and I could talk to labor leaders in the plant.

Q: Good idea.

HARBIN: They, of course, weren't terribly enthusiastic about that, but sometimes it happened. We did go to a Fiat plant, I remember, in Monte Casino, Italy. The two of us went together to tour the plant. I think it would be unfortunate if we go back to the time when American embassy people only spoke to the highest levels of society.

Q: What about the relations between the labor attachés and the AFL-CIO? Did you find the working relations generally good?

HARBIN: Well, John Sweeney is a friend of mine now. May I tell an anecdote?

Q: Of course.

HARBIN: John Sweeney and his wife came to Rome with their daughter who was 18 or 19 years old in my last year in Rome. He was, of course, before president of AFL-CIO, and he came up to my apartment and we had drinks. Then we went down to a restaurant near Piazza Navona in downtown Rome. We had to wait in line at the restaurant to be seated, so we were all lined up there and an Italian pinched Mrs. Sweeney, who was a very dignified and very gracious lady. Her daughter was standing behind her. Her daughter was outraged. She saw this happen. She saw this Italian reach over and pinch Mrs. Sweeney. Mrs. Sweeney just sort of smiled inwardly. She didn't seem to be bothered at all by it but her daughter was outraged. I was laughing, and John Sweeney was laughing about it. Italian men move in such a swift way you are never sure who the guilty party is.

Q: But it really happened.

HARBIN: It really happened. She really was pinched, and Mrs. Sweeney took it in good grace but her teenage daughter was very upset.

Q: Are there any final observations you'd like to make before we conclude?

HARBIN: I think, obviously, the AFL-CIO and the American labor movement have a real challenge to find their new role in the world. Sweeney, I think, very rightly recognizes that they have to do it. They have to bring the AFL-CIO into, if not the 21st, at least into the 20th century. I know from my own grandfather's experiences early in the century that it's a tough row to hoe. It can ruin your life and affect your life, not necessarily in a positive way. Getting into the labor movement can affect your life in a very negative way.

Q: On that note, I want to thank you, Bill, for participating in the Labor Diplomacy Oral History Project and taking all of this time on a very nice Saturday afternoon.

HARBIN: It's November in June. It's kind of chilly.

Q: Okay, thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

End of interview