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

JAMES HIGGISTON

Interviewed by: Peter Eicher
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INTERVIEW

Q: Good morning. Today is March 17, 2022. This is Peter Eicher beginning a new ADST oral history with Jim Higgiston.

Good morning, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Good morning.

My name is Jim Higgiston. I retired recently from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service in April 2021 where I worked for thirty-eight years. I am very happy to be here and appreciate the opportunity to participate in the ADST oral history project.

Q: Okay. Well, I'm delighted you agreed to join the ADST oral history project. And let's start at the very beginning. Tell me when and where you were born.

HIGGISTON: I was born in Brooklyn, New York in March 1956. I lived in Brooklyn until I moved to Washington DC for graduate school in 1980. My mom was from the Bronx, my dad was from Brooklyn. My dad served in the army in World War II. My mom finished high school but never went to college. Both my parents had working class backgrounds. My mom was a stay-at-home parent until I went to high school, and then began working various jobs until she retired.

Q: And what did your dad do?

HIGGISTON: My dad worked for the New York Transit Authority. He also worked as a driver for a medical testing company, picking up medical supplies and tests from doctors and medical institutions primarily in Brooklyn and Queens

Q: Uh-huh. Were they long-time New Yorkers?

HIGGISTON: Yes. Both my dad's parents emigrated from Ireland. His mom and dad emigrated from Ireland between 1895 and 1905 and settled in Brooklyn. My grandfather

worked for the phone company. My grandfather on my mother's side emigrated from Italy and settled in the Bronx around 1905. He worked for the New York Parks Department. I don't remember meeting my father's parents. They died when I was very young. I vaguely remember my mom's dad. I met him once or twice, but it was towards the end of his life. And my grandmother, my mom's mother, I knew quite a bit. She would visit quite often, and we would visit her. Neither my grandparents nor my parents had any education background or experience in international affairs. It's interesting given the career path I wound up choosing.

Q: Did your mom's family also come from Ireland?

HIGGISTON: My mom was born here in the States. Her dad emigrated from Italy around the turn of the 20th century. My grandmother was of Italian descent but was born in the United States.

Q: Okay. You know, the Irish and Italian families tend to be enormous. Did you grow up with dozens of aunts and cousins and things like that?

HIGGISTON: No, we were something of an aberration. Most of the families I grew up with were large. I had one older brother who is six years older than I am. My mom's family was small with just 3 children. On the other hand, my father had 5 siblings– 2 brothers and 3 sisters although only one sister was married. A lot of my friends grew up with large families. It was quite different for me. For example, the family living next door to us was Italian-American, and they had twelve kids. I grew up in an area of Brooklyn known as Flatbush. It was primarily an Irish, Italian neighborhood, with a number of Jewish families. But it was really a very diverse neighborhood with folks from various backgrounds. The Irish Italian mix was quite popular in New York. My mom had an interesting background. She was Italian, and yet always associated herself with the Irish. She had all sorts or Irish chachka in the house including a big portrait of JFK in the dining room. She also preferred corned beef and cabbage over Italian meals. My brother and I could never figure that one out.

Q: Oh, interesting. Interesting.

Would these have been Catholic families? Were you a religious family?

HIGGISTON: Yes. We were raised Catholic. I went to a Catholic grammar school and a Catholic high school, as did my brother. We lived in a very Catholic neighborhood and went to mass on Sundays and religious holidays. On the other hand, I would never consider my family to be very "religious". As I mentioned I did go to Catholic grammar school and high school. Moreover, the high school was an all-boys school. Interesting to say the least.

Q: Oh, wow.

So, were you living in an apartment?

HIGGISTON: No. We were very fortunate. When my brother was born in 1950, My family was living in Bay Ridge, which is a part of Brooklyn where they lived in an apartment near my father's parents. My parents decided to buy a house in Flatbush around the time I was born in 1956. I believe my mom was the driving force behind that decision. They wound up buying a semi-attached home with a small backyard within walking distance of the grammar school.

Q: The whole neighborhood was kind of like that?

HIGGISTON: Yes. There were apartment buildings in the neighborhood but primarily single-family houses or attached houses. Not many people that I grew up with lived in apartments. I had one friend with whom I went to grammar school who lived in an apartment. His family was Irish and in fact, he returned with his family to Ireland when we were just starting high school. But for the most part, we all lived in single-family houses or semi-detached houses.

Q: So, it was kind of a suburban upbringing, you know, you'd go out and play in the streets or the yards and so forth?

HIGGISTON: In some ways it was a very suburban upbringing. When we were younger, we walked everywhere or rode our bikes around the neighborhood. It was obviously a different time. It was very safe or, at least, we felt it was safe. During the summer, my mom would kick me out of the house at 8:00 or 9:00 am and we wouldn't come back until lunch. There were a lot of kids on my block. There was probably a group of close to twenty-five or thirty kids living on our street of various ages. We would generally all hang out and play various games in the street like stickball, slap ball, touch football or other games popular during that time. Our parents gave us a fairly long rope. And so, we ventured all over the neighborhood especially as we got older. We all had bicycles and I would often spend the day riding and exploring the surrounding areas. It was interesting; when I moved back to DC after my first tour overseas with FAS, I was visiting some friends who had children and being told that children for the most part weren't allowed to play in the streets. They had to go to a park to play, of which there were many, probably for safety reasons. I contrasted that to my childhood where we would play stickball with someone standing in the middle of a four-lane avenue with cars going by. I'm always surprised sometimes that we survived.

Q: Yeah, times have changed a little bit, I think, you know, just turn the kids loose. You might get arrested for child abuse or something these days.

HIGGISTON: Absolutely. I mean my parents obviously wanted to know what we were doing, and it was not that they weren't concerned about us. But even in 8th grade we would ride our bikes to the beach all the time and spend the entire day at the beach. It was a public beach which was about a 30-45 minute ride depending on the traffic. And like I mentioned, we all had bikes throughout high school and really didn't drive. Everything was fairly close and public transportation was good too. But we would ride bikes

everywhere. And there were a lot of us. I remember in high school, there were so many of us that turned up at a party that his parents came out and said we had to leave because the floors were vibrating so much, they were afraid it was going to collapse. But there just seemed to be a lot of us. Many of my friends had brothers or sisters that were two years ahead of us, and we all used to hang out together. It was a big group and it was a lot of fun.

Q: Well, it sounds like it. And were most of the kids then in the Catholic school with you? Did kids also go to public schools?

HIGGISTON: I had a couple of friends that went to the public schools but most of them went to Catholic schools. In our area there was one Catholic high school for boys but at least 4 schools for girls. I have a close friend who went to Brooklyn Tech High School and became an architect. For whatever reason, some parents were concerned, justifiably or not, that public schools were not as "safe" as the Catholic high schools. And the Catholic schools at that point were still fairly cheap, if not free. I think the first two years I went to high school it was free for me. Also, I think given the choice a lot of folks just were sent, by tradition, to Catholic high schools.

Q: And that started for you in elementary school?

HIGGISTON: Yes, I could walk to my grammar school in about 15 minutes, and we would come home every day for lunch and go back.

Q: Really? Come home for lunch every day? Interesting.

HIGGISTON: Everyone was pretty much within walking distance from the school. There were no school buses. We would walk home every day about noon and have close to an hour for lunch. We would get out around 3 pm.

Q: And the nuns you were saying were the main teachers?

HIGGISTON: Yes, we had Dominican nuns that put a fear of God into me when I was growing up. They were tough, I have to say. (Laughs) But you know, I survived, and I still have some good stories about our experiences. There are several folks that I went to school with that I'm still friends with and we are often in contact, so it's nice.

Q: You wear a uniform?

HIGGISTON: Yes. The boys wore a light blue shirt with a blue tie and blue pants. And the girls had to wear a white blouse and if my memory serves me well, a blue skirt.

Q: So, there were girls in the elementary one then?

HIGGISTON: Yes, our elementary school, St. Vincent Ferrer, had both girls and boys.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: When I went to Nazareth, my high school, we were required to wear a tie, but that was a very loose rule because I think I wore the same tie every day for a year. I would just take it off and put it in my locker because if you didn't have a tie, regardless of what type of tie it was, you got detention, which we avoided at all costs.

Q: Ah, okay. Okay. Did you have other races at the school or was it lily white as much at the time was?

HIGGISTON: Our grammar school was definitely white. The majority of students in my high school were also white although there were some Hispanic and black kids that attended the school.

It wasn't really until I went to Hunter College, which was part of the City University of New York, that I really had integrated classes.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. Did you do sports?

HIGGISTON: I played basketball in both grammar school and high school. They were Catholic school leagues. The high school league played at night. I liked playing but was not very good. I tried out for the freshman basketball team at Nazareth. I made it to the last cut but that ended any of my dreams to play for the NY Knicks. So it goes. Towards the end of high school, a number of us began playing tackle football in a public park which was near my house. I was surprised that no one was seriously hurt during those games.

Q: Did you do the whole altar boy route?

HIGGISTON: Yes, I was an altar boy for several years when I was in grammar school. It was something all my friends wanted to do, especially given that there was an annual trip to Rye Beach amusement park every year. We started in fifth or sixth grade. It was only open to boys at that time. We served during mass during the week and on weekends. In addition, we served at funerals and weddings where we usually received a tip from the families. For a while I was a lector at mass, primarily on Sundays. I did but never felt comfortable being in front of so many people. Still don't care for it. I did have some close friends that served quite a long time, especially as lectors but by the time I finished high school, I stopped practicing.

Q: How about summertime? Did your family take vacations to other places?

HIGGISTON: My dad worked a lot. For a number of years, he worked two jobs. As I look back on it, he did not have a great life, but we were always taken care of financially. When we were younger, we would sometimes go away for a week to the Catskills in upstate New York. It was very popular with Irish families. Other than that, we really didn't take many long vacations. We did not live very far from the beach and when we

were young, my mom would take us by car. As we got older, we would take our bikes to the beach. During the summers we were really on our own and most families did not go away.

Q: Were you much of a reader?

HIGGISTON: Yes, I read a lot. I was fairly introverted as a child. I still am in many ways. During the summers, like most kids, we had a reading list which I went through. I also liked reading the Hardy Boys and Tom Swift. My brother had a collection of them, so they were readily available. As I got a bit older, I started reading more. Initially I liked reading fiction and for the longest time, that was all I read. Later I gravitated to non-fiction especially when I got into college. My brother finished college before I graduated from grammar school, so I picked up a lot from him. But my parents weren't big readers. They would read the newspaper, but not necessarily books. That was really something that I kind of acquired when I was in high school and college.

Q: Did you get a newspaper at home? Which one, do you remember?

HIGGISTON: Well, like most working-class families we got the NY *Daily News*, which was a popular tabloid. We also got the *New York Post*, which came out in the afternoon. To be honest, I was very much into New York sports teams and both of those papers had great sports sections. Once I got into high school, I'd start reading the *New York Times*. I continued reading the *Times* until I moved to Washington DC for graduate school. Then I started reading the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal,* and the *Christian Science Monitor*, which had a great international section. I would get the Post every day. The rest I would get from time to time.

Q: Any notable hobbies?

HIGGISTON: Hobbies. I need to think.

Q: That's an answer in itself.

HIGGISTON: Yes, very true. When I was younger, I really got into chemistry for a while. I talked my parents into getting me a chemistry set for Christmas. I think they got it from Sears Roebuck. This is kind of a funny story. I was there with friends; it was in January right after Christmas. I had gotten this set and had a friend over. My mom went out for a while, and we were going through this book of different experiments that came with the chemistry set. One experiment that caught our attention was an experiment to make a rotten egg bomb, which was simply heating up a small piece of wax along with some powdered sulfur. It worked like a charm and true to the book it smelled like rotten eggs. I panicked because it really smelled badly. So, we closed the door to the kitchen and opened up all the windows. It was freezing. When my mom got home, we were sitting there in jackets, coats, gloves, and hats with the windows open and the heat escaping. That was probably the end of my chemist aspirations.

Later I took up photography. My parents gave me a 35mm camera, which I always had with me. Took a lot of pictures of friends, especially in high school and college. Kept it up until this day. I was especially happy being able to document my time overseas.

Q: Okay. Did you have the typical American family where you'd all sit around the dinner table together, as was often done in the fifties?

HIGGISTON: In general, when my brother and I were younger, the entire family would get together on Sundays and have dinner together. My mom was a good cook and Sunday dinners were special. During the week, my dad was normally working so the three of us would eat together. Once my brother got into college, it would be my mother and me. Sunday mornings we might have breakfast together after mass. They would sell these wonderful Kaiser rolls outside of church. My mom would usually make eggs and bacon or sausages along with buttered rolls. During the week, we all had different schedules, so we ate breakfast on our own.

Q: You remember what people talked about around the dinner table? Get into politics, international affairs?

HIGGISTON: Certainly not international affairs. I think we would talk about things that were going on locally. My parents didn't go to college, so politics and current affairs were not topics that were discussed. I don't remember talking about Vietnam, for example, as a kid, because I started high school in 1970, I don't remember that much of a discussion about politics or current affairs. We might talk about what's going on with friends and my parents would want to know how school was and if I was doing what I was supposed to do and listening to the nuns. It was more along those lines than any specific topic and certainly, not politics. It wasn't something that my parents would talk about when we were in the room.

Q: Yeah.

What did you like in school?

HIGGISTON: Grammar school or high school?

Q: Well, which subjects? I'm talking about generally what did you enjoy? Did you enjoy any of it?

HIGGISTON: I was really good at math. I liked science. But I also liked history and political science, especially when I got into high school. And I remember, like I said, I was pretty good at math, but I remember being in a class with Miss Kenyon who was my math teacher as a junior in high school. One day she was doing some proofs and had basically filled six blackboards with equations. It was at that point I decided that there is no way this is going to spend my life doing that type of work even though I might be good at it. So, it was at that same time that I got interested in foreign languages and international affairs. Nazareth, as we discussed, was a Catholic high school. Normally in

high school they offered a limited number of languages – Latin, French and Spanish. But it was the seventies and they started expanding the curriculum. We were very fortunate, we had teachers who spoke and taught Portuguese, Italian, and Chinese. Moreover, our Latin teacher, Marty Doyle, knew Russian. And he recruited several students to take Russian. One of my best friends, Jude Hayes, who I knew from first grade and still know today told me about the class and I decided to take it. There were perhaps five or six of us that decided to take Russian. I took it for two years, when I was a junior and a senior, and I was hooked. I started reading a lot of Russian literature and Russian history. Marty told stories about the Soviet Union that fascinated sixteen-year-olds. I knew I had to get there at some point. As I think back, it was in many ways the impetus for seeking a career in international affairs. It got me to eventually leave New York, move to Washington and eventually move overseas. I think I was always drawn to Europe and what was going on there, for whatever reason. But when I took Russian, that eventually sent me down this path.

Q: That's really unusual to be taking Russian in high school. Was this teacher an immigrant from the Soviet Union or something?

HIGGISTON: No Marty was Irish.

Q: Oh, my goodness, okay.

HIGGISTON: As I mentioned previously, it was the seventies and my high school started experimenting with the curriculum. I imagine they had all these folks that know these different languages, and they started offering these classes. As I mentioned, we had teachers there that taught Chinese, Portuguese, Italian and Russian for a couple of years while I was there. Languages that you wouldn't normally see. And it was offered at a time when students were receptive to learning new things. I know that is how I responded to Marty and his stories about the Soviet Union. In addition, there were things happening at home and in my life that from an early age I knew I wanted to set off on a different path. Maybe it was sort of an escape for me. I don't know, but I really began thinking at this time that I didn't want to stay in Brooklyn. So, whereas many of my friends that I grew up with stayed in the area, I just wanted to take off, especially after college. It was something I always wanted to do; I always wanted to travel, and I think the hook of learning about the Soviet Union and Russian history and reading about Russian literature just really got into my skin, and it just took off from there.

Q: Okay. Well, that's interesting.

Were you a good student?

HIGGISTON: Yeah, I was a good student. I was valedictorian in grammar school and did well in high school.

Q: Oh, wow.

HIGGISTON: I was an honor student in grammar school. I was an honor student in high school, won several awards. But by high school, I felt a change in my approach to school and learning. I studied a lot, but I didn't want to get so wrapped up in grades. It became more important for me to learn something than just simply to do the work, if that makes any sense.

Q: That seems a very mature approach for a high school kid.

HIGGISTON: I was not really driven to be the number one student in high school. I mean, I didn't slack off, but my grades weren't my main priority. I really just tried to enjoy my classes. I wanted to take courses that I enjoyed and that's why I took Russian and continued studying it in college. I mean, I had a decent GPA (Grade Point Average) At some point in college (and even graduate school) I stopped looking at grades.

As I was graduating high school, I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I had the sense that I would need to go to graduate school at some point. My folks did not have a lot of money to pay for college and given my feelings at the time, I applied to the New York City University system. I wound up receiving a letter from Hunter College offering me a position in their honors program. Under the program, I was not required to take the usual prerequisites during my first and second year. I was free to take whatever courses I wanted. And so, I started taking classes that really interested me. I took Latin, German, and geology. I was taking all sorts of history courses as well as fencing. I could also take courses in any of the schools that were part of the City University. It really gave you the opportunity to take courses at different colleges. I should note that at this time, the City University System was free. So, I wound up finishing college with no debt whatsoever. This was important because I know that I would have to pay for graduate school.

Hunter College had an excellent Russian language and area studies program. Most of the professors taught at both Hunter and Columbia University. I wound up taking Russian for four years. Of course, Russian was offered at 8:00 in the morning, so I was always getting up early to take the subway to Hunter.

Q: Backing up just a moment, Jim, because we hadn't actually talked about going to college yet and we're already there.

HIGGISTON: Sure.

Q: You mentioned your parents had not gone to college themselves, and at what point did you start to consider yourself as college bound?

HIGGISTON: Well, here's the thing. My parents expected us to go to college.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: And I think it was also at a time when people felt that if you're going to advance, if you're going to have a better life than your parents, then you needed to go to

college. And you know, coming from a working-class family, I think my parents felt that I could do better than them. Even though we had a house, and I was never in need of anything, I think my mom especially really wanted us to go to college. I remember graduating from high school and thinking I wanted to take a year off to do some other things before I went to college. However, my mom would not have any part of that. She clearly laid down the law and I was immediately going to college. I really had no choice. It was probably a good decision because I knew from the start, I was going to have to go to graduate school because I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do, and I knew going to college wasn't going to set me up to have a career. And so, at the time I didn't apply to any state universities or private universities. As I mentioned, the New York City University system was free at the time, so I went there for four years, and it didn't cost a nickel. And in fact, I had a Regents scholarship that actually paid me something like $500 or $600 every semester to go to school. So, I was fortunate. And like I said, I knew from the start I was going to need to go to graduate school. For a while I thought I'd go to law school, but I wasn't sure. I mean, I had friends who had a clear direction. I had a friend who studied architecture and another that went into nursing.

At one point about halfway through college, I had been doing some volunteer work teaching reading to high school students. I had also taught Russian immigrant English at one point. In any case, at one point I thought I would go into teaching and become a physical therapist and so forth. Unfortunately, when I investigated it, I found out that I would have had to go back to school and do another four years to take the required courses. I knew it was not in the cards, so I decided to pursue something in international affairs.

Q: Well, tell me a little bit more about the City College of New York. I'm not very familiar with it. You said you applied to—you were going to Hunter College, but you could take courses at any branch?

HIGGISTON: It was a consortium. I had a similar situation when I went to Georgetown. There was an agreement among various colleges in Washington that allowed you to take some courses at different universities. In New York, as I mentioned you could take courses at any of the colleges that were part of the system. They were located all around the city and some specialized in some subjects. you—there were like four or five colleges.

What was interesting about Hunter College and especially because I was interested in Russian, a lot of the teachers there all taught at Columbia University, which had a big Russian program. So, I had all these wonderful teachers who taught both at Columbia and at Hunter College. So, I was very fortunate, and I kind of lucked into it. I didn't know at the time that Hunter had a big Russian section, but as soon as I began at Hunter, I started taking a variety of classes and really loved it.

Q: So, you selected Hunter rather than the more convenient Brooklyn branch just for—because of what you said, it had the no requirements policy?

HIGGISTON: Well, I applied to the City University system and Hunter College wound up contacting me, probably because of my interests. As I mentioned previously, Hunter offered me a position in their honors program. And of course, I was. And I also wanted to get out of Brooklyn. I think for all of us, when you grow up in Brooklyn, Manhattan was *the* place, you know, to go. It was sort of the mecca. Even when I was in high school, we would take the subway to Manhattan and explore Greenwich Village and other parts of the city. So, going to school in Manhattan was very appealing as was Hunter's honors program. So, I jumped at that opportunity.

Q: So, you ended up spending four years at Hunter and getting a degree there?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I got a degree in Russian history and Russian literature.

Q: Oh, wow, okay. And you've talked a little bit about things you've done there, but you know, I'm sure there's much more in terms of, for example, you talked about jobs. Did you work at all regularly?

HIGGISTON: I've held some sort of a job pretty much since I was a junior in high school. It was nice having a bit of extra money.

Q: Wow.

HIGGISTON: I held several jobs in college. I was still living at home at the time and commuting by subway every day to school. One of my jobs was working at Sears Roebuck, and I was a debt collector.

Q: Oh, my.

HIGGISTON: Exactly. I worked with several friends in the credit section at night. We would call up folks who were past due on the credit accounts. It was in the mid-70s, which was a tough time in New York economically. Lot of folks were having a difficult time keeping up with their payments. We had account files and would call folks up on the phone regarding their accounts. We worked at night from 5:30 to 8:30 pm. My girlfriend at the time worked down the street in Macy's. She was a salesperson, and we would commute together.

Q: Hang on a second. I need to ask whether you were one of those obnoxious people who were calling up, badgering people on the telephone.

HIGGISTON: We tried not to. Most of the time we wound up leaving messages. Our bosses were not exactly happy, but we really tried to avoid harassing people. We tried to help them get off the call list primarily by getting them to make some sort of partial payment. But most of the time it was low key.

Q: Yes, most kids get their college jobs on campus doing one thing or another, rather than out doing that kind of work.

HIGGISTON: I think the problem was, there weren't too many jobs at Hunter College. It was more of a commuting college. Plus, it was easier to work on weekends or weekday nights. I was going to school 5 days a week normally from 8 am to 4:30 pm. So, there weren't a lot of opportunities for me to work during the day, so I worked, I think, a couple of nights during the week and then Saturday morning. I was lucky my friend Jude, (Yes my Russian language colleague from high school) helped me get the job. I think his sister was working there at the time.

Jude also helped me get a part time job at a local Jewish funeral home. Now, that job to this day has provided me with endless stories. I remember him asking me, "Oh, do you want to come in and be an usher on Sundays?" Because the major day for Jewish funerals was Sunday. And unlike Catholic funeral homes, Jewish funeral homes held the wake and the funeral ceremony at the same time. In the Jewish faith, you had to be buried within twenty-four hours. Sunday was the busiest day. There were some Sundays when we would have fourteen or fifteen funerals. We were responsible for just getting people into the right rooms and also lining up the cars for the procession to go out to the cemetery. I won't go into great detail, but it was the seventies, and we were partaking in different things, both at the funeral home and Sears, which made both jobs very interesting and, at the same time, very bizarre.

Q: I was going to ask you whether you had a compulsion towards some of the worst jobs out there, collection agencies and funeral homes. (Laughs) But maybe it's my misconception.

HIGGISTON: And yet, they gave me some of the best stories. Years later, Jude would come down to DC for work and stay with us frequently. He was often doing training and meeting with staff in Bethesda. Anyway, we would have dinner and eventually we always wound up talking about working at the funeral home. My dear wife Melissa put up with us but would often say that she had never heard me laugh so much. To this day we often find ourselves talking about our time there and the experiences we had.

Q: Well, that's great. So, those were two; did you have other jobs as well in college?

HIGGISTON: No, that was it. The Sears job was my primary job during school followed by the funeral home. I worked at Macy's for a short time as a stock boy. I had a lot of friends that were working there. I mean, like I said, it was more of a social event than work. And then, like I said, towards the end, I think, right after college I started working at the funeral home a couple of days a week.

Q: Okay. But we can talk about that.

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: Did you actually join a union?

HIGGISTON: No, but there wasn't really much of an opportunity to join a union. We were working part time in most places and only full-time employees could join the union. Certainly, there was no union at the funeral home. It was interesting at Macy's where the union folks had strict guidelines as to what they could/would do and what they would not do. It was my first introduction to that experience. Still, I found it much more appealing to work behind the scenes. Oftentimes working directly with customers could be unpleasant.

Q: So, what was the atmosphere like in college? When did you start? It must have been, what, like '74 or something like that?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I started college in 1974.

Q: Okay, that's great.

How was the atmosphere in college in '74 to '78? It was past the big protest era and so forth, I guess.

HIGGISTON: By the time I got into college it was 1974. The Vietnam War was over and there was relative peace. The big causes at the time were women's rights, the environment, and civil rights. The next major protests I remember were during the Reagan Administration and the foray into El Salvador. I remember attending a couple of protests.

Q: Well, he would have come in when? Seventy-six?

HIGGISTON: No, Reagan came in in '81, right, right after Jimmy Carter. But, for some reason, I seem to remember going to the protests in the 1970s.

Q: No, '81, '81, yeah, yeah, '81 was Reagan, that's right. Carter was '76.

HIGGISTON: At the time, there wasn't that type of an atmosphere at Hunter College. As I mentioned it was a commuting college which attracted a wide range of students. Some folks were auditing classes. There were retirees and, of course, the general pool of students. In my Russian class, there was an actress. I took several courses on political issues in Africa, which was really interesting. And like I said, it was the first time I was in the minority. People were very nice, but it certainly gave me a different perspective.

Q: And it sounds like it wouldn't have been a big party school or fraternity school or that kind of thing.

HIGGISTON: No. I don't think there were any fraternities at City University. I don't remember seeing any references to fraternities. It was not a school where people did a lot of social events. Then again, I had a pretty busy schedule especially with the commute and working part-time.

Q: Okay, so four years, and you would have graduated in seventy—

HIGGISTON: Seventy-eight.

Q: Eight, '78. Okay.

Oh, I've got to ask before I move on from that, I knew there was something I wanted to ask, and it was slipping my mind. Agriculture. You ended up as an agriculture attaché and with a career in the Department of Agriculture (USDA). As you were growing up throughout your whole childhood and education, were you ever 4H Club or—

HIGGISTON: Not in Brooklyn. My real connection to USDA was on the policy side. The Soviet Union was very important in terms of agricultural trade. So, my background in Russian and international trade really was my entry to USDA. But I am sure we will get to that later. However, I got asked that question a lot during my career.

Q: I wouldn't have thought so. Or drawn to those kinds of subjects?

HIGGISTON: No, not at all. So, that's a whole different story, how I got into FAS and why I got in. And I don't know if you want—that was after graduate school.

Q: Whoa. Okay, we'll get to that when we get to it then, but I just thought, you know, at this stage I would ask, yeah.

HIGGISTON: No, not at all. At the time I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do. Agriculture was certainly not on my mind. I think at one point, I was leaning towards international law, but I came to my senses after a while. I wasn't even thinking about the State Department or the Foreign Service at that point.

Q: Okay. Well, we will get to that. Meanwhile, you graduated in presumably May or June of '78.

HIGGISTON: Yes. Our graduation ceremony was held at Madison Square Garden. There were about 10,000 students in my class including the nursing school.

Q: Proud parents attend the ceremony?

HIGGISTON: No, I decided not to attend. It was not a very intimate occasion.

Q: Oh, no.

HIGGISTON: As I said, I really didn't have an interest in the graduation ceremony. I mean, it was a huge school. And so, they did have it, but it wasn't something. I was happy to graduate but I also knew I wanted to do something else and go on to graduate school. I really enjoyed my four years at Hunter, but I felt it was a jumping off point, to the next stage.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: So, I did attend my graduation from Georgetown but there were only 60 students in my year. It was a little more intimate.

Q: Well, I certainly understand that. I didn't go to any of mine, if that's worth any mention. So, I understand the feeling.

What was the actual degree you were awarded?

HIGGISTON: Oh, it was a BA (Bachelor of Arts) in Russian area studies with a minor in Russian language.

And Russian area studies was history, political science, and literature.

Q: Okay.

Okay, Jim. So, it was 1978, you've just graduated from college, and were you looking for a career? Did you know what you wanted to do next?

HIGGISTON: I knew that I needed to go to graduate school, but I wasn't ready to jump right into it. I was working, like I said, two days a week at the funeral home for a while, but it was basically hanging out with friends and doing things that kids did at that time. And then, I really wanted to move out of my parents' house and be off on my own. I also wanted to save up some money. A friend of mine recommended an employment agency. I wound up working for an international monetary exchange on the thirty-third floor of the World Trade Center. Banks would send in these orders for Belgian currency. This was before the Euro, so we would exchange dollars for Belgian, pounds?

Q: Francs, I would have thought, but I can't remember for sure.

HIGGISTON: Francs, Belgian francs, or British pounds or Bermuda dollars or whatever. And the idea was we would fill out these orders. It was not an interesting job, and I knew I wasn't long for it. To be honest, the currencies looked a lot alike and I could never get the red money very straight, so I would always mix up the Bermuda pounds with other currencies. We worked normally from 8:00 until 7:00 at night, and no one took lunch. I was going stir crazy. So, I did it for a while, and then I just said, "I can't do this anymore." I mean, there were people that really loved the job. So, I went to my supervisor and told him that it wasn't for me. I had to pay back a certain amount of money that the company had paid the employment agency, but for me it was worth it.

And then, I got a job with a publishing company in New York. It was the American Institute of Physics (AIP). It was up by the United Nations. And they were involved in translating Russian scientific journals.

Q: Wow.

HIGGISTON: I was a production assistant. Basically, we would follow and facilitate publication of the journals from start to finish. We worked with the editors and the production crew. The editors would distribute the articles in the journals to translators who I believe had a background in Russian as well as science. I was responsible for the *Journal of Zoology*, for example along with other journals. And it helped that I had some knowledge of Russian. I didn't have the background to translate the articles, but I could look at the captions of graphs or tables and know whether the translations were correct. I had responsibility for several journals. I worked at AIP for about a year and then the office moved out to Long Island. Unfortunately, it was not feasible to commute to the new location, so I had to leave. But I enjoyed using my Russian and it continued to pique my interest both in the Soviet Union and working overseas. with the Russian stuff, and again, that just continued my interest in the language. About the same time that I was at AIP I moved in with a good friend from high school.

Q: In Manhattan or in Brooklyn?

HIGGISTON: The apartment was in Brooklyn. My friend Mark was going to NYU for a PhD in Psychology. We found a nice two-bedroom apartment in the neighborhood where we both grew up.

So, when the job with AIP ended, I found a job with another publishing company, Alan R. Liss. The office was located around Fourteenth Street and Broadway. There were a lot of these very small publishing companies that worked with universities to publish various publications, primarily scientific related. I wound up working there for a couple of years as a production assistant. Again, I was responsible for several journals as well as the publication of books, mostly compilations. It was very similar to the work I did at AIP, so there wasn't as much of a transition.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: One of the journals I worked on was the *Journal of Aggressive Behavior*. I had a funny situation. One day I received a call from the editor of the journal just as we were going to final publication. In any case, the editor called me in a panic and asked whether I had published a letter to the editor which was entitled "*Aggressive Behavior in left-Handed Vegetarians*". Luckily, we caught it in time.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: It's funny, but the letter was very much in line with a lot of the articles that were included in the journal. We believed that a couple of students got together and put together this letter to the editor and submitted it. It had gotten all the way to the point where we were just about to publish it.

I worked there for about a year and a half. As I mentioned before, I knew I would need to go to graduate school. So, I began to submit applications. I didn't really have an interest in getting a PhD, so I started applying to schools with master's degrees in international affairs. I would end up getting into the Master's Program at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service. It was good to get out of New York and it turned out that going to Washington, led me to my career at the Foreign Agricultural Service.

Q: When would that have been?

HIGGISTON: I moved to Washington the summer of 1981. I needed to take a couple of economics courses. I took one at Brooklyn College and then I took a second course at Georgetown during the summer of 1981.

Q: So, you were accepted to a particular program?

HIGGISTON: Yes, the graduate program was part of Georgetown's School of Foreign Service. My degree was actually a Master of Science in the Foreign Service.

HIGGISTON: It was a two-year program. There were 60 students in each year. The students had a wide variety of backgrounds. The majority were a bit older and had previous experience either working or in the Peace Corps, for example. Some students focused on trade, business, regional affairs, or international issues. The general program focused on business, trade, and economics. I knew that given my undergraduate work in Russian, that I needed to broaden my background, so I focused on trade and finance because I thought that would be more of interest when I was searching for work. When I graduated from Hunter College, there wasn't a great deal of interest in Russian studies. That was my reason for expanding my background.

Q: So, by that time then, to apply to a school of Foreign Service, you obviously were familiar with Foreign Service? Were you already starting to think of that as a possible avenue?

HIGGISTON: No, not at all. I knew about the State Department, but it wasn't my focus. In fact, and although Georgetown's program is in the School of Foreign Service, not everybody goes into the Foreign Service and does not necessarily prepare you to go into the State Department. There are a number of schools that have similar curriculums like Princeton or Harvard.

Q: Fletcher, that's Tufts, I guess, yeah.

HIGGISTON: Yes. I applied to 4 or five schools and eventually got into Georgetown. Most of the folks at Georgetown that I knew did not go into the Foreign Service, in fact, maybe a handful in the end joined, but a lot of them went into different careers. Some went into international banking. Others worked for companies with international interest. As I look back, one of the companies that I interviewed with was Cargill. I didn't get the job, but I did wind up working with them overseas when I was with FAS.

Some folks at Georgetown went to work for associations or think tanks. I had one friend that wound up working for Henry Kissinger. She had a background in Chinese and had lived with her family in Taiwan. So, in short, the Georgetown program was not necessarily geared towards going into the Foreign Service. I had one class however, that had us working on country reports.

Q: That State Department would put out.

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: Yes, I remember those. I seem to think I remember even working on.

HIGGISTON: I had one course and wrote a paper on China. We had a lot of adjunct professors that came in that worked in DC. That was a real asset being in Washington. If you were writing a paper, you could call and meet with folks in the federal government that worked daily on these issues. One time I was looking at an issue dealing with international agricultural trade. In doing the research, I wound up meeting with someone from FAS and drawing on Attaché reports. These were the same reports that I wound up writing at FAS. I felt that Washington was the place to be if you were going to focus on international affairs. Not only did you have the federal government, but also associations and international organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Q: Was it a two-year program?

HIGGISTON: Yes, two years.

Q: And you said most of your focus was on trade and finance?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I took a variety of courses as well as Russian. You needed proficiency in a foreign language to get a degree and I had not used Russian regularly, especially my speaking ability. I also took courses in economics, statistics, and political science.

Q: Georgetown, at least these days, is a horrendously expensive school. Was that an impediment to you?

HIGGISTON: Actually, at the time, the graduate school was not excessively expensive. I would say it was about $5,000 or $6000 a year. So, it was reasonable. So, I was very lucky, because the undergraduate school was double that per year.

Q: So, it was a deal.

HIGGISTON: These days it is probably at least $35,000 a year, if not more. It still seemed expensive at the time, but I had saved up some money and took out a couple of small loans which were not too excessive. Coming out of Georgetown, I had some debt, but not really a huge amount, and I was able to pay it off quickly, relatively speaking.

Moreover, I was able to work most of the time I was at Georgetown. I received a work study grant and I worked at the Smithsonian for a semester. It was one of my favorite jobs. I was working for someone who was doing economic research on Charles Beard, an economist in the 19th century. I worked about 20 hours a week. Basically, the researcher would give me a list of books she wanted, and I would go to the Library of Congress to find them. I had a stack pass to the library and would wander around the stacks trying to find them. Many of the books were misfiled, so I would have search areas of the stacks to find them.

Q: So, this would have been '83 when you came back to Washington or '84 when you came back?

HIGGISTON: No, this was in 1981 my first year at Georgetown.

Q: Goodness.

HIGGISTON: I can't imagine that they would allow someone into the stacks now.

My second year at Georgetown I wound up getting a job at the Department of Defense. I was working for a woman named Jean Carney. We were working on programs to encourage people to get degrees in science. I helped put together a booklet that described some of the programs. I guess it helped that I had worked for a publishing company.

Q: Did you enjoy living in Washington?

HIGGISTON: Very much so. In fact, when I graduated from Georgetown, I honestly thought I would move back to New York. However, I was in New York for a couple of months and came to the conclusion that I really missed Washington. I liked the accessibility of living in the District. It was so much easier to get around Washington. When I was in New York, it would take a good hour to go by subway to get from Brooklyn to Manhattan. In Washington I could be downtown DC in about 20 minutes. I also liked the idea that in an hour I could be in the mountains. Plus, you can't beat the Smithsonian.

Q: So, you moved to New York and then you moved back to DC again?

HIGGISTON: I had some friends who lived in DC, and they offered to let me sleep on their couch until I got back on my feet. My boss at DoD encouraged me to work in the federal government so that was my goal at the time. Unfortunately, this was the eighties and there was a hiring freeze for the federal government.

Q: Oh, okay. While you were still at school. Okay.

HIGGISTON: Yes, I worked at DoD during my second year at Georgetown. It wasn't a lot of money, but it was enough to live on.

I found the work at the Pentagon interesting. People were nice. Interestingly, there was a café in the center of the Pentagon, where there is a small open area. It was called the Ground Zero Café because apparently that's where the Soviet missiles were aimed. Don't know if that is true, but it made for a good story.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: When I came back from New York in 1983, I wound up doing some contract work until the federal hiring freeze was lifted. I wound up working on a civil case dealing with contamination of the water supply in Colorado at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal. I went to Colorado for about a month. I returned to DC and then things opened up and I was able to get a position at the Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Q: Let me take a little bit of a tangent here. You just mentioned Colorado and being out there. Is that your first significant travel?

HIGGISTON: Actually, when I graduated from Georgetown, I drove my housemate's car from Washington to California. That was in 1983. After that trip, I went to Europe for about 2 months ending up in the Soviet Union, for about a month. Those were my most significant trips.

Q: From Hunter or from Georgetown?

HIGGISTON: After Georgetown. My trips to California and Europe were my most significant trips till that point.

Q: The first international experience, but Moscow must have been a tough place to visit back then. I mean, to even get permission to visit. Did you have to be on a special in-tourist program or something?

HIGGISTON: So, it was basically a language study program. This was a British program and was pretty inexpensive, relatively speaking. We needed to get to London to catch the flight to Moscow. A friend from my publishing days in New York told me about the program. We were the only two Americans on the study tour. It was pretty bare bones. Classes were held in a hotel on the outskirts of Moscow and then in Leningrad. We were supposed to be in class in the mornings till about 1:00 and were on our own right after that. Since it was during the summer it stayed light until very late, so we had plenty of time to explore the city. By the time we got to Leningrad, most of us had quit going to class. I had no idea if or when I might return so I wanted to see as much as possible. I remember being called in by one of the teachers who said, "it's very dangerous out there (in Moscow)". And that we really should continue to attend classes. In response, I told the woman, "Listen, I grew up in New York. If anything is dangerous it's being in New York. This place is not dangerous."

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: Anyway, we had less than 2 weeks left and so, they really didn't do anything to us. Leningrad was such a beautiful city. We spent a lot of time exploring the city. I'm sure we were watched but we weren't doing anything that would be of concern. Plus, to your point, Moscow and Leningrad were safe. I didn't have any concerns about my safety. Interestingly at that time, most of the people there really wanted to meet westerners, especially Americans.

Q: Okay. So, it was technically an academic program then?

HIGGISTON: Well, it was a language study program, but we didn't receive any credits. I think the British students probably received some credit. Their program had a diverse group of students. There were some pensioners that were on it as well as undergraduates.

Q: Was it in Russian?

HIGGISTON: The classes were conducted in Russian. I knew a little more Russian than most of the folks so I would help some of the students who were just starting out. One day I was sitting with one of the older students who was just starting out studying Russian. In any case, we were having breakfast and she asked me whether the hotel might have some jam to go along with the traditional brown bread. I didn't know the word for jam, so I thought, "Well, maybe it's this word." So, I asked the waiter in Russian whether he had any preservatives."

Q: (Laughs) I can tell where that's leading.

HIGGISTON: Yep, And the waiter looks at me like I have six heads. Of course, I continued and asked whether he had any fruit preservatives. The waiter just shook his head and walked away. It wasn't until later I realized that "preservatives" in most languages including Russian meant condoms.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: It was funny. I told that story a lot and the Russians would get a kick out of it.

Q: Okay. Fun, fun. And that was just kind of an interlude right after graduate school?

HIGGISTON: Yes. As I mentioned, I drove my housemate's car to California and then took the trip to Europe. After the European trip I returned to New York and then decided to go back to Washington.

Q: So, that's your first foreign experience, I mean, your actual on-the-ground foreign experience, I take it.

HIGGISTON: Yes, that was actually my first time overseas.

What did you ask?

Q: First plane trip even?

HIGGISTON: Yes, that was my first international plane trip. I did fly to Maine once and to California once.

Q: So, the impression of being overseas must have been positive enough that you weren't put off from pursuing that direction?

HIGGISTON: No, not at all. As I said before, I really felt comfortable being overseas, particularly in Europe but really everywhere. I enjoyed traveling and having new experiences. However, I really loved living overseas and really being able to immerse myself in a country. My first trip overseas really hooked me on an international career. Most of the friends that I grew up with stayed in New York or in the area. In many ways I did not feel all that comfortable in New York and felt that I needed to do something different. When FAS hired me and offered to send me overseas, I could not believe my luck. Getting to travel to Moscow and Leningrad as well as Europe, was unbelievable. At the time, I just never thought I would have the opportunity to work overseas and especially the Soviet Union.

Q: Yeah. And I suppose especially after all those years of studying Russian to actually be someplace where, you know, you're finally in Russia.

HIGGISTON: Absolutely.

So, as I mentioned there was a Latin teacher, Marty Doyle, in high school who also knew Russian. My best friend talked about taking the class when we were juniors. I was about sixteen years old at the time. Not only did he teach us about Russian, but he had endless stories about the Soviet Union that he shared with us. These were not your run of the mill stories but rather stories that really piqued the interest of teenagers like me. I was so hooked, that all I wanted to do was to visit the Soviet Union. And, when I got there finally and got to see some of these things, I was overwhelmed.

Q: Ah, so it wasn't off-putting then?

HIGGISTON: No, not at all. It just fed my interest and desire to get there.

And when I returned that summer to New York, it was clear after a while that Washington would be the best place to fulfill my dreams. However, at the time, there were very few agencies that were hiring, except for the CIA. That was a real experience. My former boss at DoD had contacts there and helped set up an interview for me.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: Oh, it gets better. Have you ever taken a lie detector test?

Q: I have not.

HIGGISTON: So, I'll tell you the story because it's kind of funny.

Q: Despite six failures?

HIGGISTON: So, my boss at DoD, Jean Carney, offered to get me an introductory meeting. Obviously, Jean vouched for me. At one point during the background check, I had to take a lie detector test. So, I had to answer questions on finances, foreign contacts, sexual proclivities and so forth. After the interview, they would hook you up and ask you about your answers. It took a good 20 minutes to calibrate the machine. Well, you know I'm Catholic, or I was brought up Catholic. At one point they interviewer asked me about stealing and whether I was telling the truth. Suddenly, something dawned on me and I said, "Oh, God. I forgot something. So, he had to unhook me and ask follow up questions. In response, I said, "Well, I remember this one time in grammar school taking money from mom's purse because I wanted to get some comic books. I didn't tell her about it. The interviewer gave me a look like, "You've got to be kidding me, right?" Well, this happened two or three times, and he started to get a little upset. He literally asked me "Are you Catholic?" And I responded affirmatively "Well, stop with the guilt already, all right? I just want to know the big things. They kept calling me back because they obviously liked my background. But I was so nervous I kept failing the lie detector test. At one point, it seemed like I was lying about my name. Nonetheless, they kept calling me back and I thanked them but told them maybe this job is not in the cards for me.

So, anyway, I took the test six or seven times. I finally passed but never heard back from them. And then suddenly, FAS called and offered me a job. I was working for FAS for about two months, and I got this call from this guy from the CIA offering me a job. As I said I had been working for FAS for about 2 months and really felt that it was a better fit for me. The CIA called me back a couple of times and offered some different opportunities. In the end I decided to stay with FAS.

Q: Ah. But now meanwhile, you said FAS got to you. That suggests you had applied to FAS, they didn't just come out of the blue, did they?

HIGGISTON: I had a friend from my Georgetown days who gave me a lead on FAS. At the time, she worked for MCI. Do you remember them?

Q: Yeah, yeah, I do.

HIGGISTON: Anyway, around the time I graduated from Georgetown, she left and moved to New York City. She went to work for a company that did a newsletter for the sugar industry. She returned to Washington for a visit, and we wound up having lunch. She was in Washington to attend an annual conference organized by the Department of Agriculture. It was called the Outlook Conference. It covered a wide range of agricultural issues. The Conference was hosted by the Secretary of Agriculture. It focused on a

number of issues, primarily domestic, but there is a section on international issues. She knew my background and my search for a job. In any case, she had met someone from USDA who was really interested in people who knew something about the Soviet Union. I set up a meeting with him. I met with this gentleman for quite a while. The Soviet Union was a major producer of sugar, and he followed this issue closely. At the end of the meeting he said, "Listen, you have an interesting background. But we here at the Economic Research Service, we prefer people with PhDs. However, if you go over to the Foreign Ag Service, they'll take anybody."

Q: (Laughs) Anybody.

HIGGISTON: Yes, anybody. So, currently, you have to apply for a job in the federal government through USA jobs. However, in 1984, you could go directly to an agency and set up your own meetings.

FAS Human Resources gave me a list of people, primarily division directors. I set up my own meetings. This was around February 1984, and the federal hiring freeze was still on. I met this division director for grains, Don Novotny. At that time, grains were an important issue for the Soviet Union, and it was a big market for the United States. So, there was a lot of focus on the grain situation in the Soviet Union. If the Soviets had to buy grains and oilseeds, it meant it would be a good year for producers around the world. Allan Mustard, who eventually served as the U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan, was working in the division. At the time, Allen was scheduled to go to Moscow as agricultural attaché and Don wanted someone to replace Allan in the division. I finally started working in November 1984 when they lifted the hiring freeze.

Q: Okay. But now, hang on a second. So, there wasn't any formal application process or testing or that kind of thing?

HIGGISTON: Nope. I filled out the old SF-171.

Q: Yeah.

HIGGISTON: That was pretty much it. Again, there was no USA Jobs process at the time.

Q: That was it? And then, you personally went around and spoke to a bunch of people—

HIGGISTON: Yes, I set up my own interviews and submitted my application to the FAS HR division. Once they lifted the hiring freeze, they had to bring in a lot of people and I was just lucky enough to be there at the right time.

Q: So, you said you'd started doing these interviews in like, February, but you weren't hired until substantially later. Did that basically tell you, look, we want you if this hiring freeze ever gets lifted?

HIGGISTON: Yes. They basically were telling me that, but you know, no one could give me a real offer. Since I couldn't rely on it, I was looking elsewhere and the only other people that showed any interest in me were the folks at the CIA.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

HIGGISTON: I would call every month. Finally, they could hire me. It was very interesting because I really had no background in agriculture. But I felt that FAS knew my background and still hired me. At that point, I figured the pressure was off. It was probably the first job where I was just going to roll the dice. And it turned out great. I was an analyst for the grain division for a while and held various positions as part of my training. My primary focus was on analysis.

Q: But before we do, think back for just a moment if there's anything big we should have talked about in your pre-agriculture experience, and if it's significantly big, we can take it up next time as well.

HIGGISTON: The only interesting thing is I did do a short stint on the Hill, on the Ways and Means Committee.

Q: Well, that is interesting.

HIGGISTON: Yes. Although it was not for very long, it was very interesting. I was working for the minority.

Q: Which side was that at that point?

HIGGISTON: Republican.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: So, Rostenkowski was the chair, and I was working on the subcommittee on trade, which was very interesting. A friend from Georgetown had worked there and left to take a permanent job at the Department of Commerce, it was an intern position. I would collect proposed legislation and do some rudimentary analysis. It wasn't a heavy lift, but it was fascinating especially when I sat through the hearings. So, Sam Gibbons of Florida was the chair and Bill Frenzel from Minnesota was the ranking member. I came out of that experience saying that every American should have an opportunity to work on Capitol Hill to see how the government works. I had a great respect for Gibbons and Frenzel, who approached from different directions, but both had the same goal. They both were interested in the positive and negative points about an issue. They really worked hand-in-hand. It was really a bipartisan approach. Not that they didn't have disagreements, but these two members were very impressive.

Years later, I've talked to people that still work there and, of course, that bipartisanship has all but disappeared. It seems like you can't even talk to anyone across the aisle. But

when I was there, it was fantastic. I mean, I just loved to watch the members work. While I was there, we worked on the Israeli Free Trade Agreement and auto part imports.

Q: Those are very prized jobs and hard to get up on the Hill. You don't just stumble into them. How did you get there?

HIGGISTON: As I mentioned, I had a friend that I went to Georgetown with who was a presidential management intern, and she was up there for a while before me. And then, she wound up going over to the Commerce Department. Commerce had a GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) office. It was only a temporary position on the subcommittee. There really wasn't an opportunity for a permanent position.

Q: Back in the GATT days. My goodness.

HIGGISTON: Yes. Before the World Trade Organization.

Q: Uh-huh.

HIGGISTON: As I mentioned, it was a temporary position and my friend had put in a good word for me. I went for a short interview. There was no security check. A different world.

Q: Yep, and I expect you didn't even need to go through metal detectors to get into buildings or anything else, huh?

HIGGISTON: No, not when I first got there.

Q: Thanks.

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Q: Today is March 24, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher with another session of Jim Higgiston's oral history.

Good morning, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Good morning.

Q: When we left off last time, it was 1984. You had had many adventures already, but you were just starting your career at Agriculture. You had just been hired. And I'd like to ask you a couple of questions about that. Tell me, were you actually hired to Agriculture or to the Foreign Agricultural Service and could you explain a little bit about the difference between those?

HIGGISTON: The Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) is an agency within the Department of Agriculture. We had our own budget, and I was hired directly into FAS.

As a way of background, the first incarnation of FAS was in 1930, although we had an agricultural commissioner stationed in London during the Lincoln administration. As you are probably aware, the United States is a big agriculture producer. In the 19th century the country became a major exporter of commodities. In addition, up until after World War II, most Americans lived in rural areas. Overseas markets became more and more important to the agriculture sector in the United States. In 1930, Congress created the Foreign Agricultural Service which was part of the Department of Agriculture. Interestingly, FAS was the only USDA agency that was exclusively focused on international issues.

Around 1938, President Roosevelt moved all FAS officers into the State Department under the Office of Foreign Agricultural Relations. In 1953, the Congress passed legislation to move FAS back to USDA. I believe the U.S. agricultural sector wanted to ensure that FAS would independently support U.S. agriculture, without concerns about foreign affairs.

Q: (Indiscernible). Go ahead.

HIGGISTON: So, then in 1953, Congress moved us back to USDA. The timing is important because that same year PL 480 was passed. Public Law 480 was the main food aid instrument that the United States had up until that point. And so, Congress tasked USDA to purchase the commodities under that program. And our agricultural attachés were responsible for negotiating the agreements under that program. There were 3 titles under the law: Title I was a long-term sales agreement where countries had to pay back the purchase with very lenient terms, up to 30 years. Title II was basically food that was donated through NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) or the UN's World Food Program. And Title III, that was administered by—eventually by AID. Title III was a program that allowed countries to pay back the purchase in local currency which would be used in the country's development. At the same time, Congress passed legislation for the development or the creation of U.S. agricultural Cooperator Programs, such as U.S. Wheat Associates, Cotton Council, and Feed Grains Council who were responsible for marketing U.S. commodities overseas. At the time, the primary function of FAS was analysis, the collection of data on crop production and market demand overseas.
The second focus for FAS at the time was responsibility for international negotiations. This was prior to the creation of the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative. We still play a role in support of USTR.

Q: Can I interrupt you for just a minute? You said responsible for negotiations on trade; just in agriculture or on everything?

HIGGISTON: Just for agriculture issues.

Q: Agriculture, right. Okay, just to make that clear. Go ahead.

HIGGISTON: USTR began under the Kennedy Administration, but really did not really come into prominence until the seventies and eighties.

As I mentioned, in 1953 the Cooperator Programs began. These organizations received funding from the U.S. agriculture industry as well as FAS. Their role was to market products overseas. They would provide technical assistance to show foreign farmers how to best use U.S; commodities. Our FAS overseas offices worked hand-in-hand with them in the different countries, basically helping them with their marketing efforts. So, for example my office in Warsaw, Poland worked with the Florida Department of Citrus to help promote U.S. grapefruit to Poland. Our ambassador agreed to host a reception for potential buyers and supermarkets. Our office helped to provide new contacts as part of our job. Oftentimes they might alert us to an issue that could inhibit U.S. exports.

And finally, we were responsible for several food aid programs. Initially, it was just the PL-480 program, but then we wound up working on the Food for Progress that began in 1985, and then there was also the McGovern-Dole Program that occurred a little bit later.

Analysis has probably been the bread-and-butter work of FAS since its incarnation. Each month USDA puts together the World Agricultural Supply and Demand Estimates (WASDE) which give a picture of production, trade and utilization of commodities around the world. Right now, the WASDE is in the news given the situation in Ukraine and Russia, particularly concerning supplies of wheat and sunflowers and how the current situation will affect world markets.

In 1980, the Foreign Service Act came into effect, and that' when we, along with AID, the State Department, the Foreign Commercial Service and I believe USIA (United States Information Agency) became five Foreign Service agencies. This primarily focused on the development of a personnel system for these foreign service agencies. For FAS, you joined the agency as a civil servant. After two years, you could apply for a position in the foreign service. The reasoning was that new employees would rotate to different parts of the agency as well as understand the role of other agencies in USDA.

Q: Okay. So, in '84, when you joined, it was as a civil servant?

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: But tell me, if it was this two-year kind of rotational issue to get in, were you already expecting to do that and get into the Foreign Agricultural Service, or was that (crosstalk/indiscernible)?

HIGGISTON: In order to get into the foreign service, you had an application process which included a supervisory recommendation. Once you passed that hurdle there was an oral exam. The good thing about FAS was that it was a small agency. We had approximately 900 people working domestically.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: By being in the agency for two years, people in the agency could judge a person's abilities. There was no written exam to join the Foreign Service. Your annual reviews for 2 years were part of the application process along with a recommendation from your supervisor. Once you overcame that hurdle, there was an oral exam conducted by a three-person panel along with someone from outside the agency. Often a State Department representative would fill that role.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

HIGGISTON: in my case, I knew I'd have to be in the agency for at least two years, which was fine because I didn't have an ag background, and also because when you are stationed overseas, you need to have a good handle on the role not only of FAS divisions but also the role of other agencies like the APHIS (Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service) people did on animal health, food safety. While FAS dealt exclusively with overseas issues, just about every other USDA agency did work overseas. These agencies did not have the overseas presence that we did but they were doing a lot of work overseas that we would help support them.

Does that answer your question?

Q: It does. Now, you said it was a small agency. You call it an agency, FAS, or service?

HIGGISTON: Yes, an agency.

Q: So, what does small mean in numbers?

HIGGISTON: At the time we had about 800 or 900 permanent Americans working in FAS which included about 150 – 180 Foreign Service officers at the time. However, we also had approximately 350 local staff working in our overseas offices.

Q: Okay.

Q: Okay. So, 150 – 180 would have been both overseas and domestic?

HIGGISTON: Correct. Approximately, two-thirds of our Foreign Service Officers were overseas at any one time. There was a lot of friction at one point with the Civil Service when the unions came into effect in the late 1990s. The civil service felt that Foreign Service officers had more opportunities. Currently, our Foreign Service numbers have decreased a bit and now there's only a small number of Foreign Service officers in Washington. Most officers would prefer to work overseas.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: I felt like I was one of the few officers that actually liked being in Washington and enjoyed coming back to our home office. I always felt it was important for officers to come back after two tours, just simply so they could get a good sense of changes in the administration and the changing goals or direction. I also think that it is very important for an officer to know the priorities of the administration.

Q: Yeah, you need to understand who you're reporting to and working for ultimately, I'm sure.

HIGGISTON: Exactly.

Q: But now, you said there were kind of disputes over jobs. It's not like—it wasn't like the State Department where some jobs were reserved for Foreign Service, and some were Civil Service?

HIGGISTON: It was, how should I say this, an unofficial distribution of jobs. Although we had discussions during my career about specifying jobs according to the civil or foreign service, the unions could never come to any agreement. In fact, the Foreign Service union would not support this position. I always felt that, as Foreign Service officer, we could bring a unique perspective to jobs in Washington.

Q: Ah. Okay.

So, what was the structure generally? Was it broken down into bureaus a lot like State? Did it cover these (crosstalk/indiscernible) separately? What?

HIGGISTON: When I joined FAS in 1984, we were structured according to commodity divisions (grains, oilseeds, dairy and livestock, forest products and horticulture), trade policy, export programs (including food aid) and trade estimates. Each commodity division dealt with analysis, marketing, and policy.

Q: So, which division were you in?

HIGGISTON: I started out in the grain and feed division.

Q: Grain and feed. Okay. And so, you were doing worldwide analysis?

HIGGISTON: Yes. When I first started, I was doing a lot of briefing papers. We also put together briefing books for meeting with at the International Wheat Council in London for negotiations with the Soviets about our grain agreement. If there was some meeting that dealt with trade policy pertaining to grains, we would prepare the briefing material.

Actually, my first job at FAS was on the "Action Desk" in the grain division. I would be responsible for reviewing all cables and wire services on anything that dealt with grains. Each day, I would summarize the most important news which would be sent to the FAS

Administrator's office and then to the Under Secretary's office. It gave me a good sense of what was important.

Q: Okay. A little bit more about that. So, the grain and feed division—

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: —would have a head who was, what, the equivalent to an office director or a—

HIGGISTON: As I mentioned, at that time FAS was divided into divisions – commodity divisions, trade policy, export credits and marketing. The directors reported to Deputy Administrators who in turn reported to Associate Administrators.

Q: —assistant secretary? A director who would then report to the director of FAS?

HIGGISTON: No. The agency was headed by an Administrator. We had 1 Associate Administrator and the General Sales Manager. We then had 3 or 4 Deputy Administrators followed by Division Directors. The Administrator reported to a Deputy Under Secretary who reported to our Under Secretary.

Q: Right.

HIGGISTON: The General Sales Manager dealt with some of our commercial programs like the GSM 102 program, which was a credit guarantee program as well as our food aid programs.

Q: And was your grain division one huge division, or was it also subdivided into functional areas of some kind?

HIGGISTON: It was a large division, and then we had offices within it that dealt with analysis and marketing. We also had a group responsible for inputting data from our posts on production and trade. The Grain and Feed Division also published monthly circulars dealing with trade as well as overall production, trade, and consumption.

On the marketing side, we dealt with Cooperators like the U.S. Wheat Associates, the Feed Grains Council, the sorghum people and so forth. Obviously, wheat, corn and rice were some of our most important grains. Our folks on the marketing side were responsible for reviewing marketing plans for all our cooperators. That is, the plans the organizations had for promoting their commodities in overseas markets. If you remember, the cooperators received funding from domestic commodity organizations as well as FAS.

It was one of the biggest divisions in FAS and probably among the commodity divisions one of the most important at the time.

Q: Did you have a title?

HIGGISTON: I was an analyst. In fact, I was known as a junior professional, which meant I was on probation for a year before I became a permanent employee. This was true of all employees.

Q: Okay, okay. And you mentioned, as you were talking about the leadership, you said he or she. Were there actually a lot of shes in the department, professionals?

HIGGISTON: My first two supervisors were women when I arrived in FAS. There were a fair number of women in the agency. As I moved up in the agency, we had at least 50 percent women. That was also true of the Foreign Service. In the class that I came in with, I think it was at least 50 percent women. Not necessarily as division directors but there were a number of women serving as deputy division directors. I remember the head of the congressional liaison office was a woman. The assistant general sales manager, who was great, was a woman. So, back in 1984, when I first started most of the people in leadership positions were men, but that changed over time. I think in terms of diversity, there was less of an issue as we got into the eighties and nineties with bringing in women than it was bringing in minorities. We had a tough time bringing in minorities. It has gotten somewhat better.

Q: So, when you joined there were not many minorities?

HIGGISTON: Very few. The head of the foreign service was an African American as was the Administrator, a couple of years after I arrived. It was hard to explain. I know we made an effort over the years to attract folks from HBCUs and HACUs. We have sent folks out to recruit minorities and it has been somewhat successful, but there is always room for improvement. But it's always been a little bit difficult for us.

Q: Now, you mentioned, just a second ago, the class you came in was 50 percent women. You haven't talked about coming in as a class.

HIGGISTON: I only say that we came in together, around the same time. As I mentioned, there was a hiring freeze until late 1984. Once the freeze was lifted, we brought in a fairly large number of new employees over the year.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: A number of us started in the same year. Hiring was done individually by different divisions. It was not the same as a "class" at the State Department. Moreover, not everyone joined the Foreign Service.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: As I mentioned, FAS at that time, did not bring us in as a class. Individuals would be hired, and FAS would have something of an orientation program. We had an organization known as JPAC, which had a couple of new hires that organized discussion

or field trips. For example, there would be field trips locally to visit the harbor in Baltimore and meet with officials there to discuss the grain elevators. In addition, they would organize weeklong trips to the Midwest United States or the Pacific Northwest. The JPAC would organize the trip and we would meet with local officials, companies j or agriculture associations. Individuals would prepare briefing papers for each of the meetings. It gave you a good introduction to the folks you would eventually represent when you were overseas. And it was not limited to folks that wanted to join the Foreign Service. All new employees participated in the program.

Q: Okay. So, it was actually almost a formal training kind of thing, like these trips, even if there wasn't a three-month class or whatever they put y0ou through in the first instance.

HIGGISTON: Yeah. Exactly. In addition, there might be specialized trips. For example, state organizations in grain states would organize crop estimate trips. These state groups would organize trips where they would put you in a car with three or four other people. Normally, there was someone from a local/state organization, someone from the local agriculture university or an extension service representative. Then you would have people from the outside, like folks from FAS or foreign attachés from other countries or companies. The goal was to ride around the area and learn about doing crop estimates. What to look for, how to differentiate different grains and how to estimate yields. Most times there were about 25 cars that set off in different directions. Each night the group would get together to discuss their findings. This really helped when I was in the Soviet Union.

My wife would always say that "The ag folks are really nice." I couldn't agree more. In some ways I was in a better position because I did not have an ag background. These folks were always willing to share information, and no question was stupid. I learned so much throughout my career by asking questions. And when I had new recruits or worked overseas with first tour officers, I always encouraged folks to ask questions. I have to say, it was probably one of the reasons why FAS was so interesting because I always felt that I was learning something new whether it was about agriculture, trade policy or a foreign country. I felt very fortunate having that experience.

Q: Well, it is really great that they sent you out to do this. I mean, I don't know about you, but still today if they sent me out to a farm I wouldn't know if I was looking at a field or a field of sorghum or something else. So—

HIGGISTON: I was with our General Sales Manager who was one of our highest-ranking officers and was appointed ambassador to Chad. We were in his office, and we were discussing some pictures of fields and he asked me whether I had grown up on a farm. I explained that I had grown up in Brooklyn. And he said, "Well, how do you know all this stuff?" And I said, "You know, all the training as JPs really paid off". He never hesitated to support this training. It was very invaluable, and I would not have been able to do my job if it wasn't for the folks I worked with in USDA who were very willing to share information, and especially on trips with the agriculture associations and cooperators. And the cooperators wanted you to understand these things because you were going to be

out there supporting them, and if you didn't understand something, you couldn't do your job.

Q: Right, right.

HIGGISTON: So, yeah, I was—

Q: I imagine that made it a much more interesting first assignment, I guess, to be able to join that with the analysis and the paperwork and such, briefing books.

HIGGISTON: Absolutely. I had a good background in math, and I enjoyed doing the analysis. I liked looking at the numbers and why the numbers made sense. I really loved it. I also liked working with new attachés to get them to understand the reasons behind the numbers. Why, for example, did imports decrease or demand for corn increase. And it was important to look at cross commodities. How did the grain situation relate to the livestock situation?

Q: Okay. So, you settled into your desk in the grain division, and did you have an office, did you have a window, or were you in—cubicles didn't exist yet at that point; did they or did they?

HIGGISTON: The USDA building was interesting. There was an aerial shot of our building. You notice that every office had a window. There was an apocryphal explanation, that the architect that designed our building also designed Leavenworth prison. The building was designed with wings and courtyards. And yes, there were times when you felt like you were working in a jail cell, but it meant a lot to have a window.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: It made for a good story and whenever I had a visitor coming to the building for the first time, I would tell the story, so I kept repeating it. Later, I found out later that that actually wasn't true.

So, my first office had a window. I shared the room with my supervisor and another employee who was about to go overseas. I didn't have my own office until I became a supervisor.

Q: Mm-hm. Do you remember what Civil Service grade you joined at?

HIGGISTON: I came in as a GS-9 because I had a master's degree. At the time it was a GS 9, 11, 12 position. After a year you would normally get an eleven and after another year a GS 12. By the way, you couldn't apply for the Foreign Service until you were a GS-11.

Q: Okay. Which would have been, you said a year after you've—

HIGGISTON: About a year. But like I said, you had to be an eleven and you also had to have two years under your belt.

Q: Two years. Okay. So, anything particularly excitable—did you spend, first of all, did you spend the whole two years in the grain division?

HIGGISTON: I started in FAS in November 1984. I went overseas to Moscow in 1988 and I had about six months of language training since I had some Russian.

Q: Okay, that's getting a little ahead of ourselves there.

HIGGISTON: I was just trying to think how long I was in the grain division.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: So, I had two jobs in the grain division. I started out doing briefing papers and contributing to briefing books. Then I went down to the analysis section putting together monthly circulars/publications and collecting and updating all the data we were receiving from our overseas posts. I felt like this would be important because, if I eventually was assigned to Moscow, I would need this skill.

Q: Was that still in the grain division, Jim?

HIGGISTON: Yes, that was all in the grain division.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: So, in working with the trade numbers, we had to participate in the "lock up" process. Do you remember the movie *Trading Places* with—?

Q: Yes, yeah, Eddie Murphy.

HIGGISTON: Right. So, in the movie they talked about orange juice futures which were based on USDA crop estimates. Anyway, every month experts from USDA and other agencies including I believe the CIA would get together and analyze the world crop situation. They would look at worldwide production, consumption, and trade in all the major commodities. All these groups would meet in one of the wings of the USDA building. The group would meet all day and come up with their analysis and then the Secretary would announce the major results at 3:30 pm after all the major commodity markets would close. The most important month would be the ones when the new crop estimates would come out because it could cause the prices to spike up or down depending on the results. But the most interesting part of "lock up" was that the wing where you met would be closed off. You could enter but after 9 am you could not leave until "lock up" ended at 3:30 pm because someone could make a killing on the markets if you knew ahead of time if the numbers were going to change drastically. So, if for example, there were drought conditions in Europe or the Russians were having harvesting

issues, it could cause the prices to drop. Having that information could be very lucrative. None of the phones would work in the lock up wing and the shades on the windows were locked so that someone could not signal the results ahead of time. Moreover, the folks that controlled the numbers were separated. So, for example, FAS dealt with international trade numbers given our overseas network. Another group would deal with production domestically and overseas because if one group controlled all the numbers, they could subjectively change numbers. You may have a situation like you have with Ukraine and Russia today, where there are concerns with supplies of wheat. Other times, nothing major is going on, you don't have many fluctuating numbers.

Every month USDA would publish the World Agriculture Supply Demand Estimates report which would summarize the results of the meetings.

Anyway, there was a funny story about one "lock up". I arrived in the meeting at around 9:30 or 10 am. I had to collect all the latest data and bring the results to the meeting. In any case, I'm walking down the hall and passing all the people in the different offices and then I see this guy with a Pepsi hat on sitting there, looking very forlorn. And I go up to a friend and ask, "What's that all about?" Well, apparently the Pepsi deliveryman had arrived before "lock up" began to service all the soda and snack machines. Unfortunately, he did not finish until after 9 am. The guards would not let him leave and he could not contact anyone. In any case, his truck was double parked outside the building for the entire day.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: So, in any case, "lock up" was an important event. As part of my work, I would print out these massive reports called P-86s, which was data for total worldwide production, stocks, consumption, trade, by every country in the world. There would be discussion especially about significant countries that produced major crops or traded major crops. Interestingly, all our overseas reports from FAS attachés were labeled as unofficial because the "lock up" process controlled the official monthly data.

Q: Okay, because they have to be (indiscernible) by somebody to become official?

HIGGISTON: The folks at "lock up" would have to resolve any disagreements and once everyone agreed to the numbers, they became official. That was when the Secretary of Agriculture would release the results.

Q: Say what the WASDE stands for?

HIGGISTON: The World Agricultural Supply Demand Estimates.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

HIGGISTON: So, I said, this month (August 2022) is going to be interesting given the situation with Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine is a major supplier of wheat, and the war

could affect their ability to ship, which in turn could both result in supply shortages and higher prices.

Q: Yeah, that is going to be big.

Okay, so you moved over to the analysis section.

HIGGISTON: And I did—so I'm trying to think, I probably worked for about a year and a half in the grain division. During that time, I worked on an initiative called the Export Enhancement Program (EEP), which was an export subsidy program, basically that Congress gave us funding to combat European subsidies.

Q: Yeah.

HIGGISTON: So, every day we had to collect data on worldwide wheat prices and the price of European wheat in order to submit an estimate on how much U.S. exporters would need to make them more competitive in specific markets. So, we were doing it for wheat, primarily. But then, we started doing it for livestock, poultry, eggs, and some other commodities. We would go through the process every day and determine the costs. The funds would then be given to the exporters to make them more competitive.

Q: That's big bucks.

HIGGISTON: It was huge. (Laughs)

Q: More money than the average State Department would work with in their career by far.

HIGGISTON: The entire budget for FAS was something like $100 million when I started in FAS. That number increased over the years to something like $200 million when I retired as far as I remember. But we also had authority to receive money for programs from other sources like USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation, AID, or the State Department. We had more money coming in for programs from other sources than in our General Authorization. As an example, the work we did in Afghanistan was funded from the State Department.

Going back to EEP, we had very good data on prices particularly for wheat. We had domestic prices coming out of Chicago and Kansas City. You had white wheat that was coming out of the Pacific Northwest. You knew what the Europeans might be selling for from our overseas posts and we had good analysis.

So, just to finish. I was working in the analysis section and wanted some different experience. My division director wanted me to stay on the analysis side. However, that would entail me working on monthly publications which really did not interest me. I mentioned that the JPs had a little network going on, and some folks upstairs in the livestock division asked me if I wanted to come work with them. After a week, I went

back to my director for the grain division, and he had not changed his position. So, I responded that I was going to take this other position in the Dairy, Livestock Division." And they weren't too happy when I did that, although I was perfectly within my rights to move. And in fact, the guy who hired me was friends with my division director, and after I left, my old division director went up to his friend and in typical fashion said, "I don't want you to recruit, i.e. poach, anyone from my section again." (Laughs)

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: But it was fine. We mended fences and so forth. But I went up to the livestock because I felt I could use additional commodity experience.

Q: What's the approximate timing on this? Was this after about two years already?

HIGGISTON: So, that's what I was trying to think when I was saying I started in '84, in November, and I went overseas in '88, in the summer, and I had, I think, about six months, five or six months of language training. So, I think it was about a year and a half, and then the rest of the time I worked in the livestock division.

Q: Okay. Language training?

HIGGISTON: So, I had a little language training before I went to Moscow.

Q: Before you went to Moscow, okay. But you were still now in the department. At what point did you decide that you wanted to be Foreign Agricultural Service rather than Civil Service? Was that right from the very start?

HIGGISTON: So, first, it's all the Foreign Agricultural Service.

Q: Right, I'm sorry, rather than Civil Service, okay.

HIGGISTON: So, Foreign Service, I always wanted to be in the Foreign Service, so as soon as the two years were up, I applied.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: But I was in the livestock division at the time. I was working as the poultry analyst. My office mate at the time had served in Moscow as agriculture attaché. He wound up marrying a Russian and unfortunately was forced out of the Foreign Service, so. In the end he wound up working for the agriculture company Merck as well as some other agriculture companies. But when we worked together, we would sit there all day, and ask him all these questions about Moscow, about work in the embassy or just daily life in Moscow. Again, it really piqued my interest. I worked as the poultry analyst for about a year about a year and a half and during that time applied for the Foreign Service.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: So, I recently came across my Foreign Service rejection letter from FAS HR. At the time I applied you had to have certain requirements. The first was 20 credit hours in economics or statistics, although you did not have to have a degree in economics, and relevant experience in international trade. So, the rejection letter stated that I didn't have the relevant experience. Apparently, they did not feel my degree nor my experience on the Hill was relevant. I really did not want to wait another year to apply. My boss at the time was a fellow New Yorker that had grown up in Queens, New York. His name was Andy Duymovic, and he was of Serbo Croatian descent. Andy had a thicker New York accent than I did. There was actually a high school in New York that, at the time, was devoted to agriculture and he started there and wound up getting a PhD in economics, I believe from Cornell University. So, I went to Andy, and I asked, "What am I going to do?" And he sagely responded, "Well, listen. If you complain or we try to put pressure on them, HR is basically going to stick in their heels or delay it and you won't get in, at least this year. They're going to win out in the end." So, he said, "The best thing for us to do is to write a note to them, basically apologizing for not including certain things in my application." For whatever reason, they did not believe that my degree from Georgetown was relevant, nor my work on the Hill. So, we sat down, and we crafted this memo, sent it over to them apologizing for the error of my ways and that I should have explained in greater detail about my background. In the end they allowed me to take the test.

Q: Okay. Now, you mentioned the test. This is just the oral test as opposed to a written?

HIGGISTON: Yes. It was primarily an oral test. As I mentioned before, you had to provide your annual reviews along with a supervisory recommendation. If my memory serves me well, I believe all applicants had to write a statement regarding their desire to join the Foreign Service. Because FAS was a relatively small agency, people had a sense of all the applicants.

Q: Tell me what you remember about the oral test.

HIGGISTON: Well, I'll tell you what I remember about the test at that time and then I will tell you how we changed the process when I was Deputy Administrator.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: So, basically the oral test was administered by a panel with four people. Three were from FAS with two normally from the Foreign Service and one civil servant. And there was an outsider either from the State Department or industry. And they had a list of questions, and they would pick specific questions off the list. Each panel asked different questions. The entire test took about 90 to 120 minutes. But again, as I mentioned, people knew who you were because you had been in the agency for two years, they had a sense of what you could do, what you couldn't do, and while —no one on the panel had supervised me, we all knew one another.

Q: Do you remember what kind of questions they asked you?

HIGGISTON: So, I would probably divide the types of questions asked into two categories. First there would be some specific factual questions on trade policy or food aid programs or commodity programs, for example. Those were pretty straight forward. The second set of questions would be more in the way of scenarios and how you would approach a problem. For example, how would you handle a situation if you did not agree with an ambassador's response to an issue. We were there to represent U.S. agriculture and it was our job to point out how a specific issue might be detrimental to U.S. agriculture. Obviously, there were times that overall U.S. policy would take precedence, but that was the role of the State Department. During the post war period, agriculture was sometimes used as a tool of overall foreign policy. Two specific examples were an export embargo on soybeans in the 1970s and Jimmy Carter's export embargoes against the Soviet Union due to Afghanistan. As a result of these two incidents, our competitors reaped the benefits to the detriment of U.S. agriculture. Moreover, Congress in response took a position that agriculture could not be used, i.e., withheld or embargoed, due to foreign policy.

So, during the test the panelists might pose a scenario in which a foreign policy issue might be detrimental to agriculture in your country as an attaché. The point was not that you would oppose the ambassador, but it was our role to point out the ramifications of a certain position. The panelists would try to see whether you could be moved off your position. The goal was to determine whether you would be able to defend your position while still being a member of the embassy's senior staff. Another question might focus on a situation if a corporation came to the office and started complaining if you didn't support their country proposal.

In retrospect, I don't know if they could get away with asking different candidates different questions. I know when I became a supervisor, it was always drummed into me that you had to ask the same questions of all the candidates. Everyone had to be treated the same.

You can't cherry pick. In addition to those issues, I noted that folks would sometimes ask questions but themselves didn't know the answer. When I became Deputy Administrator, we changed that process to make the test a lot more transparent.

Q: Okay. So, they told you shortly after you took the test or immediately after, you know, they huddled and gave you a response, as far as you can recall?

HIGGISTON: You would be notified immediately after the test whether you passed or not.

Q: Yeah. Okay, that's the same thing they did when I joined the Foreign Service when they still had an oral exam that was very similar to what you've described.

And at that point, what, do you have a swearing in, get your commission?

HIGGISTON: So, interestingly, our swearing in took place during our outgoing briefing in which we were briefed on the administrative process for going overseas. It was pretty informal. Basically, they would have a class to talk primarily about insurance, health plans, and guidance on going overseas as a first-tour officer. Each of the divisions in FAS would send representatives and talk about their needs overseas and what we needed to focus on as officers. Each of the divisions would update us on current issues and what we needed to be aware of. Someone would talk about new legislation or changes to the Farm Bill and how that might affect us during our tour. We'd have representatives from the cooperator programs. And I got sworn in prior to lunch along with other new officers in the conference room. So, there was no ceremony, which we changed later.

Q: Okay, okay. But it was a group of, what, a dozen of you or something like that or?

HIGGISTON: I would say we brought in about a dozen new officers each year in order to keep up with retirements.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: Like I said, the process changed a great deal over time. When I started in FAS, it seemed like we were bringing in a lot of new people, initially as civil servants. So, we might bring in about 20 people a year with about maybe 15 people applying for the Foreign Service. As a result, you could be a bit more discerning. If a candidate needed more training, you could have them wait another year to get more experience. So, the agency might take 10 people into the Foreign Service. The problem later on due to funding limitations would result in the agency bringing fewer people into the agency which, in turn, reduced the number of candidates who would apply to the Foreign Service.

Q: Okay. So, you passed the test and did this affect your day-to-day work at first?

HIGGISTON: No, not really. Once you passed the test, the next step would be to bid on your posts. As officers we had to bid on different posts that had open positions. Each of us would have to bid on several postings prioritizing all our bids. I think the year I bid there were six first tour postings available. And it was very interesting, there was really no competition because everybody in that group wanted to go to different posts somewhere else.

Q: Hang on. You said you had a dozen or fifteen, if there were only six openings, how did that work?

HIGGISTON: Well, not everyone was posted in their first year. You sometimes had to wait. So, the assistant attaché position in Moscow did not open up for another year.

Q: Ah, okay. But you wanted to go out as soon as possible?

HIGGISTON: Yes, I did want to go out quickly, but I really wanted to go to Moscow. That was my primary goal. Moreover, normally I would have to take long term Russian training which would also have put me on a different timeline compared, for example, to someone going to the UK or Canada. Some folks also already had language capabilities like Spanish, and they could go out immediately. I had to wait a little bit longer, and then I had to go into language training, so I didn't go out exactly when others did.

Q: Mm-hm, okay. So, you put in for Moscow and were accepted right away?

HIGGISTON: Right.

Q: So, that was kind of your dream job, huh, to go back to Moscow?

HIGGISTON: Yes, well, when I was interviewing for FAS, we discussed my going to Moscow. In many ways, FAS had me pegged to go to Moscow. And I believe I was hired to work in the grain division because I had a Russian background, and the grain folks were focused on the Soviet Union.

Q: Okay.

Q: But before—before, I was going to say, before we move to Moscow, is there anything else you want to say about your—what, did it turn out to be four years in the department before you headed out to Moscow?

HIGGISTON: Yeah. But what I wanted to say was that—so I started in November '84, right?

Q: Right.

HIGGISTON: And I left for Moscow in August of '88. So, it was about three and a half years.

Q: Okay, almost, close approaching four years.

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: So, okay. Is there anything else you want to talk about with the poultry division?

HIGGISTON: So, as I mentioned, one of the reasons why the folks in the grain division wanted me was because I had a Russian background and that the Soviet Union was very important to the U.S. grain trade. In addition, I was kind of brought in to take Allan Mustard's place. Allan Mustard preceded me in the grain division and left the division just prior to my arrival. Interestingly, Allan moved the Livestock Division prior to going to Moscow and I wound up following in his footsteps.

In some ways, I was being groomed to go to Moscow. At the time, there weren't that many Russian speakers that were coming into the agency at the time, so it was straightforward. At the time I joined the Service, I had a friend who knew Japanese; she went to Japan. It just worked out that year that we had people that could easily fill those slots. It's not always the case.

Q: That's remarkably logical. It doesn't sound like the State Department and assignment process at all. (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: Yes. It seemed like it just worked out well that year. Sometimes it doesn't work out.

Q: Yes.

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Q: Today is March 24, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher continuing with the second half of today's interview with Jim Higgiston.

Okay, Jim. So, you had gotten your Moscow assignment and you went to language training. Was that at the Foreign Service Institute?

HIGGISTON: Yes. So, I got my assignment. I was still working in my office in the livestock division. And then, probably in January or February they sent me to language training. The problem was that because I had some Russian, there wasn't a really good fit for me at FSI, so I wound up working with several tutors for four or five months.

Q: Private tutors or FSI tutors?

HIGGISTON: Private. I worked with Language Learning Enterprises, LLE, for a while. That was one of the companies FAS had worked with in the past to get language training. So, I worked with two Russian émigrés.

Q: Okay. Did you do, like the State Department trainees where you're just doing full-time Russian, or were you trying to hold down a job at the same time?

HIGGISTON: With Russian, I think I was doing it full-time for about five hours a day.

Q: That's pretty full-time, I would think.

HIGGISTON: Yes. It does take a lot out of you especially when it is one-on-one training.

Q: Were you expected to achieve a three-three or something like that?

HIGGISTON: In Russian you needed to get a 2 – 2, at the time. I received a 2+ 3 rating. I got a three in reading and a two plus in speaking.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. And that—you just were supposed to do as well as you could or were you required to reach some level before you could go off to post?

HIGGISTON: I think Russian was two-two. You had to get at least a two-two and then you could go. So, it was fine. And because my reading was better and I was doing a lot of work reading newspapers, and so that was fine. And I have to say, it got better when I was there, using it every day.

Q: Did you get any other training before you went, area studies, whatever?

HIGGISTON: You know, I don't think I took area studies. Because I had been a Russian studies major and had kept up with a lot of the things going on in Moscow, I didn't necessarily need it. I think I probably got some briefings at certain points. You know, the agency wanted certain things and so, I would find out what they were looking for. But mostly internally, you know, FAS division would give me detailed briefings on specific items. Before I went out, there was a big push to get me briefed on commodity issues, because that's where people were focusing. And also, with the cooperator program because there were several that were very active in Moscow.

Q: Did you have consultations with State, AID, Treasury, whatever the heck?

HIGGISTON: Probably with State, but not AID. AID was not working in Moscow at the time. Neither was Peace Corps, for example. I think State and Commerce were the major briefings.

Q: Okay. And how about CIA? Did you go over there as well? They follow all that kind of stuff, don't they?

HIGGISTON: Yes. Obviously, agriculture was a very important part of the Soviet economy. I don't remember any specific requests. It tracked in many ways with the work FAS wanted me to do.

Q: That's fine. So, it was August '88 when you actually went over?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I traveled to Moscow in August arriving on a Sunday. Pan Am was running a direct flight from New York. I actually moved into Allan Mustard's apartment on Bolshaya Ordynka, which was only a short walk to Red Square.

Q: Okay. You keep mentioning Allen Mustard. I mean, I know he's somebody you know and I know, and hence you've mentioned him, but for the record, since the historians are going to be reading this, do you want to (crosstalk/indiscernible)?

HIGGISTON: Allan Mustard was the FAS resident Soviet expert when I arrived at the agency. He had a five-five in Russian. He was totally fluent in the language. He had been part of the—USIA had a traveling exhibition, which had started in the 1960s. I don't

know if you remember the Khrushchev-Nixon debate in the sixties. That was at one of the exhibitions that traveled around the Soviet Union. Allan participated in the traveling exhibition on American agriculture. Allan joined FAS a couple of years before me and was obviously destined to go to Moscow and serve in the FAS office. He had a background in agriculture, and I believe his family owned a farm in Washington state, I believe. It's funny because for a while, I actually followed him throughout my career, at least initially. I started in the Grain Division when he left. Followed him to the Livestock Division and then to Moscow. He later became the U.S. ambassador to Turkmenistan and is now retired. But he's been a friend for a number of years.

Q: If you mention him again, the historians will know who you're talking about, so.

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: You said you arrived there on a Sunday. You're not supposed to arrive places Sundays anymore, but—

HIGGISTON: I guess that is true now but at the time I didn't know better.

Q: —and I guess I should ask, this was 1988, this is still the Reagan Administration, so you're going to the evil empire. So what was the atmospherics of all that?

HIGGISTON: Honestly, I was very fortunate because it was a time when the everyday Russians on the street really liked Americans. They wanted to get to know us, they wanted to talk to us. Whenever we went out on the road we would check out the markets if we were traveling. People wanted us to come back to their apartments for tea and stuff and so forth. Relations with the government were not particularly good, but we had a decent relationship with our agriculture contacts.

Q: Seriously? Back to the house? That wasn't forbidden then at that stage. My goodness.

HIGGISTON: Oh, it was forbidden, but I think it was starting to loosen up. Russians would not necessarily want to visit my apartment, but people did not seem to be afraid to talk with us. Gorbachev was not yet in power, but things seemed to be getting better.

Q: Ah, okay.

HIGGISTON: So, like I said, things started to loosen up when I arrived. People wanted to know about the United States, they wanted to meet Americans. To be honest, some folks might have been hoping to get help getting a visa, but I never had any issues with folks. People seemed to be very down to earth. At times, I felt they were like working class people in Brooklyn – very welcoming and very protective. But overall, it was very pleasant. I never had a problem on the street when I was there, I never felt intimidated. I mean, I made no bones about who I was.

Folks that were dealing with more sensitive issues probably had a more difficult time there. I had a friend who had a tough time initially because he was mistaken for an intelligence officer, which he was not. Apparently, our folks had to tell their counterparts that he was not, and the harassment stopped.

But in general, people were quite pleasant, and very solicitous. I remember I had gone to the ballet with a friend and had somehow lost the keys to my car and apartment. I had to go back to the theater and this gentleman took me around the entire theater that night even though he was about to close up and he took me around to see if we could find my keys. I mean, people were just very nice when I was there. Even the police were very nice. I never had a problem the entire time I was there. I think if they knew they could get under your skin, they would do it.

At the embassy, for example, there were Soviet guards at every entrance. Sometimes they wouldn't move when you approached the embassy so you would have to walk around them. Some people took umbrage when they did that, but it didn't bother me. I felt like it was just another good story to add to my experience there. The Soviet officials could be a little bit more difficult, but the agricultural folks were fine. I mean, I had never had a problem with them, and they were fairly cooperative.

I would divide our work contacts into three groups. We worked with the Ministry of Agriculture for general information including requests for meetings outside of Moscow as well as statistical information. We also worked with the Soviet trade officials who were very business minded and we worked with the Academy of Agricultural Sciences on our exchange programs. Of the three, the ministry was probably the most difficult, particularly when I first got to Moscow. That changed over time. As an example, normally we had to request a meeting with the ministry weeks ahead of time and from time to time our meetings were canceled at the last minute. By the time I left, I could show up at the Ministry, pass the guards and then show up at the office for international affairs. It was really remarkable.

The exchange program was pretty interesting. The Soviets would send people to the States to look at our processes and commodities and we would send folks over from the States to look at production in rural areas to see how things were changing on farms. By the end of my tour Gorbachev was in power and was trying to give the economy a boost. Our folks were interested in seeing how changes in policy might be affecting actual production. Like I said, our partners at the Academy and with the trade were easy to work with.

Q: Maybe you could say about your position in the embassy, the agriculture section, how many of you were there. This must have been a huge American embassy at the time, right? It was the center of everybody's attention.

HIGGISTON: It was a big embassy, but when I look back on it, it might be considered medium sized. You might not remember, but around 1986, the Russians withdrew all the local staff in retaliation for us kicking out some of their folks in San Francisco. So, from

1986 till the time I arrived, we were very short staffed. Officers had to do the administrative work, including GSO work, for about 50 percent of their time. It was very disruptive.

Q: Ah. No, I didn't remember the date on that. Okay.

HIGGISTON: I believe it was in 1986. And as I mentioned, the U.S. officers had to do double duty, so they would work at their normal jobs and also do GSO (General Services Officer) work, or they served as drivers and so forth. By the time I arrived, the State Department had hired a contracting firm.

Q: Is that still PA&E?

HIGGISTON: Exactly.

Q: Pacific Architects and Engineers.

HIGGISTON: Right. So, they were doing all the administrative work at the embassy including - drivers and HR, travel and so forth. In retrospect, I think it backfired on the Soviets. Having all those Soviets working in key admin sections gave the Soviets good intel on the personnel that worked there.

So, regarding our office, we have a Counselor and two attachés. We had a family member who served as the office admin assistant. Prior to 1986, I believe we also had a Russian driver but, like I said, by the tie I arrived there were only Americans in our office. We might have had a couple of local staff before 1986, but at that point it was just the American officers. I was in the junior attaché slot. We were located in the "Core" which was a classified area. At the time we were located across from the USIS (United States Information Service) office and the economic staff. That was the only embassy where I worked in the classified section. This was very unusual. Given that we are a commercial office, often meeting with U.S. and local businesses, it was much more appropriate for us to be in the unclassified area.

Q: Was this still the old embassy building on the Ring Road there?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I believe it was formerly a maternity hospital, at some point. We were on one of the upper floors. Each of the attachés had a specific portfolio, primarily running along commodity reporting. The senior attaché followed the major commodities, particularly grains and oilseeds. I think as a junior attaché I worked on livestock issues. Interestingly, we covered a lot more commodities when I was there. One of my favorites was the honey report. There was actually a honey periodical and association, so I spent some time translating information from the journal as well as local newspapers. I was also responsible for the exchange program, so I would help facilitate visas and schedules. Under the program, the host country paid for all costs domestically. So, in our case, we would pay for our teams to travel to the Soviet Union. Once they arrived, the Soviets picked up the costs, except in Moscow. There were times when I would travel with the

teams. I was single and the senior attaché had a couple of children including a newborn, so he was less interested in traveling with teams.

Since our outside meetings were not as frequent, I spent a lot of time reading newspapers gathering nuggets of information that might be published. A lot of times, it was not what the newspapers said, it was what they didn't say.

Q: You said the officials were very cooperative on the ag side if I understood correctly.

HIGGISTON: Maybe I had low expectations, but I thought they were relatively easy to see. Like I said, if there was a meeting coming up or a delegation arriving that was dealing with trade, I could get in to see the trade officials. But again, getting in to see the ministry officials to ask about the plans or status of production, could be difficult. Again, in order to request the meeting, I would have to submit a diplomatic note requesting a meeting quite a bit ahead of time and there were times when you'd get to the day of the meeting, and they would cancel. So, like I said, the ministry was a lot more difficult than the traders. The traders were all business and they had something to gain and lose from this, whereas the people at the ministry were not as interested in these contacts for the most part. And luckily, like I said, the exchange program I worked with was primarily the responsibility of the Academy of Agricultural Sciences, and they couldn't have been nicer. And I have a good story to tell about that a little bit later, so.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: So, the embassy was fairly large, but that was my first experience in an embassy. In retrospect compared with the embassies in Brussels, Ankara, and Pretoria, it was pretty small. We were limited to the one building. For FAS the three attachés, was a fairly large office. In comparison and not surprising, the State Department sections were much larger.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

HIGGISTON: When I arrived, it was Ambassador Jack Matlock.

Q: Okay. At your level as a junior ag attaché, did you have any contact with him?

HIGGISTON: Not much. I would go to the Ambassador's staff when no one else was around. We did not have many high-level visitors, so my contact was limited.

I went to Spaso House, the Ambassador's residence, a couple of times. I attended some receptions there. We had an agreement with the Soviets to buy wheat, corn, and soybeans and held negotiations led by our Under Secretary once or twice a year. When the negotiations were held in Moscow, the ambassador would host a reception at Spaso House. Sometimes, as a junior officer, I was asked to attend a reception if there were not enough American officers available.

Q: Delegations. Now, did you end up with delegations as a control officer and going to meetings with them and that sort of thing?

HIGGISTON: I guess it would depend. Like I said, I would often travel with the exchange teams and attend meetings depending on the topic. For the larger delegations, like the grain negotiations, my boss would attend. A lot of times, I would be helping with side meetings or logistics. We had some people, commodity folks that came in that we would have some meetings with them. As things started to open up, we had a rise in the number of delegations. We had a big delegation from Maryland, led by the governor of Maryland later in my tour and we had a meeting in the Kremlin with the vice president of the country, which was really interesting. We even had Frank Perdue show up for a meeting at the embassy. We were very popular in the embassy when Frank arrived.

Q: Yeah, I guess it would be.

HIGGISTON: Our most regular meetings were with representatives from our cooperators, in particular, the U.S. Wheat Associates, the U.S. Feed Grains Council and the American Soybean Association. These were the major commodities that we sold to the Soviets, so it was an important market for the industry.

Q: Were those mainly Department of Agriculture officials?

HIGGISTON: No. The cooperators were non-profit commodity associations that promoted, but did not sell, U.S. commodities overseas.

Q: Oh, okay.

HIGGISTON: They were all private sector groups. Again, I would split my time in Moscow into two periods. Initially, we really did not have many visitors or meetings. During the latter part of my tour, things really began to open up. This continued after I left and for the folks that followed me, they had a constant stream of visitors. Again, during the grain negotiations we probably had the largest delegation during the first part of my tour.

Q: Would that have been a PL-480 thing?

HIGGISTON: No. That was not. The agreement and the negotiations began in the 1970s as a result of the Great Grain Robbery.

Q: The Great Grain Robbery?

HIGGISTON: Well, I will try to explain. In 1972 grain production worldwide had dropped significantly. However, economists did not recognize the significance of the drop. The Soviet Union was having a particularly bad year that also was not recognized to people. In addition, the United States had a subsidy program that kept prices fairly low, not just domestically but for export too. So, beginning in August 1972, the Soviet Union

began buying up grain in the United States and in some of the other major grain producers, like Europe. Because the purchases were done quietly and with different grain companies – Cargill, Continental, Bunge, and Louis Dreyfus to name a few, the purchases went unnoticed. In addition, unlike today, there was no system requiring the reporting on sales of commodities. When the situation became apparent, the damage was done and prices for bread, corn and other products increased significantly which adversely affected U.S. consumers. In addition, with grain supplies in short supply, food aid donations also were hit, and food aid recipients were also negatively affected. There is a book called the *Merchants of Grain*, which details the rise of grain companies. It also outlines the *Great Grain Robbery*. Today, exporters are required to report on a weekly basis to USDA on all sales of 100,000 tons of grain. Today, USDA publishes the weekly Export Sales Report, which includes sales of approximately 40 commodities.

Q: Oh, my. Whoops.

HIGGISTON: Yes, it was a significant event. So, the U.S. wanted to prevent such disruptions and entered into an agreement that guaranteed that the Soviets could buy a certain amount of wheat, corn, and soybeans each year. That guaranteed U.S. agriculture a guaranteed market and it also meant that the Soviets were guaranteed a supply. The situation in the Soviet Union was interesting. They did a decent job in growing wheat especially, but their growing season was too short, and they needed to buy corn. They were only able to grow corn for silage. Moreover, they had a terrible time with losses and waste. So, if I remember correctly, they lost about 15 percent of all the grains they produced, 30 – 25 percent of fruits and vegetables and, I believe, 30 percent of dairy products. Their ability to store products was totally inadequate and their ability to ship products was extremely problematic. It's been a complete reversal over the past 20 years or so. Today, Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan are major producers and exporters of wheat, which has led to the current concerns today.

Q: And this would be the kind of issue these delegations were hammering out together with the Russians?

HIGGISTON: Yes. The delegations would meet and discuss the agreement. It was straight forward. Every couple of years a new agreement would be negotiated. At the same time, more producers came to the fore. Canada, Australia, and Argentina are now major producers and exporters of wheat. Brazil ships corn and soybeans and we are not seeing any significant unexpected drops in production that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s.

Q: Did you—there must have been a lot of CODELs to Russia at this time as well, congressional delegations, but I wonder whether they were all focused on the political détente and things, rather than agricultural issues.

HIGGISTON: There were a lot of delegations that did visit, but not a significant number of agriculture delegations. I accompanied Senator Kerrey from Nebraska to Ukraine along with some staff. At the time, I believe, he was thinking about a possible

presidential run, and he wanted to have some experience with the Soviet Union. We did all the ag issues, but he also had meetings on non-ag issues in Moscow. There were a lot of CODELs that came to Moscow, but their focus was not necessarily on agriculture. They might ask for a briefing on the situation but that was the extent of it.

Q: I've got a list of things I want to talk about and this—Moscow at this time was really something where big stuff was going on. But we're a little bit past 12:00 already, so I wonder if this is a good stopping point, and we can take up some more when we get back.

HIGGISTON: Sure.

Q: Does that suit you?

HIGGISTON: That would be great.

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Q: Today is April 1, 2022. This is Peter Eicher starting another session of the oral history of Jim Higgiston.

Good morning, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Good morning.

Q: We had left off while you were in Moscow as the assistant ag attaché, and that was from 1998 until 1991. I'm sorry, 1988 until 1991. I've got a bunch of questions for you, but you've probably been thinking of things since last time, so if there's anything you want to start with, why don't you go ahead.

HIGGISTON: I would like to mention one thing, before we begin. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, FAS had its own cable system known as the TOFAS/FASTO system. It was an unclassified system and was used primarily for administrative issues, but we would also use it for unclassified reporting. I was having lunch with a friend and this one incident came up. It was one of the more famous cables in our history. I have a copy of it somewhere and I can share if you are interested. This was prior to my arrival during the Chernobyl crisis.

Obviously, there was worldwide concern when Chernobyl occurred. For agriculture, the fact that it was in Ukraine, had major implications. Ukraine was a major sugar beet and wheat producing area. I think initially, it was not clear how these crops were going to be affected. No one is going to be allowed into the area, particularly the U.S. agriculture counselor. Nonetheless, Washington was looking for some analysis and contacted the FAS office in Moscow. So, in response, our Counselor at the time, Waylon Beeghly wrote a TOFAS cable noting the little information they he could collect and stating that the embassy had no confirmed information about the impact yet, but he noted that it's very

early. However, he added that there have been rumors of dump trucks carrying giant sized sugar beets observed in the area.

Of course, our cable system was all unclassified and normally contained some unclassified statistical information. Wire services and newspapers like the *Wall Street Journal* would subscribe in order to receive the cables. Commodity markets like the Chicago Board of Trade or the Kansas City Markets were very controlled so that there would not be major interruptions in the market. So, there is a band of high and low prices and if for some reason commodity prices increase or fall dramatically, the exchanges would stop trading to limit any major disruptions. So, when Waylon's cable hit the wires, they wound up stopping trading for sugar on the markets for three days. The interesting part for me was the fact that he was not reporting that this actually occurred, but that it was an unconfirmed rumor. Nonetheless, the markets reacted very quickly.

Q: Yeah. I'd love to see it. Was he trying to make a joke, or was he just doing reporting and tongue in cheek—

HIGGISTON: Waylon was extremely bright, and I never had a chance to discuss it with him. He had a family farm in Iowa, I believe. He was probably one of our smartest and most colorful attachés. Waylon had a good sense of humor, and I would assume he did not think folks would take it seriously.

Q: (Laughs) While you're on Chernobyl, were there any other effects for your job from the Chernobyl disaster?

HIGGISTON: Not so much. I know some folks at the embassy kept apprised of the situation. Chernobyl was in an area that we would not normally travel to anyway. I know, Belarus was really hit by the fallout. We traveled mostly in the southern part of Ukraine. I don't think it affected production significantly. It did not have as much an effect as I think they probably thought initially.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. And in terms of health effects in Moscow, was that an issue?

HIGGISTON: We did not have the means to monitor plants coming from the region. I think it has gotten a bit looser over the years but when we were there, you never heard of any products coming from the quarantined area. There was a science attaché that was probably looking at the situation, but I don't remember seeing any classified cables reporting on it. Like I said, most of the fallout occurred in Belarus and then the Scandinavian countries particularly in the reindeer population. There were so many other environmental issues in the Soviet Union at the time you tried to put it out of your mind.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm. Okay.

How about traveling during your tour? Were you able to get around the Soviet Union?

HIGGISTON: It's funny that you mention that because initially, our office and the Defense attaché's office were really the only ones who could travel that extensively, particularly by car. In addition to traveling with exchange delegations, our office took 2 or 3 long road trips a year to look at the crop situation. Normally, we would travel with someone from our Washington office. We would start in Moscow and drive south through Kyiv to Odessa. That was a major grain and sunflower area. Then we would go east to Krasnodar in the Russian Republic and then back up to Moscow though eastern Ukraine and western Russia. We had to file a diplomatic note outlining day by day where we would be driving and at which hotels we would be staying. When I first started, despite requesting meetings along the way, we did not meet with anyone. We drove long distances in order to cover a lot of ground. Our visitors were only given a 14-day visa, so we did not have any spare time. We would hit about 12 cities. It was pretty restrictive. It was the only time when it was very apparent that we were being followed. Ukraine was probably the most restrictive.

Q: Did you call that crop travel?

HIGGISTON: Yes. If I am correct, the office did that same route for at least 20 years if not more. The folks we traveled with had detailed accounts of what they say and would upon returning to the United States would compare what they say with previous trips. For example, I know during my time there, we saw an increase in soybean production. After the Great Grain Robbery, the United States had satellite data that looked at the agriculture areas of the Soviet Union. Oftentimes, satellite imagery was somewhat limited so the folks from Washington would use these trips to "ground truth" what they were seeing from the satellites.

And so, they would often look at specific fields along the way and see if there were any significant changes. They would also be looking at use of mechanization in the fields or changes in the crops that were being grown. We would also note the overuse of fertilizers in some fields that damaged crops.

There were some interesting things that occurred. There were a limited number of roads at that time especially in rural areas. So there was one main road going south, particularly between the major cities. Most roads were not paved. So, during harvest season, the Soviets would use trucks to transport grains or sugar beets on these main roads on which we were traveling. The trucks were open with wooden sides. They would overload trucks as much as they could. In the case of sugar beets, they would overfill the sugar beets. There was no incentive to protect the loads and as I mentioned losses were very significant, particularly in transportation.

So, we would be driving down these main roads during the harvest. Trucks would be coming off these side roads filled with sugar beets or grains. There would be no tarp covering the load. So, we would find ourselves following one of these trucks carrying wheat and the wheat would be flying out of the truck, and it was like sand hitting us on the windshield. For sugar beets, the trucks would come off a side road out of the field and then go down the main road to wherever the collection point would be. And one of the

things that we would do is, is count the number of sugar beets along the side of the road because we knew if there were a lot of sugar beets between point A and B, that the harvest was really good, and they were just piling the sugar beets on the truck as much as possible. These drivers were crazy, and they would be flying down these roads, and the sugar beets would be flying off the trucks.

Q: Huh. Interesting.

What was the reason why the ag and Defense attachés could travel and others could not? I mean, it would seem like a Defense attaché would be the last person the Soviets would want traveling around.

HIGGISTON: Because we both wanted our defense attachés to travel so it was part of an agreement. Not sure how we were able to travel that much but I believe their ag attaché traveled a lot too.

Q: So, the same—reciprocity then?

HIGGISTON: Yes, exactly. So, I once traveled with a Soviet delegation that was looking at in transit fumigation practices for grain shipment. We were having some problems with shipping wheat and other crops from the United States to the Soviet Union. A lot of the shipments were becoming infested with bugs, along the way. So, we would ship wheat or corn or soybeans and by the time they got to their ports in the Soviet Union they'd be infested; not all of them, but a lot of them would. So, the United States wanted to use in-transit fumigation, and basically, they would put these pellets in the holds of the ship, seal off the holds, and then send them to Moscow. And then, when you opened the holds, the gas would dissipate. If I'm not mistaken, the gas was mustard gas.

Q: Great.

HIGGISTON: So, the problem was in order to use this method, you had to be able to seal the holds. Unfortunately, not all vessels could do this. There was a case of a shipment in the Middle East, and they tried to use this method on the wrong type of ship where they could not seal the holds. The problem, of course, came when the gas escaped into a crews' quarters, and they were killed. So, the process was safe because on the right vessels the case would safely dissipate but you had to use the correct ships.

So, three Soviet scientists came over to view the process. They came to Washington for meetings and then we took them down to New Orleans to see the process. After that we took them to Enid Oklahoma to see the grain being transported to New Orleans. We also had the Soviet ag attaché from Washington accompany us.

The port of New Orleans was all open, so we could take them all around and the port representatives rolled out the red carpet. We were put on a small ferry and taken all around the port looking at the grain elevators. But we wanted to take them to another site, and for the visitors coming in from the Soviet Union, we could drive from New Orleans

to the site without any problem. It took maybe 20 minutes. However, for the Soviet attaché their direct road went through a restricted area. There was nothing there, just swamps but it was closed. So, the ag attaché from the Soviet embassy was not allowed to take the direct route. In the end, he had to drive around Lake Okeechobee in order to arrive at our destination. Obviously, there were areas that were restricted for security reasons, but in some cases the open and closed areas were done in proportion. So, if you were a visitor, you could go to a lot more areas, but if you were a resident, you were basically limited. I said, for whatever reason, for reciprocity, they wanted their attachés to be able to travel, meaning their military attachés.

Q: That must have been pretty difficult traveling, the car trip from Moscow down to the Black Sea. I imagine the hotel accommodations weren't quite what we're used to?

HIGGISTON: So, I was thinking about this the other day. The drive was okay for the most part. You had to be careful, and you could not drive at night. There wasn't a great deal of traffic at the time and even in the cities it wasn't so bad. We had a Volvo 240 which was like a tank. The real issue was getting gas. The Volvo had a big tank, so we had good range, but you needed to know where and when to get gas. We had to find stations that had high quality gas because the normal Russian gas was dirty. You really needed to know where the stations were located. Once I did the trip, I felt more comfortable. The stations were located on the outskirts of the cities. But we absolutely had to fill the tank before you set off for the next city. Later in my tour, there would be some gas shortages. That made it a bit trickier.

The roads themselves were not too bad. Not great but not terrible. In fact, I saw worse roads in South Africa. The main roads were pretty good. Secondary roads could be problematic. You had to be careful when you drove, and you really had to be aware of everything around you. Most roads were one lane in each direction and although the traffic was not too bad, you could wind up behind a line of slow trucks. So, you would really have to pass the trucks or else arrive late to your next stop. Luckily, the Volvo had a big engine and passing was not as much of an issue, but it could be a white-knuckled affair at times.

Q: Did you drive yourself or did you have an embassy driver do this?

HIGGISTON: No, we didn't have embassy drivers at that point, so I drove.

Q: Oh, my.

HIGGISTON: And my boss didn't really want to do the trip and the other attaché was not interested because he was married with two young kids. But I loved it. I loved driving, and I loved seeing the country. In any case, the traveler in the States could not drive, so I did all the driving going back and forth.

But one funny story. Each embassy had a specific tag number. All the diplomat plates were red, and each embassy had a specific number. So, for the United States the first

numbers were D (for diplomat) followed by 004. I believe 004 was pir number because we were the fourth country to recognize the Soviet Union. In any case, that's the story I heard. I think the British were number one.

So, when we were on crop travel, we would often visit the local farmers markets. I got down, and like I said, one of the things we would do, we might go to a local market to check on the availability of food. We would talk to some of the farmers or locals at the market. We weren't trying to hide anything and eventually I identified myself as American and as the ag attaché from the U.S. Embassy from Moscow.

On my first trip, I remember being in one small town and visiting the market. As soon as folks heard I was the Agricultural Attaché from the American Embassy people gave me a strange look and walked away. It seemed like they didn't want to have anything to do with us. This was kind of unusual. As I mentioned, the Soviet people in general were normally curious about us. So, when I got back to Moscow, I had a friend who worked for Merck, the ag company, and who had worked for FAS in Moscow. We were having dinner, and I mentioned my experience on the road. "You know, I don't understand what's going on." He laughed and said, "One of the most popular shows at that time on Soviet TV was this spy show, and the evil person, the evil character, was from the U.S. embassy, and it was the Ag Attaché."

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: And on the show you would basically see the car pull up and you'd have the D-0-0-4 in red, and the ag attaché would kill somebody or steal something. And so, for at least the short time, people were very nervous when they met me and because they thought I was a spy.

Q: Hah. Okay. And accommodations along the road? They just had the normal hotels and things.

HIGGISTON: So, actually it was not as bad as you would think. As foreigners we had to stay at Intourist hotels. It was interesting. No matter what city you arrived at by car, you could always find signs for the Intourist hotels. I remember the rooms being clean and basic. It made it easier, especially at that time, to have a decent restaurant in the hotel and not having to search for one in a new city. I am sure it made it easier for them to watch us and the rooms were most likely bugged.

When I was working in Moscow, we had to use Intourist hotels. You really had no choice since all the reservations were made through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Later, when I traveled back to the former Soviet Union, there were more choices. When I was covering Ukraine out of Warsaw for a year, there were many more hotels and much nicer hotels. Like I said, they were clean. We would normally arrive around 5 or 6:00 pm when we were doing crop travel, have dinner and then leave the next morning at 7:00 am. Since we normally did not have permission to meet with local officials, there was no real reason to delay.

As you know, the highway police, the GAI (State Automobile Inspection Service) police, had checkpoints along the way. As I mentioned, we had to submit a diplomatic note ahead of time to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which listed day by day where we would be traveling. So, the GAI knew on what day we would be traveling from one city to the next. The checkpoints were regular along the road, so there really was no need to follow up. The only time we were followed was if we were near a military base that, most times we were unaware of. Most often, when we passed a checkpoint, we didn't have to stop. The guards would note it and let the next checkpoint know we would be coming through. They'd give us a certain amount of time to get there. And basically, if we did not get there, like if we stopped to have lunch along the road, they would send someone out to look for us. But for the most part, I was never aware of a tail. On the few occasions that we were followed, the rule was never to try to lose the tail. Because if you made them look bad, they knew eventually where you were heading. I had heard of instances that they would let the air out of your tires or put something in your gas tank, but I never had any problems on the road with the police.

Towards the end of my tour, it could be more difficult to find high quality gas. It seemed like the enforcement of rules became much more lax. The gas stations could sell the premium gas at a higher price to locals. We had to use coupons from the Ministry to purchase gas at an official price. I remember going into one station, trying to buy some gas. And the attendant said, "We don't have any premium gas to give you." So, I knew he had gas. I told him, "That's fine. I'm going to go sit by our car, have a soda, and when the GAI comes by, when I don't show up to the checkpoint, I will tell them that you wouldn't sell me gas, and then we'll see what happens." So, I go out to our car, open the trunk, take out a soda and sit on the ground. We sat there for less than 5 minutes, and the attendant came out and asked, "How much gas do you want?" So, we got our gas and then went on our way. Towards the end of my tour, it became easier to travel, but it became a little bit more difficult in terms of things like getting gas.

Q: Mm-hm. And were these mainly collective farms still along the way?

HIGGISTON: So, there were two types of farms. There were state farms, which were the government farms, where the people who worked on them were state employees. Then there were collective farms, where all the farmers on the farm shared the equipment, had housing, and shared in the sales of the commodities. The state farms were much larger and if I remember correctly were not as efficient. The collective farms were probably more conscientious over preserving more of their production because they had a little bit more at stake, whereas the state farms were basically government workers, they didn't really have a stake in what the farm was doing, they were going to get paid no matter what.

Q: Would you stop and visit these and speak to the farm management, whatever it was?

HIGGISTON: We actually were not allowed to stop and visit any farms at that time.

Q: Oh.

HIGGISTON: The Soviets wouldn't allow us to stop and visit any farms along the way when I was assigned there initially. We tried to arrange meetings with local officials but normally, we were never able to meet. Under Gorbachev and his policy of *perestroika*, local governments were given the authority to attract investment from westerners. Again, this was towards the end of my tour in 1993. Things opened up quite a bit. We were given more flexibility to travel on different routes. This one time we stopped in Dnipropetrovsk in Ukraine. We got there a bit late around 6:30 or 7 pm. In any case, we went to check in and a local delegation was there at the hotel waiting for us. They invited (We really had no choice) us out to a farm for dinner. The end goal, of course, was to convince us to invest money in the province for their agriculture sector. Of course, that was not our role and so our standard response was to have them draw up a short proposal that we would share with the embassy. Most times, the proposals were pretty bare bones. But again, this was very late in my tour.

The only times we really were able to visit farms was when we had one of the exchange programs that specifically requested visits to farms. But other than that, we weren't allowed to visit the farms.

Q: So, these were big, long days of just driving and looking, and good thing you could recognize the difference between wheat and barley or something, huh?

HIGGISTON: Yes. Basically, you would take notes and what you were seeing. Since you couldn't really stop, it was not that easy to differentiate small grains like wheat, rye, or barley. You could obviously see the corn, sunflowers, soybeans, and sugar beets. Sometimes there would be a pull off. We might stop for lunch or get a soda out of the cooler. However, the GAI would come by and tell us to move along. You were very limited to what you could see from the roads. Again, towards the end of my tour things got more flexible primarily due to *perestroika*. Farms and provinces were given the authority and encouraged to attract investment. At that point, the local authorities very much wanted us to visit and talk investment. To be honest, I think most folks thought we would write a check for a million dollars and give it to them and that really wasn't going to happen.

But of course, you know, everybody wanted money because there the Soviet economy was going into freefall. We were seeing more companies come to Moscow and travel to rural areas looking to invest. But to be honest some companies thought the former Soviet Union was going to be the next best thing. Problem, of course, was that it was pretty corrupt, and you could not take out profits easily. Along with the U.S. Commercial Counselor, I met with some U.S. companies that had signed agreements that really were not worth the paper they were written on. It seemed like these companies lost all their business sense when they crossed the border. Now granted, we usually met with the companies that were having problems. Any company that was doing well, probably did not want to share the information so that their competitors might find out.

Q: What kind of money could we give them? I mean, were you looking for—

HIGGISTON: To be honest, we really were not set up to provide that type of money or investment.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: But like I said, if there was something that might be of interest, perhaps a poultry facility or maybe a sugar refinery, there may be an agriculture company that might be interested in investing. And, if we had a U.S. visitor, and you never knew who was going to come in through the door at time, we would brief them on the challenges and, if we did have any information. We would share it with them. But the challenges were pretty high, and it was pretty risky to invest in the country at that time.

We did have some programs when the Soviet Union broke up, and it was to try to help them establish markets, like wholesale markets or how to work with intermediaries and so forth, but that was it. We had a small budget, but it was not for investment purposes. Again, to be honest, I was glad we did not have money to use there. It was so risky.

Q: Did you get further afield as well to, you know, to Armenia or Azerbaijan or Georgia or some of the Central Asian socialist republics?

HIGGISTON: Workwise, we did limited travel. We looked at the grain growing areas like Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. I also traveled to Uzbekistan to see if there was information on the cotton crop, but we traveled on our own to most places, like Georgia. At least when I was serving in Moscow. I traveled to most of the other republics, who were actually independent after I left, when I served in Washington or Turkey.

I visited Uzbekistan several times. It was a really interesting part of the Soviet Union. We used to say, there are a lot of places in the USSR to visit, but there are a limited number of places to revisit. Central Asia and, in particular Uzbekistan, was one of those places. So very different. It was also a place where few Americans would visit.

Q: Is this for tourism rather than official business?

HIGGISTON: Yes. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were cotton producers and we followed production although it wasn't as easy to get information from them. We traveled to Kazakhstan since it was a big wheat producer. But farms in Kazakhstan were huge and getting around was a challenge. As I mentioned, I wound up visiting most of the republics, except for Moldova, but not during my Moscow tour. I got to visit the rest in subsequent years. Most of the republics were not significant producers of important crops. We were not interested in berry production or grape production. It was more those crops like wheat, corn, sunflowers, or cotton that could affect international markets

Q: Were they pulling people out of the universities and the businesses and everything to do the cotton harvest back then, as they did at a later point?

HIGGISTON: I don't remember that being an issue when I was there. However, when our Secretary of agriculture, at the time, traveled to Uzbekistan, when I was in Turkey, the issue of child labor came up. I don't remember student labor being a hot issue.

Q: You mean secretary of agriculture?

HIGGISTON: Yes. This was when I served in Turkey and our office was responsible for all of Central Asia. Secretary Veneman was asked to visit Afghanistan at the time. The United States had a base in Uzbekistan at the time. So, Washington decided to have her travel to Uzbekistan and then onto Afghanistan. The capital, of course, was Tashkent but someone in Washington convinced her to travel to Samarkand, one of the major cities along the silk road. During the trip to Uzbekistan, they held a press conference, and the question did come up. But she was prepared. I don't remember seeing much coming out at that time about child labor, but our embassy was certainly aware of the situation.

Interestingly, I got a lot of information about Uzbekistan and the cotton situation from traders in Istanbul, who had extremely good contacts and information.

Q: That was when you were assigned to Turkey, not when you were assigned in Moscow, right?

HIGGISTON: Yes, when I worked in Turkey.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: So, obviously Istanbul was a regular stop when I worked in Turkey, and it was pretty easy to meet with the cotton traders and they were willing to share information. It was invaluable. The folks that were in the industry were probably the best contact because they traveled to Central Asia a lot more often than we were able to.

Q: Hmm. In the States and most of the Western countries, there was a continuing migration from the farm to the cities. Did they still have the, while you were there, the propiska, internal passport system that forced people to remain on the farm or wherever they were?

HIGGISTON: Again, this really didn't come up much when I served in Moscow. But yes, there were restrictions for folks trying to move from rural areas to the cities. At the time however, the rural areas had a bit more to offer. People in rural areas usually had small plots of land and grew a variety of crops. They would have some chickens and perhaps a cow if they were lucky. So, food was much more plentiful and affordable in rural areas. In Soviet times, there were areas outside most cities where people could get a small parcel of land to grow food. People could survive on this and sell excess at farmers' markets throughout the cities. At some point we need to talk about the different distribution points for food in the cities—the quality of the food and the availability of food in cities and rural areas.

If I can digress a bit, the migration of folks from rural areas to large cities was a big problem in Turkey. Agriculture was a bit more modern in Turkey and it did not need as much labor. Plus, the population was growing faster in Turkey. But Turkey, unlike the Soviet Union, did not have restrictions on people moving to the cities. It was a big concern. It was an issue in South Africa too. You saw a lot poorer areas around the major cities because there was less of a need for labor on farms.

Jumping back to Russia and migration. I went back in 1992 and 1993 to work on some technical assistance programs. AID had just arrived and was doing other technical work in various sectors. During that time, I was dealing with a lot of delegations and spent a lot of time bringing people to and from the airport. One Saturday morning, I was in the embassy cafeteria. I would be dealing with a lot of delegations at that point, and I ran into a couple of friends of mine who worked for AID, and they were talking about one of the central train stations. And they commented on the number of homeless people at the train stations. At the time homelessness was not an issue. Certainly, not a major issue in 1992. Like all countries, I am sure that changed, but at the time it was not. They mentioned that they had been at one of the stations and a large number of Asiatic or Turkish looking people were living in boxes in the train stations. So, we drove to the Station and it was empty. I surmised that in many areas of the Soviet Union or former Soviet Union, there was a shortage of manufactured goods. So people from Central Asia would bring cotton goods or fresh fruits and vegetables to Moscow and sell them. They would then buy up whatever good they could find and bring them back to their homes. The people lying on the crates were probably there to protect the goods while others were out looking for things and waiting for the train to return home.

Q: You said you wanted to talk a little bit about food distribution at some point. Is this a good time to do that if there's more you want to say?

HIGGISTON: Well, as I mentioned, Moscow was a heavy reporting post. We really were not doing any marketing work. In fact, I don't remember any trade shows that occurred while I was there. So, we spent a lot of our time reading newspapers and looking at the crop situation. Most times, the newspapers were not straight forward. You had to read between the lines. Many times, it was not what the Soviets were saying in the papers, it was what they were not saying. But, in addition to our regular crop reporting, we also were tasked with looking at food supplies. Most of this work was done in Moscow, although, as I mentioned, we would try to report on food availability outside of Moscow. Each month, we would visit 3 or 4 of the major farmers' markets in Moscow, along with some State and Cooperative stores.

The state stores had the cheapest prices and lowest quality. Most locals could not afford to do all their food shopping at the farmers' markets, given the prices. Most folks had access to small plots of land on the outskirts of the city or they relied on family plots in rural areas. If you had a little bit more money, you could go to the cooperative stores. They sold primarily fruits and vegetables and were basically being supplied by the

cooperative farms. Some farmers that had access to small private plots would sometimes sell eggs or some specific products on street corners.

Although these private plots were small, they often produced a lot comparatively speaking. These small private plots maybe a quarter acre; it was not that much. But they could grow a lot on it, and they were probably the thing that kept the Soviet Union supplied. Spoilage was lower and therefore the farms were more productive. So, whereas with the state farms and stores, you would see a lot of waste, the cooperative farms and private plots were of much better quality.

And as I mentioned, the farmers' markets were probably the best quality, coming straight from cooperative farms or farmers with private plots. But they were the most expensive. There were no international stores when I was serving there. We did have access to a diplomatic store which had higher quality food. I remember you could sometimes find giant crab legs there. Other than that, until the ruble devalued during my second year in Moscow (1989/90) we really could not afford to buy things at the markets unless you had access to cheaper rubles. A lot of folks were selling jeans or other western items and got cheap rubles in return.

When the Soviet Union started breaking up, supply lines became strained. Moscow was the best supplied of all the cities, but nevertheless, in 1991 and 1992 deliveries were not as regular. I noticed that when we visited stores, deliveries would be made very promptly. As an example, there was a store that sold dairy products near my apartment. At the beginning of my tour, if you went if you visited the stare at 7:30 am it would be fully stocked. Deliveries were done on a regular schedule. Towards the end of my tour those deliveries were less regular. Food was being delivered but not on a regular schedule. So, folks at the embassy were concerned about food shortages but I noted the change in deliveries. I also visited stores on the outskirts of Moscow, and they were stocked with food. Not like a western store but for the Soviet Union, it was pretty well stocked.

It was also a matter of perspective. I remember visiting some stores with a colleague from the embassy and a visitor from the U.S. extension service. He had grown up in Canada, in the 1950s. It was during the winter months. An embassy colleague was concerned by the types of food available, but my colleague from the extension service noted that "In the fifties, neither Canada nor the United States, for that matter, were importing a lot of products, especially fruits and vegetables. We were dependent on local production and the time of year. So, this is what you would see during the winter months – potatoes, carrots, apples, cabbage beets and other commodities that could be stored easily during the winter. You would not find a lot of citrus products or products out of season. Until we started importing, because consumers demanded a greater variety, we were as limited as the Soviets. However, in the 1980s the situation in our countries had changed but not in the Soviet Union in the 1980s and early 90s. You would sometimes see oranges from Egypt because the Soviets had a relationship with the Egyptians, but it was not on a regular basis. Your best opportunity to see those commodities was in the farmers' markets but at much higher prices particularly for Russians.

We wound up following the food supplies very carefully because lots of folks were concerned that Moscow and the rest of the Soviet Union were in danger of running out of food. And if Moscow ran out of food, it was going to be worse outside of Moscow. The big concern, of course, was that this would cause political unrest. Those countries from the former Soviet Union, might be tempted to trade weapons for money in order to buy food supplies and that was something that the West was very concerned with.

I remember traveling to another part of the Soviet Union. As we were coming to the center of the city, I noticed these private plots near an apartment complex. In addition, I noticed these wooden covers on the ground on the plots. I asked my taxi driver about them, and he told us that they were storage bins where folks would store fruits and vegetables. Since it was during the winter, the ground was frozen or at least very cold. They could store potatoes, beets, and the like in these storage bins and basically survived on these stores during the winter.

Q: Okay. No, it's interesting, the shortages and things. I remember stories in Poland of how rare it was to see a banana on the shelf or something. I suppose it's potentially even worse in Moscow, or Russia rather, the Soviet Union.

HIGGISTON: It was very rare that we saw a lot of citrus or exotic products in Moscow and, like I said, Moscow was better supplied than probably any other city in the Soviet Union. During the summer you would see some more products like grapes and some other fruits from Georgia or Central Asia. You certainly saw apples and pears, but you did not see a lot of citrus products.

And in fact, that reminds me of a story about McDonald's when they opened their first restaurant in the Soviet Union. Again, this was probably during the latter part of my tour. From the day it opened McDonald's had lines around the block. The Russians were immediately attracted to the fast-food restaurant. So, we set up a meeting with the folks running McDonald's. By the way, the restaurant was actually a Canadian McDonald's. There was some legal issue with the United States opening up a McDonald's restaurant in the Soviet Union, so the McDonald's restaurants in the Soviet Union were part of the Canada subsidiary.

We visited the corporate headquarters in the Soviet Union, which was located outside of Moscow. So, in most countries including the United States, the restaurants are supplied with the products from contractors. The supplies, burgers, buns, French fries, etc. are contracted out and produce and deliver the products according to the specifications. So with McDonald's, the hamburgers that you would buy in Chicago would be exactly the same as the hamburger's you would buy in San Antonio. Some countries would have some different products, like wine in France, but the basic hamburgers were made according to on specification

So, what distinguished the situation in the Soviet Union was the fact that McDonald's had to build its own "factory" to make the products and maintain its own storage facility. The reason for the former was that McDonald's could not find reliable contractors at the time

to produce the hamburgers and other products according to the specifications demanded. So, the McDonald's facility outside of Moscow actually baked the buns and produced the burgers and other products themselves. In addition, there was a huge cold storage facility, which at the time had, among other things, strawberries stacked to the thirty-foot ceilings. When asked, the McDonald's representative explained that one of their most popular items was their ice cream sundaes, especially the ones with strawberries. The Soviet Union did grow a lot of strawberries. However, the problem was that the strawberries were only available for three or four weeks and then they disappeared. Again, this was related to the lack of proper storage in the country. So, each year McDonald's had to buy as many strawberries as they could and store them so that they would have them throughout the entire year for their sundaes.

Another interesting issue was McDonald's fish sandwiches. The McDonald's in Moscow sold more fish sandwiches than any other store in the world. The only problem was the supply of frozen fish. According to Soviet law, at the time, McDonald's and many other companies could earn rubles but could not exchange them for hard currency, like U.S. dollars or another western currency. That was one of the reasons that McDonald's sourced its products locally, so it could pay in rubles. The fish sandwiches were another problem. The Soviet Union could not supply the fish needed for the sandwiches. So, McDonald's had to source its fish from the west. That meant it had to pay hard currency for the imports since it could not use rubles. Although they were selling the fish sandwiches, they were constantly losing money. In the end they had to stop selling the fish sandwiches until they could convert some of the rubles into a western currency.

One of the other interesting aspects of the McDonald's in the Soviet Union was the personnel situation. As you know, in the United States the turnover in personnel was quite high. At the time, I don't know what the percentage was, but it was quite high. However, in the Soviet Union, the turnover was quite low. According to their representative, the McDonald's in Moscow was losing less than one percent of its personnel. For whatever reason, folks who worked there wanted to stay.

Q: Hmm. Well, this was a big deal. Since you raised it, the opening of McDonald's in Moscow was one of these seminal events that you can still see talked about and pictures of the crowds lined up outside of the place and so forth. So, you were there for that. Did you visit the McDonald's itself?

HIGGISTON: I would visit, but not very often. When we had a delegation, they would often want to visit. I always found it very funny because there were some really wonderful local restaurants in the city. The food was very good and the atmosphere was very nice. There was one restaurant that had separate rooms decorated in all different types of local pottery. It was really nice, and the food was absolutely great because it was a co-operative or one of the new private restaurants. But it seemed like most of our visitors wanted to go to Pizza Hut or McDonald's when they visited. I would always comment, "You're going to be in the States tomorrow. Here we are in the Soviet Union," why not try some of the local restaurants.

We had a lot of U.S. companies at the time that wanted to invest in the Soviet Union. Normally, a company would come to us for an introductory discussion, and then return after their meetings with local companies. We often worked with the U.S. Commercial office for these meetings since they were the lead on investment issues. I was good friends with the commercial attaché, and we often did these meetings together. In any case, a U.S. company that came in and told us they had signed a contract wanted our opinion on whether they would be able to convert their ruble profits into dollars. So, the commercial attaché and I were looking at the contract, which was in Russian. Obviously, we could not give an official opinion since that would be left up to lawyers, but it did not appear that they could convert rubles into dollars. According to our reading, the Soviets were not going to allow them to convert profits into rubles under the agreement they had signed.

I mean, you could see just the look on their faces that they knew they had screwed up and it was going to cost them in the end. It was like that with a lot of foreign companies. In the case of McDonald's, they used their money to open up more restaurants around the country like Kyiv or St. Petersburg. But a lot of companies were either reluctant to invest because of that requirement, or they were stuck with a lot of rubles. And the ruble, as you know, devalued quite a bit when I was there. When I first arrived, the ruble, for one dollar you could get .56 rubles per dollar. So, on the open market things cost quite a bit. And you couldn't really afford a lot of things in the farmers' markets, for example, because it was too expensive. During my time there however, the exchange rate went from .56 rubles to the dollar to six to one, then thirty to one, to something like several hundred to one. At the end of my tour, we were flush with rubles because we were considered residents and could pay local prices. So, as an example, we might pay the equivalent of $6 for a plane ticket to St. Petersburg. Hotels were also cheap.

Q: Oh. Which was significantly different, of course.

HIGGISTON: Yes. It was a lot more expensive, for foreign travelers.

Q: Yes.

HIGGISTON: Like I said, as far as traveling was concerned. We could pay for either a train or by plane ticket in local currency. And like I said, you could fly to Leningrad/St. Petersburg for six dollars.

Q: Oh, my goodness. Whoa.

HIGGISTON: Yes, it was quite a deal. We talked about the PA&E folks.

Q: Yes.

HIGGISTON: A lot of the folks that worked for PA&E were Russian or Soviet Studies majors. When PA&E got the contract to take over administrative services at the embassy, it was an opportunity for these folks to live in Moscow and GET PAID for it. One day, I

went to their office, and they had a large map of the Soviet Union on the wall. Because it was so cheap, they would throw a dart at the map and would buy tickets to visit that part of the country. Sometimes it was nice. They would usually travel on the weekend so there was little at stake. But since it wasn't costing that much, there wasn't much at stake. It was a great way to see the country.

Q: Yeah.

Okay, let's call it coffee break time for a couple of minutes and take up again, okay?

HIGGISTON: No problem.

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Q: Today is April 1, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher continuing with the second half of today's session with Jim Higgiston.

Jim, I wanted to get a little bit more into how all the huge, earthshaking political events affected you and your recollections of them. I mean, you were there right at the time that, I guess you got there during the last of the Gorbachev era, and it must have been shortly after you—my dates are a little hazy in my mind whether you were there before or after the Berlin Wall came down, but certainly at the time some of the Soviet republics started declaring their independence and maybe right up to the coup attempt that resulted in the dissolution. Anyway, can you talk a little bit about that and what you were seeing? I know you've talked about some of the changes early in your tour and late in your tour, which have gotten at it peripherally.

HIGGISTON: It's a great question. It was a real dramatic change from the time I arrived till the time I left. As I mentioned, initially it was very difficult to work with Soviet officials. Meetings were hard to arrange, and they would often cancel the meetings at the last minute. It was also very rare that the officials would be forthcoming with data. By the time finished my tour, believe it or not, I was able to go to the ministry of agriculture unannounced, walk into the building, and go to the office where my counterpart in the foreign affairs section of the ministry of agriculture sat, knock on the door, and go in and speak to him about a visit or some other issue. This was a huge change. Officials were much more willing to talk with you. I can't tell you how often someone from our office would come back shaking their heads, basically saying, you wouldn't believe what I was just told. I describe it as being in the eye of the storm. There was so much going on and so many changes, that you couldn't put it all in perspective. It didn't last however and my successors were more restricted.

I mentioned we had an exchange program, and we sent someone from GOSKOMSTST, which was the Soviet's statistical bureau to Washington for a couple of weeks. I went to see him and asked him about his trip and program in Washington. During his visit, he met with representatives from USDA's Agricultural Statistics Service, the Economic Research Service as well as FAS officials who discussed data collection and utilization. He also

met with members of the U.S. Census Bureau. Anyway, he enjoyed the overall program and showed me a couple of shopping bags filled with statistics books he had been given during his meetings.

As I was leaving, he told me to wait. And he gets up from behind his desk with a bag containing a number of Russian statistic books and, more importantly, some unpublished materials. They covered primarily the major commodities, especially grains. And as he was handing the books to me, he said, "You know, I realized going to the United States that this information does not have to be secret, and we should be sharing this." It was amazing. I sent the entire package of books and detailed data back to Washington, which was very happy.

I lived off the embassy compound strictly for foreign diplomats or foreign business representatives. Each compound had a guard. He would check on anyone who came to visit, especially Soviet citizens. He would take down information about the visitor and presumably send the information to the government. Needless to say, I did not have many visitors during my first couple of years. And I remember one day being in my apartment and there's a knock on the door. It was someone I had met in Moscow. I was surprised because he told me that he just walked into the parking lot outside our building, and he simply walked up to my apartment. If this had happened earlier in my tour, I would obviously have thought it was someone sent to spy on me. But at this point in my tour, it was clear that the government had been loosening up. He had no fear that the government was going to do anything to him.

These were the type of things that we were seeing daily, things that you would never have seen before. It was on the working level, where we really saw the change. One time we were doing crop travel and were passing through Dnepropetrovsk in southern Ukraine.

And as I mentioned, we always had to submit dip notes when we traveled which contained our entire itinerary. We had never taken this route and when we arrived at the hotel it was about 5:30 - 6:00 pm. There were five local officials there waiting for us and he said, "Okay, you have fifteen minutes, we have to take you to a meeting".

We dropped off our bags and they took us out to this state farm outside the city. There was a lot of food and a lot of drinking. At some point during the evening, they did this presentation of all these proposals where they were seeking investment. We would politely sit through the presentations explaining that we did not have funding but did ask them for a one-page summary that we would share to folks in Moscow.

Q: Yes.

HIGGISTON: The other thing that happened during my last six months was the fire we had at the embassy.

Q: No, I don't remember that story, sorry.

HIGGISTON: So, the old embassy was located in a former maternity hospital. It was an old building. They were doing renovations of the building in addition to the building of the new embassy. They were building an elevator shaft on the outside of the building in the courtyard. In any case, I was in the office one day. My boss was in the States at the time. And suddenly, the fire alarm goes off and we all had to scramble to get out. We exited to the courtyard and as I looked over my shoulder, a fire had broken out in the elevator shaft. Unfortunately, we were stuck in the compound because there was no safe exit. In the end we all had to leave over a wall in the back of the compound. It pretty much changed the way we worked for my last six months. There was a bowling alley in the new compound, and they turned it into a workspace for all the sections. Obviously, it was all non-classified. In some ways, it changed the way we worked. Since we were all sitting in an open space, there were a lot of opportunities to exchange information and, since things were opening up, there was a plethora of information. Although the fire was not good, I thought the experience after the fire was good.

At one point, the Soviets allowed for seats in the Parliament to be open for direct elections. It was a small number of seats, and the Communist Party controlled the parliament. Still, it was a major change and, at the time, people thought it was a positive step forward. As a result, the embassy sent folks out to different parts of the country to observe the elections. I traveled to the western part of Ukraine with a colleague from the embassy. It was really amazing when I think of the access we had. We were able to go into the voting facilities and talk to people in the voting stations, things you would not be able to do in the States.

So, we were there for a couple of days and walked around the city and started talking with folks about the election. So, we happened to be in a local bookstore. There was a young woman in the store who was with an older gentleman, I believe her grandfather who had this big gray beard and was at an advanced age. In any case, we were asking the woman about the elections and her opinions.

But as we were talking, the older gentleman is staring and listening to us. After a while, he turns to me, and says, “Where are you from?” We weren’t keeping our identities secret, but we had not gotten to that point in the conversation. So, I said, in Russian, “Well, can you guess.” And he asks, “Are you Georgian?” And I say no. And then he asks, “You’re not Belarussian, are you?” Again, I answer no. “And you’re not Bulgarian, are you?” So, I reply no and finally say that I am American and that we are from the U.S. embassy in Moscow. And without a beat he turns to me and says, “Why didn’t you open up a second front in World War II when we needed you to?” It was as though WWII had just ended and he had been waiting all his life to ask.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: It seemed that people were really trying to embrace a free market and become entrepreneurs. Of course, they really had no concept of what types of goods would be in demand and what consumers were looking for or demanding. Quality did not factor into their thinking. We visited a farm outside of Moscow and these folks were

trying to sell local apple juice. And the juice tasted pretty good, but the product was not uniform. Each bottle was a different shade of juice. In addition, the labels were not applied in the same way. It was clear that they didn't have a good sense of what it would take to become competitive in a real market. We drew on the McDonald's example. When you go to McDonald's in France or the United States or the UK or Russia, it's the same product. Consumers want to know when they buy a product it has to taste the same and of the same quality.

Another thing I witnessed was how Russians had an unrealistic view of the United States. I remember meeting an emigrant who had gone to the States and was back on a trip. He expressed disappointment. When he and his family were in New York, they noticed that there were a lot of homeless people and a lot of crime.

In response, I noted that New York is a big city and we do have crime and a lot of homeless people. And he said, "We didn't expect that. That's what our government (Soviet) was saying but we just assumed it was all a lie and there were no problems in the United States."

Q: Yeah, yeah.

Did the actual breakup of the Soviet Union begin while you were there or not until afterwards?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I was back in the States and watched as the Berlin Wall came down. A lot of the republics declared their independence. It started with the Baltics (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) and then the others followed.

Q: So, you suddenly had Estonia or Georgia or whatever declaring independence?

HIGGISTON: During that time, Lithuania declared their independence. If you remember, that's when the Soviet government sent tanks into the capital, Vilnius. They surrounded the parliament, and, at the time, all U.S. agencies were asked to see how they could support the new Lithuanian government. The big issue at the time was nuclear weapons. Our government was concerned that the different republics might try to sell the weapons.

Q: Mm-hm.

HIGGISTON: The second major issue, our government was concerned about was the possibility of unrest in the other republics. We were involved because our government was concerned that if the food supply situation became a problem, it could lead to unrest. For example, if there was political unrest in Kyrgyzstan where there were a lot of weapons and weapon factories, other countries might try to buy the weapons.

So, one of the U.S. goals was making sure that things like food production or distribution did not fall apart and lead to a greater problem. Our office was being asked about the

food situation in Moscow and other parts of the country. We had good contacts and could compare supplies at the time with historical information.

So, getting back to the Baltics. USDA wanted to send our Under Secretary to Lithuania. I believe Lithuania was the first republic to declare independence.

As a show of support, he wanted to travel directly to Lithuania. Unfortunately, the Soviet government in Moscow insisted that he travel to Moscow first and then onto Vilnius.

Our government wanted him to travel directly to Lithuania, or at least, bypass Moscow. So, the only way we could accommodate him was to have him fly to Poland first and then cross the border on foot. Waylon Beeghley who was the agricultural counselor at the time in Warsaw, drove the under secretary to the border where he crossed the board on foot where we would meet him on the other side. So, we met him and drove to Vilnius. We were able to do this because Poland and Lithuania had a common border and since both countries wanted to support the visit, we were able to do it.

While we were in Lithuania, we met with the Minister of Agriculture and, in fact, met with the President at the time, Vytautas Landsbergis. He was actually in one of the government buildings surrounded by barriers and barbed wire. It was surreal. I remember you could see tanks at the end of some streets. So that was the beginning of the end of the USSR. This was in 1990.

Q: So, Gorbachev was still in power, but Yeltsin was already, what, the head of the Russian SSR or something like that?

HIGGISTON: I believe at the time; Yeltsin was a very popular mayor of Moscow.

Q: Mayor of Moscow, that's right, okay. Were you there for the actual coup attempt where he ended up standing on the tank and so forth that would have been very close to the embassy?

HIGGISTON: I left Moscow in August 1991. I went to Finland and then onto Turkey before I returned to the States. I remember listening to the radio in Turkey when the Parliament was stormed. Then, a couple of years later there was a coup attempt. I was actually on my way to North Africa at the time, as I was working on food aid. I was asked to divert my trip at the last minute and head to Moscow. I had to go to Paris first to get a visa.

Q: This was while you were stationed there, or this was a different—?

HIGGISTON: No, I left Moscow in August 1991. The coups occurred after my departure.

Q: Oh, okay.

HIGGISTON: I mentioned after the fire at the embassy, we were working in the bowling alley. Eventually, we moved our office to the Penta hotel, which was run by Lufthansa. In any case, I traveled to Moscow several times in subsequent years.

Q: Okay. All right. Well, let's—just momentous stuff. But you've talked a couple of times about the embassy fire, but you haven't really told us what happened.

HIGGISTON: So, at the time they were trying to retrofit the new embassy building. My understanding was that the United States allowed the Soviets to do most of the initial work, knowing that the Soviets would "bug" the building. Unfortunately, once they took over the new building, they realized that it would be almost impossible to remove the "bugs".

At the same time, they were doing work to upgrade the old embassy building. As I mentioned the old building was on the ring road and was previously used as a maternity hospital. The fire broke out in an external elevator shaft on the back part of the building. No one was hurt and much of the damage was in the attic where there was a cache of furniture stored which caught fire. It really made life difficult for my last six months.

We had closed all the safes, but our office had very little in the way of classified materials. Apparently, there were stories of Russian firemen being carried out on stretchers when in fact they had taken whatever materials they could find in the offices. They were trying to steal whatever they could, especially from the classified areas.

Q: Oh, wow, that's quite something. So, it was still in a state of disrepair, and you were still in the bowling alley by the time you left Moscow for your next assignment?

HIGGISTON: I left Moscow in August 1991. I had started a new job in Washington, but they asked me to return to Moscow and help with a technical assistance program USDA was putting together. I returned to Moscow in January 1992 and stayed there until May 1992 working on our technical assistance program. I was the person on the ground that helped coordinate logistics for the program, setting up meetings, hotels, and transportation. By the time I returned in January, the ag office we had moved to the Penta Hotel where we had a suite of offices.

My boss, David Schoonover, had rented a suite of offices in the hotel. It was a nice setup because we did not have the security constraints, which we had at the embassy. Again, it helped that we really did not have much in the way of classified materials, if any. Not sure exactly what prompted the move although I believe the embassy was adding staff and they needed space until the repairs were completed at the old embassy. Being located at the hotel, also allowed us to have visitors and unclassified meetings which were impossible at the embassy.

However, after being there for a couple of months, I felt we were very isolated from the rest of the embassy. It wasn't easy going back and forth between the embassy and hotel. The traffic was bad, and it seemed as though the number of cars on the road had doubled

since I had left the previous August. The Ring Road was jam packed with cars. It was just not feasible to spend that much time getting to the embassy. So, in the end I thought it was more of a detriment.

There were pluses and minuses. The access was easy, but the contact with the other sections was much less. Our interaction with the economic and political sections was much less.

Q: Okay.

Well, we're getting, I guess we're hitting the end of your tour and about two hours for today's talk, so maybe this is a good place to wrap it up. I was going to ask, was this—when you were initially assigned to Moscow, was it a three-year tour or did you extend someplace along the way?

HIGGISTON: For FAS, Moscow was a three-year tour even as a first tour officer. For State, it was 18 months, I believe, for first tour officers.

Q: For you it was a three-year tour.

HIGGISTON: Yes, normally, we were on three-year tours. We had fewer officers, so our rotations were a bit longer. I arrived in August of '88, my tour ended in August of '91, and then I went back for four months in January 1992 to May 1992.

Q: Yeah.

When you were—at what point were you starting to look for your next assignment, and what was the process for that?

HIGGISTON: During that time, it was normal for FAS to bring folks back after their first tour. That has changed at various times. So, in the fall, after the promotion cycle, we would bid on posts. In the FAS bidding process, you would list your preferences for postings based on the post openings. This included positions in Washington headquarters. I honestly didn't know where I wanted to work. I wound up applying for a position that in the end was not very interesting, but in the end it turned out well because the job was so bad that they allowed me to go to Moscow in January 1992.

I returned to Moscow in January and stayed until May 1992. At that point I was approached by the folks who dealt with food aid and commercial programs to take over for another officer, Holly Higgins. Initially, I worked on assistance and commercial programs for Africa and Europe. But the emphasis switched to assistance for the former Soviet Union and Eastern/Central Europe very quickly. They felt that my background working in Moscow would be an asset.

Q: This was the second time, though? The first time you went off to be what?

HIGGISTON: The initial job that I went to after I departed Moscow in August 1991 was in the marketing area. It was called the Trade Assistance Programming Office (TAPO). The idea, at the time, was to provide outreach to companies that wanted to export agricultural products. One of the tasks of the office was to compile information on trade barriers from all our posts overseas. To be honest, it was not very appealing. Plus, the only space they could find for the office was in Virginia at the Food and Nutrition Service out on Route 7. It was impossible to get to and there was very little contact with the main office. That made my decision to return to Moscow in January 1992 a lot easier.

Q: Okay. So, that ended up only being for a few months, and we can talk about that next time, if you have any recollections.

HIGGISTON: Okay.

Q: Okay. Well, let's leave it there, if that's okay, and take it up with that next time.

HIGGISTON: Okay. That's great. Thank you.

Q: I'll stop the recording.

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Q: Today is April 8, 2022. This is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Jim Higgiston.

Good morning, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Good morning.

Q: When we left off last time, you had pretty much finished up your assignments in Moscow. You left in August 1991, went back to the department for a few months, and then came back again from January '92 to about May '92. And I just wanted to ask you, following that six month gap, and I think you've already talked about some of the things you did when you got back, but had things changed appreciably in your new six-month tour there after you'd been away for six months?

HIGGISTON: In Moscow you mean?

Q: Yes.

HIGGISTON: I returned to work in Washington in September 1991 and began working in the TAPO office. I would try to get back to our headquarters on Independence Avenue. Luckily there was a shuttle from Virginia. In any case, I ran into the undersecretary at the time. He had traveled to Moscow a couple of times while I served there. He was also the undersecretary that crossed the border of Poland and Lithuania by foot in 1990. He asked me what I was doing, and when he heard, he said, "Well, we have to find something else

for you to do." So, they called me in November, and they asked whether I would go back to Moscow for 4 months to work on technical assistance programs for USDA.

As I mentioned before, there was so much happening, and so many changes in the former Soviet Union, that it was hard to keep track of everything. In some ways, it was a lot like the wild west. It seemed like everyone was out for themselves, trying to make money. Things were a lot freer, and people were not afraid to meet with foreigners, but there was no discipline.

By the time I arrived in January 1992, AID was already on the ground, but they were doing more work on building democratic institutions but were not involved in agriculture. We were asked to put together a program to help the Russians to create an agriculture sector that functioned in a market economy. So, there were a couple of programs that USDA focused on. One was to create wholesale markets similar to the ones we have here in the United States. A place farmers could take their production and sell to retailers and processors. The idea was to cut out the middleman in the transactions. The second one was to create links all along the supply chain.

As I mentioned, I was coordinating logistics in Moscow for all the delegations coming to Russia and some of the other former republics.

For example, we had a team from USDA's Extension Service traveling to Armenia. I help facilitate the travel and hotels and work with contacts from the governments to set up meetings and programs. I had a funny experience with Allan Mustard who was running these programs on the U.S. side. Allan was traveling with former Secretary of Agriculture Lyng and a group of private sector representatives. The group wanted to travel to four different cities in the former Soviet Union. My job was to set up meetings in each of the four cities and arrange to visit some facilities in each place.

The group wanted to talk about possibly placing American business representatives in the different stages of the agriculture system like wholesale markets, transportation, and retail stores.

Of course, there were issues. The team could only be on the ground for a certain number of days. I believe their visas were limited to twelve to fourteen days. In any case, I tried to arrange travel to the four cities on commercial flights on Aeroflot. However, there was just no way we could hit the four cities given the limited time. So, I called Allen up and we were talking, and I said, "There's just no way we could do it. The only way we could do it is if we rented an airplane." And he said, "Okay, go rent an airplane."

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: So, I went around, and folks who would rent a plane to us, and it cost about seventeen million rubles, which was something on the order of $15,000 or $20,000. And the embassy facilitated the process by giving me a suitcase filled with rubles, but they wouldn't send anybody with me, so I'm walking around Moscow trying to find the

office to pay for the flight. Crime was on the rise and probably wasn't the smartest thing to do, but I guess I looked innocuous enough. So, I found the office and handed over the seventeen million rubles.

Q: In a suitcase in cash?

HIGGISTON: Yes. Exactly. Unfortunately, I never got to fly on the plane because I had to go do the advance work in each of the cities, so I'd traveled ahead a couple of days while they were in the previous city and so forth. And the funny part was, when it arrived, when I finally saw the plane, I think it was a Tupolev-154, it was an agricultural, survey plane with a head of wheat painted on the side of the plane. They would take pictures of the fields and would do some sort of crop assessment, or they would look to see if there were any problems in the fields or the work that was being done.

I dealt with a lot of logistics for delegations for the four months I was there. I was living in the hotel across from the embassy. It was clean but I had a very small room, But given all the delegations, it was a great location for getting the office vehicle to pick up folks at the airport. Folks were always coming in, so I appreciated not having to travel far to get the car.

Q: Drive it yourself? You didn't have Russian drivers?

HIGGISTON: No. At that point, when I was initially there, I was doing my own driving. Later, we wound up hiring a driver, but he was mostly for the staff in the ag section, rather than delegations although I did count on him to pick me up sometimes. I would take the VW van and drive out to the airport. So, I got to know Moscow well by driving to all the local airports as well as the international ones.

Q: Well, fun, fun, fun.

At that point, I guess when you came back, it was Russia rather than the Soviet Union.

HIGGISTON: Yes, it was the Russian Federation at that point. And we had folks going out to the different former republics.

Q: Yep, yep.

And what happened to all of the collective farms and government farms once they were shifting away from communism?

Q: Or was that happening yet at that point?

HIGGISTON: It probably wasn't happening right at that point. But eventually, they were all dissolved in some way. Like a lot of industries, people who had close contacts with the government were able to obtain a lot of the farms which had the best land. I am not sure

what the process was for "selling" the farms, but I am sure there was a lot of bribery going on.

I have to say, however, the agriculture sector really turned around especially for those products that were in demand internationally like wheat and sunflower seeds. I remember visiting some wheat farms in Kazakhstan, which were huge, bigger than farms you have in the United States. To be honest, the Soviets were always able to produce agriculturally. I always felt the problem was more in the post-harvest period. They seemed to lose a great deal with their inadequate storage or transportation. I think when given the opportunity and incentive, they were able to produce. Russia became a net importer to one of the major wheat exporters. These producers were on their own and could not count on the government providing them with inputs.

Q: Mm-hm, okay.

Another agricultural product that we haven't talked about that I've got to ask about before we move on from here, caviar. Did you have anything to do with that?

HIGGISTON: No, we didn't follow caviar. It was not a commodity that is traded worldwide. You could find some caviar in Russian stores, but it was more profitable to export caviar for hard currency.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: There is a good story on exporting products from the Soviet Union. It related to Pepsi. Pepsi, as you know, was the American company that made inroads into the Soviet market. Pepsi signed a deal in which they would send Pepsi syrup to the USSR and in return Pepsi had the marketing rights to Stolichnaya vodka in the States. The funny part is, I'm meeting with the Pepsi representatives and, if you recall McDonald's experience with sourcing frozen fish to sell in their stores in the USSR.

Q: You talked about that.

HIGGISTON: I asked how the process worked. Well, they responded, the first shipment was a little bit of a problem because when we opened the first case of vodka, they and they realized there was an issue because at that time, if you opened a bottle of vodka in the Soviet Union, you finished the bottle of vodka in the Soviet Union. There was no screw on top of the vodka bottle which was an issue for the U.S. market.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: Yes, when the first shipments came, the bottles had flip tops.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: Apparently, Pepsi had to put in a new bottling plant to accommodate the U.S. market with screw on tops.

Q: Oh, great cultural differences, huh?

HIGGISTON: Yes, exactly.

Q: Okay.

Well, we've talked a lot about Moscow. If you have some more stories we can go on, or you could talk about how you were selected for your next assignment.

HIGGISTON: Well, I would like to note the time I served as a duty officer in Moscow. I spent the entire time that weekend in the embassy because it was so busy. I had a very strange time. I had three noteworthy incidents. First was, there was a retired U.S. general who was there on a tourist trip. I got a call from someone from his group. They were going to the Moscow circus up by the university. If you remember that, it's up on the hill. And while he was walking to the circus, he got knocked over by a horse and wagon, which you would often see in Moscow. The general fell on his head, had to have brain surgery.

Q: Oh, my god, in Moscow?

HIGGISTON: And the gentleman was eighty-six.

Q: Oh, gosh.

HIGGISTON: I call up the doctor, and she says, "I don't know how we even get him out of the country given his condition?" But the good thing was, the delegation, either hosted by or had high-level contacts with the Politburo who were able to get him into the hospital that the Politburo uses for its members. Apparently, he was treated and survived. It wasn't clear to me whether he had surgery. In any case he came through okay. And again, he was eighty-six.

Q: Oh, my.

HIGGISTON: While I am in the office dealing with this issue, I get a call from a Member of Congress. One of his constituents had a son who was in Moscow on some sort of school trip. I think he was part of a high school band. In any case, it was his first time overseas and the poor kid along with his buddies started drinking vodka. I am sure how much he drank but it was probably quite a bit because he had seared his larynx. The parents were afraid that his larynx would rupture if he flew. So, the Congressman gets my name and title etched and says, "You will help my constituent's son." But it was more like "You WILL help my constituent's son."

So, anyway, I talked to the doctor, and she said, "You know, tell him to drink water with sugar to raise his electrolytes. Just have him drink a couple of glasses before he flies, he should be fine." I gave the kid's group leader that information. Never heard back and I assumed he made it okay. In any case, the Congressman never called again. I think I would have heard from him if things did not work out.

I was serving as a duty officer over Labor Day weekend when all this occurred. The third issue was also interesting. Each Labor Day the embassy held a picnic outside of Moscow at one of the embassy dachas. It is a big family event. I get this call from one of the communicators in the embassy. She was a single mom and her daughter had fallen and broken her wrist. We had a medical unit of course, but no x-ray equipment. They took the child to the Children's Hospital which was not too far from the embassy.

Unfortunately, the hospital wanted to put her under general anesthesia and keep her there for three days. The mother understandably was upset and went to see the U.S. doctor. The doctor agreed to help the child but needed an x-ray to set the break. The embassy, of course, did not have this equipment. The mom who spoke fluent Russian asked for the x-ray, but the hospital would only give her a drawing of the x-ray, which, of course, would not be acceptable.

I got the call at around 6 pm and I had been at the embassy since early in the morning. It was just one of those weekends from hell. So, I go over to the children's hospital. I walk in and there's a waiting room and then there's a window, and basically, you're supposed to write down on a piece of paper what your issue is, put it in the slot and then they'll respond to you. And I'm like, Ah, no way. So, I start kicking the door. And this woman who was sitting there with her daughter says, "Oh, no, you're supposed to write something down." And I said, "Well, you know, I think this will work better." And so, the orderly comes out and I explain that I'm from the embassy, that child broke her wrist and that I need the x-rays. The orderly looks at me (and I am a sight) and says "Okay, here are the x-rays." I only had to serve as duty officer twice in my career and both times in Moscow. Both times, however, were memorable.

Q: Yep. Yep, yep. Sometimes those duty officer experiences are stories for the ages, yes.

HIGGISTON: Yes, they are.

Q: Yeah.

HIGGISTON: In any case, as I mentioned previously, I returned to the State in May 1992 and took over the job of food assistance to the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe. At the time, USDA was in the middle of discussions on how to provide some food assistance to these countries.

Q: This was May of 1992, right?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I started pretty soon after I got back from Moscow in May 1992. At the time I led a small group that dealt with Africa and Europe, although we had very few programs in Europe at the time. Soon after, they asked me to cover the former Soviet Union and Central/Eastern Europe. I had a team of 6 people.

Q: Jim, just a second. Before we get into the substance, I just wanted to ask, was there no open assignments project—process or anything? You were just called and asked if you wanted this job and you said, yeah, I'll take it?

HIGGISTON: At the time, this position was not in the normal rotation. I think they were also gearing up for the breakup of the Soviet Union. But no, I don't think the position was advertised.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: This was simply definitely off cycle. Also, things were a bit looser at the time. At the end of the 1990s, the civil servants unionized, and things became much more formal.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: In addition, given the Administration's emphasis on Russia and the former Soviet Union, they were looking for someone that had experience and since I had just left there, I kind of fit the bill for them. So, at that point, there was a process, but this position was not part of it because my predecessor was leaving to go into language training, and they needed someone to fill in behind her.

Q: Okay. Sorry for the interruption. You were going to talk about three programs.

HIGGISTON: At the time, there were three food aid programs. USDA was responsible for PL 480, Title I, Title II and III were run by AID. The second one was called Food for Progress that began in 1987, that was a grant program, initiated by Jesse Helms I believe, which was a small program, basically to reward countries that were making progress in becoming democracies. My understanding was that Helms did not like AID so he asked USDA to run the program. The last food aid program was called Section 416(b), which came out of the 1949 farm bill. It was also a grant program. However, it was limited to only commodities that the Secretary of Agriculture deemed in excess that could be donated overseas.

When I returned in May 1992, we were already two-thirds of the way through the fiscal year. The majority of our food aid funds had already been allocated by May. AID basically said that they had no food aid funds to provide to the former Soviet Union. They were committed to their traditional food aid recipients in Africa, South America, and Asia. It fell to USDA to deal with the issue. I mentioned that PL-480, Title I, was one of our bigger programs. At the time, we had a budget over a billion dollars. The biggest recipient at that point was Egypt with $600 million. And Egypt was slowly graduating

out of the program. In any case, it appeared that Egypt might not use its funding and FAS was looking to use the funds for the former Soviet Union. It wasn't till the end of May that Egypt officially communicated its intention not to use the PL 480 funds. I believe Egypt was given the funds for its role in an Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement.

Q: Yes, I think that was back in like, what, '78 or something like that.

HIGGISTON: By the time I returned to Washington, it was a question of whether Egypt would use it. The Egyptians decided in the end to buy commercially since there were no strings attached. And so, basically, we were waiting because that $600 million was going to be reprogrammed for the former Soviet Union. And that money did not come through until the end of May. With the PL-480, Title I program, agreements had to be negotiated and the commodities purchased and shipped by September 30, the end of the fiscal year.

To accomplish this, we had to send individuals from my staff to former republics to negotiate the agreements and have them signed and returned to Washington. We sent out six people. Allan Mustard, given his Russian and his experience in the region, was one of the people. He went to Kyrgyzstan, I believe, and one other country, perhaps Turkmenistan. We also had people go to Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan. However, we were prohibited from signing anything with Azerbaijan because of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan. We also negotiated an agreement with Belarus. I think we also did Uzbekistan. We were successful in getting the agreements, negotiated, and signed. It was a real success.

And these programs continued for the following years. However, Congress put something in the USDA budget that gave us $500 million for Russia alone. It was sort of a hybrid program. The Russia program was a long-term sales agreement at low interest and long-term repayment (20 – 25 years). The agreements with the countries of the former Soviet Union, were a variety of grants of long-term sales agreements.

Q: So, you were orchestrating all of this. Must have been quite a job and the department must have been behind you if you were really given the resources, the personnel to send teams out to all these places.

HIGGISTON: Well, it was clear that this was a priority for the administration. FAS always did well with our budget. In fact. We often received more from Congress than the Department's proposal. The cost of sending folks out to the different countries was never an issue.

I think, you know, in a perfect world, I think AID would have been the ones to manage this program. However, they wanted to continue to concentrate on their traditional markets. In some ways, AID wanted to apply the Africa model to the former Soviet Union. However, it was a totally different situation. At the same time, there was some criticism in later years by the World Bank that our assistance was disruptive to domestic production.

But there was a lot of interest in our programs. I often represented USDA at the interagency meetings, and everyone was interested in the status of our programs. USDA really handled all the food aid for the former Soviet Union and Eastern/Central Europe. AID was never involved in food aid programs in that part of the world. And it's not too surprising given the fact that eventually food aid was no longer needed in that part of the world. Unfortunately, there were times when some leader would come to Washington, and we were often asked whether there was any food aid that could be given to a country. That occurred for a couple of years, but once the food aid budget was reduced, it was no longer an issue.

Q: You mean kind of in the sense of we need a deliverable for this trip, can we give them some food aid whether they need it or not kind of thing?

HIGGISTON: We were not giving food aid to countries that didn't need it. I was dealing with the former Soviet Union, so all of those countries at some point probably needed food aid particularly right after the Soviet Union broke up. But in the end most graduated and became self-sufficient like Kyrgyzstan or were able to commercially buy commodities.

Q: Mm-hm. Were you personally involved (audio drops)—

HIGGISTON: Sorry?

Q: Were you personally involved in some of these negotiations, or were you just orchestrating them?

HIGGISTON: No, I negotiated the one for Belarus in Washington in 1992 and was the lead on the Russia program for the $500 million.

Q: Oh, wow. Was that done in Washington as well?

HIGGISTON: Yes. The Russians sent a delegation to the United States to meet with State and USDA. The Russia agreement was a long-term sales agreement. Russia would have to pay back the sale in dollars. It was done under lenient terms (20 – 25 years for repayment. In addition, the Russians were supposed to carry out certain reforms as part of the agreement. Most of the terms were not prohibitive.

And since the agreements were fairly standard, the negotiations could be done quickly. Moreover, we also included a line at the end of the agreements that stated in case of a disagreement the English language version would have precedence. All our agreements had to be approved by USDA's Office of the General Counsel. It was a busy time.

Q: And so, was it just ag doing it or did you have a delegation of people from other agencies involved?

HIGGISTON: No, we oversaw the negotiations. There was some interest on the part of State and Treasury, especially on the repayment terms, but that was all discussed prior to the negotiations. There were no real surprises. Initially, the goal was to get commodities to the countries so that food shortages did not occur. Later, there was more interest in getting the recipients to do more reforms in the agriculture sector. Eventually, Russia and the FSU were less of a concern and the Balkans, for example, became of interest.

So, we also had a commercial program called the GSM-102 Program which was a credit guarantee program which was similar to the Exim Bank credit guarantee program.

Q: What, EXIM (Export-Import Bank of the United States) or—

HIGGISTON: Yes Exim has a similar program although theirs was a one year program while ours was a three year program for GSM 102 and up to eight years for GSM 103, which was mainly used to buy livestock.

The intent was to graduate food aid countries to the commercial programs. That was really the intent in Russia. After we signed the $500 million program in 1993, we looked to announce a GSM-102 program the following year. We had to look at the banking situation and the ability of the country to pay back commercial debt.

Q: Mm-hm. And did it work? I mean, were these countries able to move to the market away from the guarantees?

HIGGISTON: Yes. graduated a lot of them to that commercial program so that they were not receiving food aid. I think one of the best examples was South Korea. They were a food aid recipient that became one of the biggest users of the GSM program. Many countries became commercial buyers even when food aid ended, like Poland.

Q: Were you in your office making the decisions on how your billions and hundreds of millions would be allocated among different countries, or was that dictated from above somehow?

HIGGISTON: In the case of food aid, each year we would send out a cable asking posts if they wanted to be considered for a food aid program, primarily PL 480, Title I or our Food for Progress Program. Our division was divided by geographic regions. Once each of our divisions had an idea of the extent of the requests, we put together a list of the countries, commodities and amounts and prioritized discussing it with our leadership. Once that was completed, we gave the list to an interagency group, and they provided their input. Obviously, the administration might have priorities at times, like when the Soviet Union broke up, but it was pretty much straightforward. Again, our programs were not emergency programs. It could take about a year from start to finish. AID really dealt with emergency food situations or more developmental issues.

For the commercial programs the process was quite different. The GSM program was much larger. Normally, we had the ability to provide $5 billion in credit guarantees. In

that program we needed to look at the viability of banks to handle the program. In addition, we had a group that looked at country risk. Like food aid, we had an interagency process. Treasury had input into the risk of providing credit guarantees. Then of course, it was important to have U.S. based banks who were willing to work in these countries.

Q: Were the countries coming to you, saying, Please let us into these programs, or were you trying to sell it to them?

HIGGISTON: As I said, for food aid, we would ask U.S. embassies for their input into recipients but we also had interest from banks. Like the credit guarantee program (GSM 102), but the private sector would often approach us. Without the credit guarantees the bank would not accept letters of credit. Let's face it, the bottom line with these programs was to sell U.S. commodities overseas and these programs, especially the GSM program, were initiated to help with exports and mitigate risk. I should note that many of our competitors, France, for example had similar programs.

Today, a lot of the programs have been scaled back. Most food aid is run through international organizations like the UN's World Food Programme or through Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Even the commercial programs have been scaled back and the terms are much stricter.

Q: Now, you were in this job for four years. And first, just for the record, let me make sure I've got it straight. You were the area director for the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe?

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: And did you have a staff? I mean, what was that and how big was that if you did?

HIGGISTON: I did have a staff of 6 people along with an administrative assistant and a stay-in-school student. Each of the staff had a portfolio of countries. And each portfolio had food aid countries as well as countries with commercial programs. Towards the end of my stay in Washington, we also took on the allotment of food assistance to NGOs.

Q: Now, you must have liked this job; you were there for four years. Was it a four-year assignment initially or did you extend?

HIGGISTON: It's a good question. Washington assignments in FAS had no limitations. At the time, you could only stay in Washington for 8 years according to the Foreign Service agreement. We wanted to have people stay in positions a minimum of two years, but sometimes people left after a year. When I was Deputy Administrator for the Foreign Service, I kept pushing for domestic assignments to be treated like overseas assignments with specific guidelines.

Q: It keeps changing in State.

HIGGISTON: Right. FAS always allowed FSOs to stay in Washington a bit longer than State. The thinking behind it was that the number of FAS officers were fewer than State. That was also reflected in overseas assignments. For several years up till the present, our overseas assignments are 3 plus 1. Assignments were three years with the ability of officers to stay for a fourth year without having to compete for the assignment. Of course, posts like Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan were shorter given the security situation.

The lack of guidelines for Washington assignments caused a lot of problems for civil service supervisors in Washington. If you must replace someone every other year in Washington, it leaves a big hole in your staffing. I think it caused a lot of animosity and as a result, we do not have many positions for FSOs in Washington. And so, I always wanted Washington assignments to require a minimum amount of time in Washington, two years. We talked about having designated positions in Washington, but no one supported it, particularly the Foreign Service.

Q: But in this case, when you were assigned back, was it for an indefinite period?

HIGGISTON: Yes. Basically, you could stay in Washington for up to 8 years before you had to go out. So, I got back, technically in ’91, right, and I finished my domestic assignment in ’96, went into language training and then in ’97 I moved to Poland.

Q: All right, okay. Maybe this is a good place to take our morning coffee break for a couple of minutes and then resume.

HIGGISTON: Yep, okay. Good.

Q: Okay. Thanks.

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Q: Today is April 8, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher continuing with the second half of today’s interview session with Jim Higgiston.

All right, I also wanted to ask you in your Washington job, did you do a lot of travel or any travel to the countries you were dealing with?

HIGGISTON: So, my travel was primarily to Moscow or countries in the former Soviet Union. I would travel to Moscow perhaps once a year. Initially, I went to North Africa and traveled to Eastern Europe. However, in the grand scheme of things, I did not travel that much. To be honest, I let the staff do most of the travel. I felt like they would benefit more from it than I would. And I had traveled so much when I was in Moscow that the idea of getting on a plane for a long trip did not really have much of an attraction.

But I was asked to travel with U.S. officials to Russia and the former Soviet Union. There was an interagency task force on the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Ambassador Tom Simons headed the group and one time he asked me to join a delegation he was leading to Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia. We flew on a chartered flight out of Romania. It was nice travel because there were no check in lines. We would board our plane on the tarmac and didn't have to wait in any airports.

My boss asked to accompany one of our political appointees on a large delegation. I remember going to my boss, and saying I said, "Oh, you know, so-and-so knows about this, I'm not sure if I need to go on the trip or whatever," and I realized after about two seconds that I was definitely going on the trip.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: I always found it interesting that after working with our programs for 6 months you really absorbed the information. You picked up a lot of the details about the programs which become second nature. I remember I was briefing this one ambassador about the differences in our food aid programs since each program has certain details that set them apart. I remember trying to brief him on the different programs and I could tell he just tuned out. Way too many details.

So, I traveled enough but not too much. Like I said, I let my staff travel more.

Q: Civil Service mainly?

HIGGISTON: Primarily Civil Service, although I did have one FSO on the staff. I also had a lot of new hires on my staff. My boss was great at getting me the resources I needed to do the work.

Q: Just organizationally, you were—what was I going to say—area director for food assistance in a changing group of countries, and you reported to who? Who reported to who?

HIGGISTON: I was in the Export Credits Area. I reported to the Director and Deputy Director of the Program Development Division and then above my director, was the Assistant General Sales Manager and the General Sales Manager who was also one of the Associate Administrators.

Q: Right.

HIGGISTON: Overall in the agency, we had several commodity divisions, a trade policy area, and an export sales area. That was the structure we had from the time I started in 1984 till 2006.

Q: Okay. And did you report directly to the general manager or were there layers in between the general sales manager.

HIGGISTON: I reported to the Director of the Program Development Division. In that division three geographic regions.

Q: Okay, just to get our bureaucracy straight for the record.

HIGGISTON: Funny story about one of our General Sales Managers, Melvin Sims. He was a real gentleman. In any case he was in Iraq. This was well before the first Iraq war. Anyway, they were driving around the country and Mel is sitting in the back seat with another USDA official. They had an Iraqi official in the front seat. They must have been in Baghdad at the time.

And there's a news broadcast on the radio in English and it's about these two men in Iran being caught stealing and that they had been hanged. Someone said, "Oh, that's terrible."At that point one of the Iraqis said, "Yes, they are barbarians, over there." So, there's a break in the conversation, it's quiet, and Mel basically asks "So, what do you do here if people steal?" And the guy, without missing a beat, says, "Oh, we just cut their hands off."

Q: Okay. And so, this went along. If you have any more stories, please jump in with them, but otherwise, at what point did you think of moving on and what made you choose your next assignment?

HIGGISTON: I returned from Moscow in 1991, got married in 1996 and was ready to go out again. I decided from the start whenever we were bidding, that I would hand her the bid sheet and say, "Where do you want to go?" I figured it would save me a lot of problems in the future.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: She wanted to go to Poland, so I said, "Okay," so I put in for Poland. I put Sophia second on my sheet. All heads of office had to be approved by a committee made up of the Agency leadership and in the end I was chosen to go to Warsaw. For first tour officers they were basically assigned directly by the Office of Foreign Affairs.

Q: So, late '95 or so is when you were assigned to Poland, but you still needed to do, what, language training and so forth?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I did a year of language training at Foreign Service Institute. And so, we went out—

Q: So, that would have been '96, '97?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I was in language training from September 1996 to June 1997. There is an attaché conference every year at that time. So, after the conference we took some annual leave. I got out there in August. Our residence was not ready, so Melissa delayed her arrival till September.

Q: Talk a little bit about your language training. You said you were at FSI this time as opposed to the private tutors you had for Russian?

HIGGISTON: Sure. As opposed to Russian, I had no background in Polish. I decided to do my training at FSI. I thought it would give me an opportunity to meet some of the folks that I would be serving with. I went for the full year at FSI for Polish. I found it a bit challenging. As you know, some people thrive on it. I didn't care for it.

Q: Polish is a tough language too.

HIGGISTON: It was interesting. In some ways, it was similar to Russian but certainly more difficult. It was a fairly large group studying Polish with folks going to consulates in Kraków or Poznan as well as Warsaw. We had at least 20 students. I was glad when the training ended.

Q: Oh, my goodness. That's enormous. I'm surprised.

HIGGISTON: I think we had four classes at various levels, so it was, you know, it was okay. Like I said, I wish I could say I enjoyed it a lot.

Q: A good chance to get to know some of the people you were going to be working with, I suppose.

HIGGISTON: Yes. absolutely, so that was one good aspect of the training.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: They told interesting stories, so.

Q: But have you ever been to Poland before?

HIGGISTON: No, unfortunately, I never made it to Warsaw. When I lived in Moscow, a group of us took the train to Berlin from Moscow, although I don't remember much about the trip. I couldn't tell you what we did there. One interesting thing about the trip was the train ride.

I don't know if you remember, but the railroad gauge in Russia is different from the railroad gauge in Europe. And when you get to the border, they must change the wheels on the railcars. They time the switch for the middle of the night. It was a quiet process, and you could easily sleep through it. Basically, they lift the rail car, roll out the wheels, and roll in the new wheels. It takes a little while, but you don't notice it.

Q: Okay. Did you get any special area studies, or were you required to do something more than just language to learn about Poland?

HIGGISTON: We did have area studies for Polish. You may know that Melissa, my wife, is of Polish descent and she really was excited about living in Poland. We had a teacher that talked a lot about Polish writers. We also watched some Polish movies. I didn't know too much about Poland before taking the class.

The teachers organized a trip to Poland during the year, but I didn't go. They went for about a week. However, during the same time, I believe, the teachers took us to West Virginia and stayed in a house for a week for an immersion experience. there may have been a trip to Poland, but I didn't do it, didn't go there. We were only supposed to speak Polish. It was not the greatest experience.

Q: Could have taken you to Chicago, huh?

HIGGISTON: Sure.

Q: Second biggest Polish city in the country—in the world. (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: Yes. Plus, all the Polish food you could eat.

Q: Let me ask you also why—you've mentioned Melissa a couple of times. You got married while you were back in Washington?

HIGGISTON: Yes. We were supposed to get married in May 1996. It was going to be a small wedding just for our families. Unfortunately, both our families said the timing would not work for them, so we had to postpone the wedding. We did however go on our honeymoon to Mexico. We wound up getting married in October 1996 because I needed to get Melissa on my orders. It all worked out in the end.

Q: And she had a career as well that she was willing to give up to join you overseas?

HIGGISTON: Yes. It is an interesting story. We had been going out for a little while and I knew it was at that point where I was going to have to go overseas. At the time, Melissa was working for an NGO on coastal development issues. The organization was called the Coast Alliance. Basically, they were trying to limit building houses in low-lying areas along the coast because it was, you know, these areas would flood, and the government was subsidizing flood insurance.

Anyway, she was due to move up in the organization at that point. In fact, I think she was going to be the director. At the same time, I knew I would have to leave for overseas. Anyway, it was a Sunday afternoon, we were coming back from the Renaissance Festival in Maryland. I was dropping her off at her apartment on Connecticut Avenue. At that point she decided to have the conversation about our relationship and where it was going.

Obviously, I replied that I had to go overseas shortly and that I knew heading up her organization was something she always wanted to do. In response and to my surprise, she responded "You know, that's okay. I'd rather go overseas." And so, she agreed to go

overseas. And the rest is history. I was lucky, she was very independent and really immersed herself. There were some issues, of course. Being a "trailing spouse" is not the easiest.

Anyway, by October 1996 we had to get married to get her on my orders.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: We went on our honeymoon to Mexico for a week south of Cancun in May 1996. Then in the fall we got married at the end of October but had gone on a second honeymoon to West Virginia over the Columbus Day weekend.

Q: Okay, I was going to ask that. But hang on. You said you took your honeymoon and then a few months later you got married?

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: Okay. Just wanted to make sure I got that right.

HIGGISTON: We couldn't take an extended honeymoon in October because I had to go back to class. We got married on a Saturday. Both families came to Washington on Friday night. We had a party in our apartment. We got married the next day in our apartment by a DC judge. That night we had dinner at a restaurant called 1789 in Georgetown. It was very funny. We were at dinner and the Yankees were playing in the World Series, so everybody wanted to leave early to go back to the hotel to watch the game.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: The next morning, there was breakfast at the hotel folks were staying at. And on Monday, I went back to class.

Q: Yeah. Okay. So, she was able to take language as well. Would that have been like the six-week survival course, or did she get into a real Polish course?

HIGGISTON: She was in a course with other spouses at FSI. I think it was full time for several months.

Q: Oh, wow. So, she got a good grounding in Polish then. That's great.

HIGGISTON: It helped with her negotiations in the Polish stores.

Q: I'm sure it helped, but also for her it made the transition easier if she had already made a bunch of friends in language training and so forth. That makes a big difference.

HIGGISTON: Yes, absolutely.

Q: So, then you head on out in the summer of '70—1977, correct?

HIGGISTON: No. 1997.

Q: I'm sorry, that's correct, 1997. Thank you for correcting that. That's a few years difference.

HIGGISTON: Yes. We went out in '97. I went out initially while Melissa went to see her family and left for Warsaw in September. We couldn't move directly into our house, so I was in a hotel for a couple of weeks, not too long, two weeks, I guess, while they were fixing it up. And that was my first, before I moved into our house. It was my first time as head of the office. I had an American deputy and five local staff.

Q: Wow. That's a pretty good size staff. And your position was what exactly? Counselor for agricultural affairs or—?

HIGGISTON: Since I had an American officer as my deputy, I was considered a counselor, and he was the attaché.

Q: Okay.

We're getting not too far from the end, so I think we should probably save Polish tales for next time. But maybe what you could do this time is talk a little bit about the embassy in general, who was the ambassador, how big was the embassy, where did you fit into the embassy structure and so forth.

HIGGISTON: Okay. That's fine, I can do that.

Q: Yeah. Then I would say, let's do the—a little bit of the administrative and life in Poland now and can start your actual professional Polish life next time.

HIGGISTON: So, you know, it was a fairly large embassy. We were downtown, right near the parliament building. During my time there, the admin folks were looking for a new embassy, but they were never able to do it. I think the only option at the time was outside the city and no one wanted to move that far away from the government. I mean, you could walk to most of the government buildings. They did a bit of a refurbishment of the buildings, but it was mostly cosmetic. I think the biggest concern was the lack of a setback. We were right on the street. The car entrance was right under my office which gave me pause some days.

Our office was next to the marine offices. There were three buildings. Our building was one of the annexes. On the ground floor was the Eagle Café which was very popular during communist times because there were very few places to get a burger in Warsaw and one of the few cafes. By the time I arrived, Poland was applying for membership in the European Union and there were a lot of restaurants near the embassy.

So, I'm trying to think who was there first. I'm going to have to ask, but oh—

Q: Dan Fried.

HIGGISTON: Dan Fried was second.

Q: Ah, he was second. Okay.

HIGGISTON: Yes. The Ambassador who was there was the director general of the Foreign Service. Pearson was his name.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: And then, Dan Fried and finally Chris Hill was there.

Q: So, you had three ambassadors in your years in Poland?

HIGGISTON: I had three ambassadors in two posts. Let's see. There were three in Warsaw, three in Turkey at least. I guess I only had one in Brussels with a chargé, and then I just had the one in Pretoria.

Q: Okay. So, okay, well good. And so, how were the office accommodations? Was it a—you said they were looking for an old one—new one, was it an old, miserable building?

HIGGISTON: It was an older building. It was fine. I mean, we didn't have to worry about elevators in our building because we were in a small building. We were on the second floor. As I mentioned, our office was on the second floor right over the gate to the embassy where they checked the cars. So, if something did happen, I was not in a good position.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: The offices were spacious. Both offices had offices as did all the ag specialists. My admin person and marketing specialist shared a very large office. We also had a good conference room. We were happy with the offices. The commercial office was in another part of town. I didn't have as much contact with them. I always thought it was more beneficial for our offices to be near each other, but that was not always the case.

You know, heading my first post allowed me to get my feet wet in operating in an embassy environment. And having only served in Moscow previously, it was quite different. We did not have a great deal of trade with Poland, and we were just starting to participate in more trade shows. We also had responsibility for Lithuania.

Q: Can I stop you before you get into professional programs? We can save that for next time because I'm sure there's a lot of it and I don't want you to have to repeat yourself or not remember what you said.

Tell me about—how about the housing? Did you do all right on that?

HIGGISTON: There was a lot of new housing going up around the city. We were put in the southern outskirts of the city center in an area called Ursynow. It was all reclaimed farmland. In the morning you could hear the roosters in the distance. We were in one of the new developments. It was a townhouse with 3 bedrooms and a large kitchen and dining room. There were no trees in the area and the steps and "deck" were all in stone.

It was definitely a big house, bigger than Melissa and I had ever lived in. When I moved in, they were still putting the cobblestone pavement down on the street we were living on. There were about 60 houses in the compound with Americans living in 9 of the townhouses. We would get together over the weekends for drinks or a BBQ. It was also close to the new metro line, which had a stop close to the embassy. You could also take a bus downtown. It was a new area and we had several large stores near us.

Q: And how did you find Warsaw? Was it still immersed in its communist past, or had it emerged already?

HIGGISTON: By the time we arrived, Warsaw and Poland had already transitioned to a modern western European city. There were still elements of communist times. If you remember, Warsaw was leveled by the Germans and then the Russians. They rebuilt during the 1950s and 1960s. It was quite beautiful. But the rest of downtown was very much in the Soviet style. But having said that, they—you know, it was certainly very Western, so a lot of different restaurants and stores. . But it was fine. Like I said, it wasn't quaint, although like I said, I thought the old town was quite nice.

Q: So, living was pleasant?

HIGGISTON: I thought living was very pleasant. You could really get whatever you needed. Plenty of restaurants and parks around the city. Aeroflot had all these cheap flights at the time, and we were able to especially travel around Europe. We also traveled around the country quite a bit both for work and pleasure.

Q: Aeroflot, you probably mean—

HIGGISTON: Sorry, LOT.

Q: —LOT Polish Airlines, right, yeah. Okay. Okay.

Well look, it's—we're not quite up to two hours yet, but I think it's probably better to pause it here—

HIGGISTON: Sure.

Q: —and we can take up with your professional life in Poland next time.

HIGGISTON: Yes. I think there are fewer stories about Poland than there were about Moscow, so it shouldn't take as much time. (Laughs)

Q: Well, that period you were in Moscow was really history in the making.

HIGGISTON: Yes, absolutely.

Q: But nonetheless, we want to hear about Poland as well. So, let me pause it, stop it there.

HIGGISTON: Okay. Good.

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Q: Today is April 15, 2022. Ooh, tax day. Hope you've gotten yours in. This is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Jim Higgiston.

Good morning, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Good morning.

Q: When we left off last time, we'd talked a little bit about your being assigned to Poland and life in Poland, but we hadn't actually gone into the professional side of that. So, let me ask you now, first of all, make a note that we're talking about the summer of 1997, August of 1997—

HIGGISTON: Right.

Q: —that you were assigned as agricultural counselor to Warsaw. Was this a three-year assignment?

HIGGISTON: Yes. It was a three-year assignment with the ability to extend for a fourth year without competing for the position. Because we have a smaller Foreign Service contingent, Washington usually kept us at posts a little bit longer than most other agencies. We always opted to stay for the fourth year, mainly because we hated to move every three years. And I also felt like it took a while to settle in and to really get a sense of what was going on in the country. So, it was nice having that fourth year because you felt like you could really get more things done at that point. Throughout my career we opted to stay as long as possible. Except for Moscow, all my postings had regional coverage. When I first arrived in Poland, we covered Lithuania and Poland. And then I was asked to oversee Ukraine during my last year because the attaché there who was of Ukrainian descent decided one day, he didn't want to deal with the Ukrainians anymore

because he felt like the Ukrainian treated him as if he was one of their own, and therefore that he should help them more than he wanted to. (Both laugh) And so, I got a call from Washington, and they asked whether I would mind being responsible for Ukraine. Since I had been in Moscow and had visited Ukraine on numerous occasions it would not be that difficult. They spoke a lot of Russian there, so I could get by. We had a small office with two local staff.

Plus, the flights were pretty easy; it was only about a two-hour flight from Warsaw to Kiev, and there were daily flights. The only issue I had was the Ambassador who I had worked with previously in Washington. He really wanted me there full time but, of course, my ambassador in Warsaw wanted me in Poland full time. So, it was a little bit of a juggling act for a little while. But I enjoyed it. It was nice going back to Ukraine. We had a small office there. We were doing little things. We didn't have any major programs, but we were still doing a lot of reporting and commodity analysis.

Q: A small office meant an office of locals, no assigned Americans?

HIGGISTON: So, Kyiv had one officer, usually, and at the time I was there, they had two local staff. One was an administrative assistant and the other one was a specialist. So, the specialist did all the reporting, and so I would basically have to clear off on all those reports going back to Washington.

So, one funny story. FAS had its own reporting system that was unclassified. Because it was primarily on commodity reporting, no one cleared off on the reports in the embassy. You might do a small piece on policy but that was really reserved for State cables. The reports were immediately made available to the public and were put up on the FAS website in Washington. So, when I was in Ukraine, we concentrated on commodity reporting and analysis.

Most of our offices were staffed with one American officer. I always had at least an American deputy. However, in Brussels and Pretoria I had two Americans working for me. Kyiv was a one American officer post.

Q: So, you had to go down there regularly for this period of a year that you were doing that as well?

HIGGISTON: I was going down there probably once a month for a week.

Q: Oh, wow.

HIGGISTON: Yes. Obviously, the ambassador wanted me there full-time but unfortunately that was not going to happen. It was relatively easy to be in touch with the office and I could get to Kyiv from Warsaw pretty easily with all the flights between the cities. I had actually worked with him when he was at AID. As I mentioned I would end up spending one week out of every month in Kyiv. Since I had an American deputy in

Warsaw, it was a little easier. If I had been by myself in Warsaw, it would have been more stressful.

Q: Who was that ambassador?

HIGGISTON: Ambassador Pascual. He started at AID and I know he was Ambassador in Mexico. He was very smart and very dedicated. I enjoyed working with him, but like I said, there were times when we were like, you know, I didn't feel sometimes that with so much going on in both countries that we were not able to give him what he needed. I think he felt like we should have more programs in Ukraine, but the issue was limited funding.

Q: Yeah.

Well, stay on Ukraine for a moment here. I mean, that's a big agricultural exporter, generally speaking.

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: We weren't having programs to send food aid to them, were we?

HIGGISTON: Not when I was there but probably in the early 1990s after Ukraine declared its independence. Again, while Ukraine today is a major wheat exporter at the time, they were still trying to overcome the problems they had under the Soviets. By the time I was there, we didn't have any active programs, it was more a reporting post. We would be doing commodity reports and follow any changes in government policy that would affect production. We had a small exchange program with Ukraine but that was the extent of it.

We didn't have many visitors from the States. I wasn't doing much traveling during that time.

Q: I remember your fun stories of—during Soviet times, driving to Ukraine and not being able to get out of the car for more than a few minutes and information being very tight and you couldn't speak to people. This was only a few years later. Had the situation changed?

HIGGISTON: So, it was interesting. When I was in Moscow, we always felt like the Ukrainians outdid the Russians in terms of the way they ran things. They were a lot more conservative and stricter at that point. At the time, the communists were obviously still in power, but I didn't have any problems when I was there. I do have two stories I have to relate.

This was back when I was still in Moscow in the early 1990s. For the most part, I never had a problem with the police. The only times I was followed was on the road and normally when we were traveling a new route or were close to some military base. The

embassy in Moscow had access to 2 dachas, or summer homes. One was in a suburb of Moscow, well within the city limits. Folks from the embassy could rent out the dacha for a weekend. In any case, some friends had rented the dacha for a birthday party on a Friday or Saturday night. I had to leave a bit early from the party because I had to pick up a delegation the next morning from the airport.

Anyway, I went, it was dark when I left the compound, which was surrounded by a wall. I needed to get some gas on the way home. Interestingly, the gasoline stations in Moscow were the only stores that were open twenty-four/seven. So, you could show up at a gas station no matter what time day or night and get gas. So, there was a station near the embassy on the way home. When I left the compound, I noticed that I was being followed. In fact, I had four unmarked and marked cars following me the entire way to the gas station. I thought this was kind of strange because I had never been followed within city limits.

Q: Four cars? Whoa.

HIGGISTON: Yes. It was a bit overkill. First, we were in Moscow, and second, I've never garnered that much attention. I didn't try to lose the tails because they knew where you lived. They could easily flatten your tires if they wanted to, which has happened in the past, particularly when you were on the road. So, I just ignored them and drove to the station. And as I get out of the car to pump the gas, suddenly, these cars pull up outside and they look at me, and there's this look of horror on their face because they realized they had followed the wrong car.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: There was a colleague who worked for the agency, who had a mustache and dark hair. He was much taller than me, but sitting in a car at night, you can't tell the difference. So, once I got out of the car, it was clear they had the wrong person and they immediately sped off to get back to the dacha to see if they could find him.

Q: They probably assumed you had staged the whole thing. (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: Maybe. But the fact that I stopped to get gas and got out of the car, makes me think that they simply mistook me for another person. I didn't try to disguise what I was doing. But it was just one of those things.

In terms of being followed, I never had any problems in Kyiv. They had some nicer hotels in Kyiv, at the time. I think they knew I was not a threat to them. However, there were some incidents that occurred with other U.S. visitors while I was there. It involved a visitor going to a bar and meeting some Ukrainian woman. Let's just say it did not end well. No one got hurt, but it was an issue.

But like I said, when I was there, we didn't travel as much outside of Kyiv because I was just updating the embassy on our activities. I was also visiting with ministry officials. And if we had an exchange program, I would be working to help the Ukrainians decide

on the team members. I'm sure if I traveled outside the city, I would have attracted a lot more attention.

Q: Even in '97-'98 from Poland?

HIGGISTON: My sense was that while things had improved, it was still pretty strict. I mentioned that when I left Moscow back in 1992. I could go into the ministry of agriculture unannounced without any pre-approval. But in the late 1990s, things had started to regress. When I spoke with some of the folks that followed me in Moscow, they would talk about how things had gotten a lot more difficult. When I was in Kyiv in the late 1990s, I didn't think it was that restrictive. The Ukrainians wanted foreigners to visit and especially invest in the country.

Q: Okay.

Well, let's turn to Poland then, and how did you find it there? Was that quite a contrast even though they'd just recently come out of communism as well?

HIGGISTON: It was like night and day compared with the former Soviet Union. Poland had applied for membership in the European Union. There were a lot more private restaurants and other enterprises. Investment was booming. Not that there weren't issues, but Poland's trajectory was very positive. It was very easy to live there and travel. Poles were very pro-American. You could not have asked for a better place to live and serve.

Professionally, it was a very good relationship. My Polish counterparts were always happy to see us and we were able to help each other on trade issues. We had a big exchange program. Both AID and USDA had food aid programs in the 1970s and 1980s. There was a lot of local currency available for development.

The funds were put into a bank account and the Poles used the funds money for various projects: statistics gathering; development of an extension service; developed a 4-H club and so forth. Our office along with the Poles, but they really made most of the major decisions. There wasn't a concern about the money being misused.

Q: We talked about programs in Poland. But you said seventies, eighties, even way back during the worst of the Cold War we had good programs in Poland?

HIGGISTON: Yes, it seemed strange to me too but that is how I remember it. Obviously, the Poles were under the thumb of the Russians, but they did stand apart. For example, Polish agriculture was never collectivized. And there were no state farms in Poland. But the Poles really hated the Russians. Believe it or it seemed like the Poles hated the Russians more than the Germans. Don't know how to read into that. I remember there was a guy on my staff, during the collapse of the ruble in 1998. People were wondering if it was truly the end of communist rule. And he said, "They'll always come back." He told me never to count the Russians out and sure enough, we see what's happening today.

Q: Well, that was pretty common in Poland. I mean, you know, the Russians had taken over half the country with the Nazis and then helped level Warsaw during the war, huh?

HIGGISTON: Sure. I know we had programs, because we had a lot of funds from our old food aid programs. And while I was working on food aid, I don't ever remember signing any agreements with Poland. So, the assistance programs had to pre-date my work in Washington. I do know that the Russians were bleeding both the rest of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries for food and other scarce items. So, we had—there were a lot of programs. I don't know what the basis was other than the fact that what was happening in the Eastern Bloc was the Russians were taking everything, especially food. I know Poland was a big agriculture producer, so they were a prime target.

Q: Really?

HIGGISTON: Later on, the private farms in Poland became an issue when Poland was trying to join the European Union. The average farm size in Poland was one or two hectares and each farmer on average had one or two cows. Clearly, it was not economically feasible for these farms to compete commercially. And I know when the Poles were negotiating with the Europeans on how much assistance the agriculture sector would receive. The Europeans were drawing a strict line.

The Poles were saying that there was something on the order of 2 million farmers in Poland while the Europeans felt that the number was more like 500,000. And so, the Poles, of course, had to deal with a social issue as well as an economic one. What are you going to do with all these people if they get kicked off the farms? Or how can they survive without assistance? A lot of our assistance was geared towards things like developing a 4-H club, how to better gather agricultural statistics and so forth.

Q: I guess I had no idea that the farms remained private in Poland. That seems to be contrary to the whole communist ethos and the way they would have run things.

HIGGISTON: Yes. That's very true. The farms were never collectivized, and they remained private. And like I said, they were very small. But a lot of the big processors for meat, grains, or dairy products were all government monopolies.

Q: Well, how did this affect your work?

HIGGISTON: During the period that Poland was working to join the European Union, we were trying to maintain our market share in Poland. We were selling a lot of steaks to Poland and at one point we had U.S. T-Bone steaks in about 100 – 150 restaurants. It was quite a success. This was important because we could not sell the same steaks in the rest of the EU. I think our hope was that Poland would support imports of U.S. products into the EU when they joined. At the same time, the United States was a big market for Polish hams. Obviously, Polish immigrants wanted Polish hams and the Poles wanted to accommodate them. Another issue for us was to transship U.S. poultry meat through Poland to Ukraine. Again, it was a fairly big market and we needed permission to

transship. Remember however, Poland was a big producer of wheat and oilseeds which competed with U.S. wheat and soybeans. So, we had a niche market for U.S. products.

We had an interesting situation while I was in Poland. We have agencies in USDA that deal both with importing and exporting regulations. So, they set the regulations to ensure that products entering the States were safe for the U.S. consumer. At the same time, there were folks in these same agencies that needed to issue health certificates for export markets. Unfortunately, there are times that these folks do not talk with one another. So, at one point we were negotiating with the Poles to allow us to bring poultry and red meat to Poland. Obviously, they wanted to protect their market but at the same time they wanted to continue selling Polish hams to the United States. Both countries however needed to make some concessions to allow the trade to continue.

I remember coming to the embassy on Friday and we had just gotten the Poles to allow us to continue to bring in the meat products and we had been working to develop an acceptable export certificate. And I got a call from the import side of a USDA agency that dealt with food safety, and they basically said that they were going to ban imports of Polish ham. We hadn't gotten any warning. The U.S. folks had sent out a technical questionnaire to the Poles and the Poles had not answered it adequately or in a way that the U.S. agency would accept. We were going to cut off Polish exports to the United States the following Tuesday—no, the following Monday. And I was like, "Wait. We're just—we just finished getting them to agree to allow us to get our product in here, we can't cut them off." So, I said, "Send me the forms that you need," and I went to my local ag specialist, and I said, "Okay, we got to get in there at 9:00 on Monday and sit down with them in order to fill out the forms." And like I said, the Poles were very good about this stuff. So, the Poles needed to demonstrate that they had implemented regulations that would ensure that Polish exporters would be selling safe products to the United States.

So, it might deal with the cleanliness of the facilities. Was there a veterinarian on-site? Are there a number of site inspections carried out by the ministry. The Poles had actually given their U.S. counterparts a lot of information, but as far as I was concerned, the problem was that the information was not in the format that the U.S. side wanted.

We worked with these three or four Polish specialists, and we painstakingly listed the specific documentation that responded to the U.S. concerns. We basically had to fill out the form for them because they just were not grasping the importance of this, other than the fact that they were going to get their exports cut off. But that was the type of work stuff that you wound up having to do in order to keep trade flowing. It wasn't just that we didn't want to cut off the Polish exports, but rather if we cut off the Poles, then we were suddenly going to get our products cut off.

Q: Doesn't say much for our own bureaucracy if you're given, like, forty-eight hours' notice that they're about to cut off imports.

HIGGISTON: This was probably the worst situation. I think sometimes U.S. agencies didn't think it was important to inform the embassy. FAS is not a regulatory agency so often we are overlooked. We don't have any regulatory responsibilities or authorities.

We have two USDA agencies that are key to our work. One is APHIS, which is the Animal, Plant, Health Inspection Service. They deal with, basically, animal and plant diseases, both a product going into the States, but also a product leaving the States and coming to a foreign country. So, for example, if there was an outbreak of BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy), they would be the ones who would have to basically respond to that issue.

The second agency is the Food Safety Inspection Service, and they were the ones that dealt with meat, poultry, pork and beef, and they were looking at the processing facilities in a country trying to export to the States. We depended on them because we needed them to provide health certificates that are acceptable to the host country. And you know, each country has a little bit of a different take on how they run their food safety, so for the United States, it's all government run. In many countries, it's privately run, and that doesn't always cut it with the United States.

I think during my career, the relationship between FAS and the regulatory agencies (APHIS and FSIS) has gotten much better. But that was my first experience dealing with the Food Safety Inspection Service. I didn't have any reason to deal with them in Moscow.

I found it was critical to establish a good working relationship with different U.S. agencies, not just USDA agencies. It made it a lot easier to get things done. I think it was critical because once you established that relationship with the U.S. agencies, it was a lot easier to get things done. I worked a lot with USTR especially in Turkey and Brussels. After the Uruguay Round USTR had a much bigger role in these negotiations. Prior to the 1990s, it was an entirely different environment.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Poland was a big grain producer as well. Was that something that affected you?

HIGGISTON: Only in the sense that it was one of the more important commodities that we had to follow. Poland was not really a market for us. We were looking at what the effect might be in the European Union once they joined.

As in Ukraine, another country with a large agricultural sector, we were closely looking at production of major crops. However, in Poland we were also looking at trade policy issues, like the acceptance of biotech products. Moreover, we had access to the Polish market for our products, like beef, which had limited access to the EU market. We were trying to get a sense of how import policies might change in Poland or the EU. In the end, Poland adopted EU import policies.

In addition to analysis and trade policy, we were participating in a lot of trade shows and doing more marketing work, unlike my time in the Soviet Union. We did a big trade show each year in Poznan. One year we also participated in a show in Lithuania and a seafood show in Gdansk. The ambassador hosted a reception at his residence for the Florida Department of Citrus. We had representatives from importers, retailers, and government officials. The Florida folks gave away bags of pink grapefruit to everyone. It was really a nice event.

We also had a very popular exchange program in USDA called the Cochran Fellowship Program. One year, the ambassador at the time, Chris Hill, hosted a reception at the residence for close to 250 former participants. We would send folks to the States on a variety of issues. It might be a technical issue, an economic program, research, or a marketing program. These types of programs greatly benefitted our office.

If we had a visitor coming to Poland, we had an extensive list of contacts in Poland that we could arrange meetings with. We had one person who went to the States on this program that eventually became the minister of agriculture for Lithuania.

This was probably one of the best programs we had at USDA. We did some interesting training programs while I was in Poland. In one case we worked with our APHIS colleagues in the region to arrange training for Polish and Ukrainian border control officials, who were responsible for ensuring that food or livestock between Poland and Lithuania was safe.

The training focused on the possibility of an outbreak of a highly contagious disease, foot and mouth disease along the border between the two countries. We were trying to show the officials of both countries the importance of communicating information in case there was an outbreak. The idea was that the staff would need to react immediately. These types of diseases don't pay attention to the borders.

There was a lot of trade carried out between these countries and we wanted to see how officials would react. It was very interesting because the Poles did very well and appreciated the need to react quickly. For the Ukrainians, they needed to communicate with their supervisors in Kyiv before they could react or even, more importantly, communicate with the Polish officials right across the border. Unlike their Polish colleagues, the Ukrainians could not operate outside their established lines of authority. There was a term that we used in Moscow, but I don't remember the exact term.

Q: Communalized?

HIGGISTON: Yes, I think that was the term. Even though Poland had been under communist control for over 30 years, they were really a western country. Poland had its own issues, but they already could grasp how to operate in a market economy. They knew the importance of being able to make decisions.

It was a very dynamic time. And like I said, it is great to serve in a country where the people loved Americans. It was fun. As I mentioned, Warsaw was the first time I headed a post, and it was a good one to head. We had a lot of visitors coming to Poland. It certainly helped that the United States had a lot of Polish immigrants. We also had an undersecretary who had been there previously with the World Bank. He would come to Poland a couple of times a year because he loved Poland and loved to see the Poles. Towards the end of the administration, he made one last trip to Poland. We arranged for a reception and had something like six or eight former ministers of agriculture that showed up.

Q: Wow.

HIGGISTON: Yes, it was remarkable. He had a personality that people loved to be around him, and so everyone showed up. It was not something you would see in many countries. Even though the former ministers were from different political parties, they still liked him and showed up for him. We had one former minister who spontaneously started singing a song.

Q: Singing?

HIGGISTON: Yes, he was singing a Polish song to the undersecretary. It was such a great event. I really enjoyed it. It was a good post. We did have our ups and downs, but for the most part, it was a great place to serve.

One of my favorite stories about Poland happened when we got a new ambassador. I was invited along with other members of the senior staff to attend his official ceremony to present his credentials to the President of Poland. The most interesting part of the ceremony was that it was held in the same building where the Warsaw Pact was signed. We had some time to wander around the building. Having studied about the Soviet Union and the post war period, the building really resonated with me. I don't know if I mentioned this before, but I—to the day I retired, I have said that I cannot believe that they paid me to do that job because of all the things that I got to see and got to do.

But Poland was a lot of fun. There were a lot of things that I enjoyed doing. We traveled a lot in the country. We would drive around the country quite a bit by car, and even drove to Lithuania one year to participate in a trade show.

Q: For tourism or for work?

HIGGISTON: Work and pleasure. A lot of places were pretty close in Poland. We would often visit some government institutions outside of Warsaw. We would sometimes fly, especially to Lithuania, but we would also take trains. The train system was great and easy to use. We'd go down to Krakow quite often to meet with officials there or just visit for the day.

There was one time we were down south and traveling with folks from the chief veterinarian's office. We were traveling along a road that went through a forest. Our hosts stopped the car and walked us into the forest.

After a couple of minutes, we came upon a cemetery. I'm looking at the names on the graves, and there were a lot of graves that had the Islamic crescent that you saw in Turkey. It turned out it was close to the most northern point that the Muslims reached in Europe and Jan Sobieski led the Poles against the Muslims. Anyway, the names on the tombstones were a combination of Polish and Islamic names. It was really interesting which showed how the Muslims integrated into Polish culture. Not sure how many Muslims exist in modern Poland, but it really impressed me.

Q: You dealt mainly with the ministry of agriculture?

HIGGISTON: Yes. The ministry of agriculture was our primary contact in all countries. We also dealt with the ministries of foreign trade, economic ministries and commercial companies and associations. We also worked with universities in some cases.

We brought a lot of Poles into the States under various programs. I remember visiting this one university about an hour outside of the city who did a lot of regulatory work for the Polish government. And I remember walking in this one office, and there were all these posters from U.S. universities like the University of California at Davis, Texas A&M, Iowa State, Cornell University. All these folks had been in the States at one point or another on a training program. It paid off so much for us in the long run because they had a better understanding of the U.S. regulatory system and developed strong contacts with their counterparts in the United States.

Unfortunately, funding for a lot of these programs were cut later. I truly believe the progress we made on trade was due in great part to these exchange programs and the contacts that were established during these exchange programs.

Q: I think it's a great testament to how important international visitors' programs can be in any field. I had not heard the agriculture stories before.

I need to ask, at one point, I was with you, and you took a group from the embassy to visit a blueberry production facility. How did that fit it?

HIGGISTON: Yes, we had two events that we were able to do for the embassy community. The blueberry picking was probably the most popular.

I mentioned that the United States had provided food assistance to Poland in the 1970s and 80s. This was one of the programs that was funded from the sale of the commodities that the Polish government received under the food aid programs.

Some of the funds were given to a university professor to start a blueberry association in Poland and to help some small-scale Polish farmers to grow blueberries to sell. The

professor had a research facility outside of Warsaw where he grew several different varieties of blueberries. And believe it or not he had 10 different varieties that he grew at this facility. He then provided seedlings to farmers so they could propagate the plants on their farms.

A member of my staff at the time kept in contact with this professor and each year, he invited the embassy to pick blueberries at the research facility. We paid a nominal fee for the blueberries we picked. Blueberries are an interesting berry that can be frozen for months and still keep their shape. It was great for baking and other uses. Like I said, it was one of the most popular outings for the embassy. I think we also sent the head of the facility to the States for some training. But it was one of those programs that benefited from our food aid and exchange programs. The outing had gone one for a number of years prior to my arrival. At one point we had something like 5 kilos in our freezer in Warsaw.

Q: Well, that prompted the question, I still remember after however many years it's been, twenty years, how good those blueberries were. I was never a blueberry fan before, but now they're still one of my favorites. (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: I agree. I don't remember eating blueberries growing up, but I really like them. You know, one of the benefits of international trade is the ability to have all varieties of fruits and vegetables year-round.

The downside, of course, can be the taste. Tomatoes are a good example. In order to transport and store tomatoes they need to be much heartier and that usually means that the flavor suffers. Even berries are an issue.

Q: Okay. Well, good to know.

HIGGISTON: The second trip we organized for the embassy community was to a horse breeding facility. We were invited to the stud farm by the chief veterinary officer. We toured the facility, and they provided carriage rides.

It was a beautiful facility with these incredible animals that they allowed us to see and to ride. The chief veterinary officer was there, and he stayed with us the entire day. He had a real love for the work, and it showed when he was talking about the facility.

Q: Doesn't have anything to do with agriculture, but there was a Polish pope while you were there, John Paul II.

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: Were you there when he was visiting Warsaw from time to time?

HIGGISTON: Yes, I was there. There was a parade that went right by the embassy. You could feel the energy among the Poles. You really saw it at the embassy. It was such a big deal for everyone. It was really an amazing event.

Q: Kind of closed down the town for a few days, if I recall.

HIGGISTON: Absolutely. Luckily the embassy was close to many of the government buildings, so we were still able to get work done. We also had a presidential visit at the end of my tour. They shut the city down during that visit too.

Q: Which president was that?

HIGGISTON: So, I was there '97 to 2001, so that would have been—

Q: Clinton or Bush I?

HIGGISTON: No, it was George W. Bush.

Q: Bush II, rather, Bush II, yeah. Okay.

HIGGISTON: The visit occurred just before I left Warsaw. They asked us to arrange some bilateral meetings during the visit for the staff. They were trying to arrange some sort of informal trade agreement. The President was there for a couple of days. Like the pope's visit, the Poles shut down the city during the Bush trip.

Q: Did you use your Polish a lot?

HIGGISTON: I did, however I ran into some issues. My Polish was fairly good, but not great. However, the biggest problem occurred when I was asked to oversee our operations in Ukraine, when our attaché Kyiv decided to retire with little notice. I wound up going to Kyiv once a month for about a week. During those trips I used my Russian quite a bit. My Russian got better but my Polish suffered. There were a lot of times coming home from the airport from a stay in Ukraine, getting in a taxi and asking the drivers to take me home. Unfortunately, I often asked in Russian which was not popular in Poland.

Q: They didn't like that very much, if I can recall.

HIGGISTON: That's an understatement. They hated the Russian. It was better for me to speak English rather than Russian in Poland. It happened a number of times in my career even in Turkey. I was asked to travel to Central Asia once a month to visit some of our offices. They spoke very little English there so my Russian came in quite handy. Again, unfortunately, my Russian became very dominant and my Turkish, which had been good, suffered.

Q: So, the government officials tended to speak English. That's interesting.

HIGGISTON: Yes, we had English speakers in most of the government offices. To be honest, our main contacts even in Russia spoke English.

Q: But on the farms in Poland, they wouldn't have been speaking English?

HIGGISTON: No. Some of them did, but a lot of them just spoke Polish. I could understand a fair amount, but I depended on my Polish staff most times. It was important to have a native speaker especially if we were discussing a technical issue or anything of significance so that there was no misunderstanding. Most of our trade issues were of the technical kind and I never felt comfortable speaking Polish with something on the line.

Q: So, you'd have a Polish staff member with you in case you needed interpretation?

HIGGISTON: Yes. We had a large staff in Poland, about 4 specialists. They were all very good. They had great contacts and a tremendous amount of experience. Most of our local staffs have been with us for years. They would also help if we had visitors in town. They would often accompany them to meetings.

Q: Okay. This is probably a good moment for a morning coffee break, if that's alright with you?

HIGGISTON: Yes. That works for me.

Q: Okay. Let me pause it.

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Q: Today is April 15, 2022. This is Peter Eicher continuing with the second half of today's session with Jim Higgiston.

Jim, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about your regional responsibilities. You're mentioned Lithuania a couple of times. Were you also responsible for the other Baltics or any other countries?

HIGGISTON: When I arrived in Poland, we had country responsibility for Poland and Lithuania. Poland was particularly busy given its aspirations to join the European Union and the fact that it was such an important agriculture producer. During my third year in Poland, our attaché in Kyiv unexpectedly decided to retire. I was asked to oversee our operations in Ukraine until the next assignment cycle. It made a lot of sense. I had visited Ukraine quite a bit during my tour in Moscow. My Russian would come in handy with daily flights between Warsaw and Kyiv. Lastly, I had a great American deputy in Warsaw who could run the office while I was away.

Changing coverage was a common occurrence. I had the same situation while I was in Ankara. FAS/Washington asked me to take over responsibility for the Central Asian countries. We had to pull our attaché out of Islamabad for health and safety reasons. It

was not an unusual occurrence. We often asked our attachés to be flexible and assume greater country responsibilities.

Most of our posts and, in fact, all of the posts where I served, were all regional. For me, Brussels was probably the anomaly. As part of the U.S. Mission to the EU, we really did not have any country responsibilities. I did travel to other member states in my role, as Minister Counselor, but we were not responsible for any bilateral relations. At the time I arrived, bilateral relations with Belgium were handled out of The Hague, which at some point made sense. However, we asked to take over because it gave us a direct relationship with a member state and gave us greater insight into what they were thinking. Plus, the bilateral embassy was right across the alley from the Mission to the EU.

Each year in Washington, we go through a review process for our worldwide coverage. We would discuss whether we needed to consider reconfiguring our overseas coverage or new posts to open. Some years we would make more changes than in others, but it was a very dynamic process. When I arrived in Warsaw, we weren't doing a great deal in Lithuania. However, we started to participate in trade shows and initially, they were considered as a recipient for one of our food aid programs. They also participated in our Cochran Fellowship program.

Q: Well, anything else you want to talk about with regard to Warsaw, or should we move on?

HIGGISTON: I think I hit all the high points. On a personal note, Poland was the site for many of the Nazi death camps from World War II. Melissa and I traveled to many of the camps. In addition, Melissa, as the CLO, would arrange tours of Warsaw which still had remnants of the Jewish ghetto. It was very sobering and disturbing. I think all Americans should take the time to visit.

Q: Okay. So, you obviously did decide to stay the fourth year, and then during that year you must have been thinking about what comes next.

HIGGISTON: Yes. As I mentioned before, I always gave Melissa the bid sheet and gave her input into our postings. I thought it was important for her to have input into the decision for a number of reasons, but especially given that she was going to have a more difficult time adjusting to a new post, a new country, and a new community. I always had an office to go to and colleagues with whom I would be working. However, she really had to start from scratch in each posting.

Later, when I became deputy administrator overseeing the foreign service, I felt that this was an important issue we needed to discuss with our new recruits. I always wanted to be honest with folks considering the Foreign Service. Officers must deal with a number of issues, but especially a spouse who will most likely not be able to have a career overseas. There were very few countries where we had a bilateral work agreement. So, many folks worked at an embassy job that paid only a fraction of what they might earn in the States.

Even later on, in Brussel for example, the Belgians would not allow some teleworking jobs because they felt it took work away from the locals.

People also don't always think of the impact on their children. If your child had any special needs, you might be working in a country that could not provide that support. Schools varied country to country. It was important for me that Melissa bought into all this and where she wanted to go because no matter what, it was always going to be an adjustment for her.

I was extremely fortunate. She worked in each of the posts that I served but it was still difficult.

Q: You gave her the list and apparently, she chose Turkey, right?

HIGGISTON: Yes. Poland was a natural fit because her grandparents came from Poland. We had no connection to Turkey, but Melissa was always very adventurous, and she immediately and enthusiastically supported the move to Ankara. Sometimes, it is just the luck of the draw – what posts are open at the time you are bidding. I thought I'd be going back to Moscow at some point, but the timing never worked out. However, Melissa made it very clear she did not want to go to Moscow. She hated the long winter nights and the cold weather, but it was a moot point since the timing never panned out.

I never really had a plan when I was considering postings. Luckily, it just all worked out in the end and we loved all the posts where we served. At the time, we never really thought about Turkey, but we had been talking to some folks who served there, and they recommended it. It was a beautiful country. Looking back, we never served in Latin America or Asia, which would have been nice. The places we might have wanted to go to were not open when we were ready to go out. In the end, Turkey came up, we both agreed that it would be different. It was a "1" posting but they sent me as a "2". I didn't get promoted to a "one" until I got to Turkey, even though I headed the post in Warsaw.

So, we went back for a year of language training. We got back in August and started language training almost immediately.

Q: September of 2001 we're talking about?

HIGGISTON: Right. I was at FSI learning Turkish when 9/11 occurred. I remember one of the Turkish instructors coming in that morning and saying that something's going on in New York and Washington. We turned on the TV and saw the Trade Center in New York engulfed in smoke and then the report came up about the Pentagon being hit. We were in a class on the side of the building facing west. We immediately looked out the window and could see the plume of smoke coming from the building. It was surreal. I had to walk back to Oakwood that day. I walked along Route 50 which was packed with cars. Melissa was in Ohio visiting her family at the time. FSI was closed that day, but we went back to school the next day.

Q: Yeah, wow. So, you were at the main campus of FSI?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I had taken Polish at FSI and liked the atmosphere for the most part. So, when I got assigned to Turkey, I decided to go back to FSI for the year.

I was at FSI, main campus, and as I look back, there are good things and bad things about it. I think it's good to be in a class with other students because you have a chance to listen and get to know folks with whom you would be working with overseas rather than having one-on-one training with one language instructor for 5 or 6 hours which could be brutal.

It was very interesting, however. On the first day of classes at FSI, they brought the entire student body to a big meeting room. The head of FSI began to discuss student behavior and what would and would not be tolerated. From what I gathered there was a tendency for students to "act out inappropriately" in class. Thinking about it, it made a lot of sense. Most FSOs were very intelligent and good at their jobs. They were also very competitive. So, when placed in a situation that was out of the norm like language training, it could be quite difficult especially at the beginning of training. In addition, some students had a lot more at stake than others, especially those from other agencies. For some agencies, if you didn't receive a certain fluency, you might not be able to go overseas.

I remember one incident. I went to meet the head of the section to talk about my experience and how classes were progressing. After the meeting, I returned to my class. When I opened the door to the class, one student was having a very heated argument with the instructor. Another student was crying for some reason and a third was zoning out staring out the window. At that point, I just decided to leave and go home because I didn't think it would be very useful to be in class at that moment.

Let's face it, people who go into the Foreign Service can be hard chargers. Learning a new language can be very humbling, especially in the beginning. You are thinking, "I can't even say my name let alone carry out a conversation." And I think that was one of the problems that they were having. There were times I felt like I was back in grammar school again.

Q: That's what it sounds like.

HIGGISTON: It was very strange. You know, for me—

Q: So, this was happening even in your Turkish class, it sounds like?

HIGGISTON: Yes, this happened in Turkish class. Polish was not that much different, but people really seemed to be upset in Turkish. Some of the students were more demanding and I got switched with other students. In the end, they put me in a class with the Commercial Counselor who was a really nice guy. It helped that we wanted to use similar terminology concerning trade, for example. So, the last couple of months went smoothly.

Q: Ahh. Okay. So, there was more than one Turkish class at the time?

HIGGISTON: Oh, my gosh, we had a lot of people. There were several U.S. offices in Turkey – Ankara, Istanbul, and Adana. There were also folks stationed at the U.S. base in Incirlik. It was a fairly large number of students. The classes were also big.

Q: Wow.

HIGGISTON: We had maybe five people or six people at times in a class, which can be quite a bit because it's hard for everybody to get a chance to speak with those numbers.

Q: Was Melissa taking it as well?

HIGGISTON: They had a course specifically for spouses that started in January of February. Up until that point, she had been working in Washington.

Q: So, for you it was, what, a nine-month course or something like that?

HIGGISTON: I think Polish was a bit longer. Although I had studied Russian for a number of years, Polish was even more difficult even though Russian had a different alphabet. The pronunciation and grammar were more difficult with Polish.

I know you asked me about Polish before. In some ways the biggest problem with Polish for me, was that it was so close to Russian in many ways. I would have issues differentiating between the two. And when I started spending time in Ukraine, I found that Ukrainian was a little bit of a mixture of Russian and Polish. It was a challenge.

Melissa took some Polish. She was very good with languages and after she arrived in Warsaw, she picked up a lot more because she spent a lot of time going to stores and exploring the city. She was fearless.

Q: Okay. Was Turkish considered a hard language to learn? And did you find it hard?

HIGGISTON: Oh yes. Turkish was difficult for me. I try to put it out of my mind. But from what I remember of Turkish the grammar could be challenging. I think you often start a sentence with a verb and then end the sentence with the subject. In English, when I start a sentence, I don't always know how it's going to finish, so how am I going to be able to start at the end and figure out the beginning. Again, like Polish, I started out strong and was doing fairly well. But when FAS closed our office in Pakistan and withdrew our attaché who had responsibility for Central Asia, I was asked to oversee our operations there. It made sense given my familiarity with the region. There were also a fair number of flights from Istanbul to most of the capitals in the region. Plus, they still spoke a lot of Russian there.

The downside was that the travel was very brutal. I would leave our apartment in Ankara at around noon on a Sunday, fly to Istanbul, and then travel to either Tashkent or Almaty. Given the distance, I would normally travel there one week out of every month. We had

local staff in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and I needed to do supervisory trips. Both of those countries were important reporting posts for cotton (Uzbekistan) and wheat (Kazakhstan).

Of course, my Russian started to get stronger, and my Turkish suffered as a result. This is a generalization, but it seemed like I would wind up doing some work in the former Soviet Union from each of my posts. Even when I got to Brussels, I would get asked about Russia especially during my initial meetings.

Q: So, back to language training. You were there for nine or ten months, and you were expected to get to what level?

HIGGISTON: A 2 in speaking and a 2 in reading was the minimum for Russian. A 3-3 was required for Turkish. I got 2+ and 3, I think, speaking and reading. I qualified in each of my languages.

When we returned from Poland for the year, they put us in the Oakwood apartments out in Falls Church, Virginia. It was a one bedroom and not very comfortable especially after having such a large house in Warsaw. But it was close to the metro, and it had a shuttle bus to FSI, so it was convenient.

Q: So, you stayed there for a full year effectively then?

HIGGISTON: Yes, we were there for the entire year. I would have to say that accommodations for long-term TDYs have gotten a lot better since then. I was back on temporary duty in 2018 and stayed in a very nice furnished apartment near Pentagon City. However, at the time I was studying Turkish there weren't that many choices.

Q: Okay. Well, you know, we're starting to push 12:00, so maybe that's a good stopping point.

HIGGISTON: Sure.

Q: And we can take up Turkey next time?

HIGGISTON: Okay. That would be great.

Q: Okay, let me stop the recording.

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Q: Today is April 22, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher starting a new interview session with Jim Higgiston.

Good morning, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Good morning.

Q: When we left off last time, you had just finished Turkish language training and we're about to head off to Ankara as agricultural counselor. And it was the summer of 2002, is that right?

HIGGISTON: That's right.

Q: Okay. Why don't you start by telling us a little bit about the embassy in Ankara and the U.S. establishment in Turkey, and then you can go on and talk about your specific part in it.

HIGGISTON: FAS offices are primarily in capital cities, so even though Istanbul was the center of commerce, we were in Ankara. I had an American assistant and two local staff. At the consulate in Istanbul, I also had two local staff.

The embassy in Ankara was quite big. It was downtown and was only about five minutes away from where we lived. Before arriving to Turkey, I did not realize that Ankara was so hilly. The city was like a bowl with the center of the city at the bottom of the bowl. Our apartment was up on a hill, right next to the ambassador's residence.

We had a lot of military cooperation with Turkey, which was also a member of NATO. Plus, we had the military base in Incirlik. Turkey was obviously strategically located near the former Soviet Union and the Middle East. Our country team at the embassy was made up of a number of security or intelligence agencies. The rest of us sat around the perimeter of the room. It was kind of funny because most of the intelligence folks never really reported anything at the meeting as I recall. Mostly, when it was their turn to speak, they would announce that they had to speak with the Ambassador after the meeting.

The embassy was physically quite large. We have several buildings on our "campus". Our office was in a building with the Commercial service folks as well as other agencies like the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) folks and the FBI. We each had a floor in the building so there was plenty of space. Ankara was my first post after 9/11. It was interesting how that really changed the environment that we were working in, especially overseas and it always gave you pause.

The Iranians had a travel agency right across the street from the embassy, which we were told was not really a travel agency. There were a number of restaurants around the embassy that were frequented by embassy staff. After 9/11, I always felt on guard knowing that anything could happen.

But I was lucky because both in Warsaw and Turkey, the people and especially the government officials were very friendly. It wasn't a contentious relationship. If they couldn't do something, they would simply inform us. It wasn't something that was adversarial. We worked well together with the Turkish ministries when I was there. The

only unfortunate part was that the government moved some of the ministries, including agriculture and food safety, to the outskirts of town, which made it a bit more difficult to get to meetings.

As I mentioned, our residence was right around the corner from the ambassador, so it was very nice. Whenever we had receptions, we could just walk home. And despite the feelings that I had regarding terrorism, Ankara was a very safe city to walk around. I never worried about being in the city even though there was a bombing in Ankara at the end of my tour.

The Turks would always look out for us. If we had a meeting at a restaurant, our contacts would always make sure that we got into a taxi. And so, we felt fairly secure when we were there.

AS I mentioned, when I first arrived, we were only covering Turkey and Azerbaijan. At the time, there wasn't a lot going on in Azerbaijan although Turkey was busy. I would send my deputy to Azerbaijan to give him some experience given that it was his first tour.

In the first year in a new country, you're learning the ropes about who you need to speak with and learn about your commercial contacts. Who does what in a country and who are the people that are important to talk with? And for me, it happened in every post. Once you have gotten that out of the way, you ask yourself, "How am I going to spend the rest of my time here?" And I was always fortunate in that some new challenge was given to me that kept the job interesting.

As I mentioned, when I was in Warsaw, I was asked to cover Ukraine during the latter part of my assignment. That certainly kept me busy. When I was in Ankara, it was Central Asia. Interestingly, most of the countries in the former Soviet Union did not want to be covered out of Moscow. So, Ankara was really the best option at that time, given the flights and proximity to those countries.

Initially, all the Central Asian countries were covered out of Pakistan, where we had an attaché. Compared with Turkey where the travel time was close to 15 hours, travel from Pakistan to Central Asia was much easier. However, given the situation in Pakistan, it made sense for us to cover those countries out of Turkey.

Q: All of them?

HIGGISTON: Yes, all of them.

Q: And Georgia and Armenia, or just the Stans in the middle?

HIGGISTON: We also covered Azerbaijan, while Georgia and Armenia were covered out of Moscow. In addition, we had put an attaché back in Kyiv. Moscow covered Russia, Armenia, Georgia, and Belarus. I believe they also covered Moldova, but that might have been covered out of Bulgaria or Romania. At some point.

We had the largest number of countries to cover in the region. That was probably one of the biggest changes in FAS from the time I started. Most of our posts had regional coverage. Previously, they only covered one or two countries. But with the breakup of the Soviet Union as well as Yugoslavia, we had more countries to cover.

It was great seeing all those countries, but it required us to travel quite a bit. It was important to travel to the countries where we had local staff and the ambassadors in those countries liked us to visit frequently. Of course, they would have preferred having one of us in country at all times, but that was never going to happen. It was a bit of a balancing act to make sure all our ambassadors were satisfied with our coverage.

I traveled mostly to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Not only were they important for reporting, but we had local staff there and it was important to see them. I would probably go there 3 or four times a year.

I'd also traveled to Kyrgyzstan several times which was a food aid recipient and Turkmenistan to look at the cotton crop. I visited Tajikistan once, which was economically underdeveloped. There was some food aid going in, but we really didn't have that much going on there. I went to Kyrgyzstan every time I went to Kazakhstan. We drove from Almaty to Bishkek, the capital, and would spend a day or two for meetings.

It was a long flight. None of the flights left out of Ankara; we had to go to Istanbul and then catch a flight to Central Asia. I would leave my apartment around noon and get to Almaty or Tashkent around 4:00 in the morning local time.

After a year, I really started to burn out because I was on the road, I would say, anywhere from 50 to 75 percent of my time, just simply because of all the things I had to do in Turkey along with having to travel to Central Asia. We had some active programs in each country. whether it was food aid or reporting. I was on the road quite a bit, and while I saw a great deal of the countries, I was glad when the travel ended.

Q: Well, let's take them one at a time. Why don't we start with Turkey since that was your main assignment. Who was the ambassador while you were there?

HIGGISTON: When I arrived in Ankara, Robert Pearson was the Ambassador, but he was only there for a couple of months. Then Eric Edelman arrived. He was there for 2 years. Then Ross Wilson who was Ambassador to Azerbaijan arrived. Interestingly, I served with both Edelman and Wilson during my first tour in Moscow. Edelman was in the political section and Wilson in the economic section.

Q: Three ambassadors in three years?

HIGGISTON: Yes, Four years, three ambassadors. Same thing happened in Moscow and Warsaw for whatever reason.

Q: Four years, okay. All right. And U.S. relations with Turkey at that point were okay? It was democratic, it was pre-Erdoğan, right?

HIGGISTON: Yes, it was pre-Erdoğan. I think it was a fairly good relationship, although I think, you know, things were not as good as they were prior to the 1990s. The Turkish military was pretty powerful and although Turkey was a democracy, the military would step in if things got a bit difficult. I think it was in the late 1980s or early 1990s when we did not support a military takeover. Relations were still good, but it took the shine off the relationship at that point. But for the most part, I would say, I never had any sort of a problem, I got along with both the people and the officials.

We got along very well with the Turkish business community. A lot of Turks had gone to college in the United States. There were a number of Turks who owned farms in the United States, particularly rice farms. These folks were actually big importers at the same time. They either owned the farms outright or they had stake in those farms. Most of the companies were very western although some were a bit more conservative. The women in the office wore, you know, their faces weren't covered, but they always wore head scarfs.

We would travel to Istanbul mainly because it really was the center of business for the country. I think I mentioned before they had great information on the trade in Central Asia, particularly on cotton, but also Kazakhstan. I got a lot of useful information from the Turkish traders. They were a great source of information on what was going on in Central Asia. Officials in Central Asia were not as open so the Istanbul traders were very important.

We traveled quite a bit in Turkey.

Q: For business?

HIGGISTON: Both for business and pleasure. We had a lot of good contacts that had relationships with U.S. companies. We were often invited to visit their facilities. We would travel and visit some farms, just to get a sense of the farming community and the challenges they were facing.

But Turkey was such a huge country, and it wasn't that easy to visit all parts of the country. In Poland, we could travel much easier by car or train. In Turkey, it really required you to fly. Plus, the western part of Turkey was much more modern. The eastern part was very different. Interestingly, farms in western Turkey were much smaller than the central and eastern part of the country. In western Turkey, the way it worked, if you had a farm, it was divided up among all the sons. After many years the size of the farms became smaller and, to be honest, not as commercially viable. In other countries it was done differently.

Q: The oldest son gets it, right.

HIGGISTON: Yes, but not in Turkey. The land was divided among all the kids, so a lot of the farms in the west were very small, like a hectare or two. Like I said it was not very commercially viable. In the east, this was land that had been reclaimed and because they put in the dams, they were able to irrigate the land so the farms were newer and were much bigger and would have a much bigger impact commercially. However, the Turks were putting dams in and inhibiting the water that normally flowed to Iraq and Syria. It became a real political problem.

I already mentioned that our posts are primarily in capital cities since our major contacts are normally with government officials to discuss policy or regulatory issues. We also worked closely with industry officials. The Turkish officials were easy to work with for the most part. I found throughout my career that foreign officials who had spent time in the United States, especially if they went to school there, were the easiest to work with primarily due to their familiarity with the U.S. food safety systems. The Turks and the Poles were probably the easiest to work with. I would say that even with the Europeans, our access was very good. We usually could get in for meetings whenever we needed which made our lives easier.

Q: Did you have the same kind of programs there as you had had in other countries, the PL-480s and so forth?

HIGGISTON: We did not have any food aid programs in Turkey, but we did have our credit program and our Cochran program. Turkey was pretty much self-sufficient although they still needed to import certain commodities from year to year. They could grow a lot, but they couldn't grow everything. So, they could grow rice, wheat, corn, and cotton. But from year to year, they couldn't always cover all their needs.

They could grow corn and wheat. They could grow cotton, but they couldn't grow enough of each of them to be self-sufficient. So, if they decided to increase wheat production, that would take away land from another commodity, and so they would have to import corn.

Q: Mm-hm.

HIGGISTON: We worked a lot with Turkish banks to facilitate our credit guarantee program. Under that program we established an overall country limit and individual bank limits. The problem in Turkey was that there were plenty of banks, but the economic situation was not great. The political situation was also an issue even before Erdogan came to power. Nonetheless, it was one of the biggest credit programs in the world. Each year however, Washington had to review the country limit to determine the size of the program.

Q: And these were programs to export U.S. food to Turkey?

HIGGISTON: Yes. Under our programs, the commodities sold or donated had to be from the United States. Unlike EXIM Bank, commodity content had to be 100% from the United States. EXIM, of course, worked with non-ag products and those could have some foreign contact. If a foreign buyer wanted to purchase a jet, you would have parts of that plane coming in from different places. Under their program, it required a certain amount of domestic content.

In Turkey's case, U.S. companies saw Turkey as an important market but because of the economic and political risk, they were not willing to sell without some government guarantee. Under our program, a Turkish bank would issue a guaranteed letter of credit to a U.S. bank. The U.S. bank would purchase "insurance" in case the Turkish bank defaulted on the letter of credit. It did not cover the entire transaction. We would cover 98 percent of the principle.

Q: Now, as ag attaché, you would be dealing only with agricultural products, not with agricultural equipment. That would be the Commerce Department or something?

HIGGISTON: Yes, we dealt exclusively with agricultural products along with wine, distilled products and processed foods. Commerce dealt with agricultural equipment like tractors and things like fertilizer. Depending on the country we would often do joint presentations. This relationship worked best when we were co-located like in Turkey and Brussels. We were both asked to visit the Turkish part of Cyprus to discuss commodities and equipment.

Q: You weren't allowed to do that, were you?

HIGGISTON: It was a special request from the government.

Q: By the Turks or by the U.S. government?

HIGGISTON: The U.S. government.

Q: Really? I thought we were not recognizing that, that it was a hands-off area.

HIGGISTON: This was an initiative to help Northern Cyprus. From what I remember, Northern Cyprus could not ship directly to the EU or the United States. They had to go through ports in Cyprus. Northern Cyprus grew citrus products as well as carob. They wanted to ship these products from Northern Cypriot ports directly to the United States rather than through the EU or Cyprus. Northern Cyprus could not compete with U.S. citrus. Cyprus did export to the United States but not enough to command an entire vessel. They would ship through Europe as part of a larger vessel with products from the EU for example.

It was interesting that there was a direct flight from Ankara to Northern Cyprus, but we were not allowed to take that flight. Instead, we had to fly from Ankara to Istanbul to

Athens and then to Cyprus. The direct flight took about an hour at most. Our itinerary took most of the day.

Then in order to get to Northern Cyprus, we had to walk across no-man's land between Cyprus and Northern Cyprus. It was very surreal because the area looked like a war zone. There were soldiers on both sides staring down at us with guns. It reminded me of going through Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin prior to reunification.

I think the reason for this initiative had to do primarily with labor. At some point, the EU allowed Northern Cyprus residents to work in Cyprus or the EU. Because the economic situation in Northern Cyprus was not great, Northern Cypriots took advantage of their ability to work in the EU and left Northern Cyprus. This was especially true for younger people. They saw more opportunity working in the EU. This was starting to result in a labor drain. Northern Cypriot companies were having a difficult time hiring people for jobs. The United States wanted to encourage economic development in Northern Cyprus in the hope to encourage people to stay in the country.

Have you ever been to Cyprus?

Q: Only to the southern part.

HIGGISTON: My recollection was that Cyprus was all hotels and tourists. But it was interesting and the differences between the two parts of Cyprus were dramatic. Northern Cyprus was much less developed. It was quite nice. The northern part is pristine. It was very beautiful. Seemed like there were a lot of small villages.

Q: So, this was kind of an exploratory mission that you took up there?

HIGGISTON: Well, our job really is not to promote sales to the United States, but we were asked to go to assess the situation.

Q: Yeah. But you were asked—

HIGGISTON: Our ambassador at the time, asked the Commercial Counselor and me to travel there even though the commercial possibilities were not great. It was clear though, that the ambassador had made up his mind and after about 2 minutes of discussion, we knew that we were headed to Cyprus, regardless.

Q: (Laughs) Oh.

HIGGISTON: We went, and I thought it was very interesting to see the differences between the parts. We spent a lot of time discussing the situation with businesses and officials, but I am not sure we accomplished a lot given that the United States was never going to be a big market for Northern Cyprus agricultural products.

We were there for a couple of days and did at least one or two seminars where we met with businesspeople and just explained what we did and so forth.

Q: Well, I'm amazed that we're even visiting it. I mean, I'm finding this fascinating because I thought it was kind of a pariah, unrecognized state, and I'm learning for the first time that they had agreements with the EU and that American embassy people were visiting there and so forth.

HIGGISTON: Yes, looking back it was amazing. I never really focused on Northern Cyprus prior to the trip. I learned a lot while I was there. My colleague from Commerce and I talked about it afterward and while the intention was good, you can't force trade. I don't know what the situation is like now. The only other noteworthy part of the trip was that they lost my luggage in Greece. I always wondered whether it was planned.

Q: Of course. I'm surprised they didn't send your counterpart from the embassy in Athens instead of you even.

HIGGISTON: Yes. That came up. Greece was covered out of Rome. So, I spoke with my counterpart and explained the situation. I think because it was an initiative to support Northern Cyprus and originated out of Ankara, there wasn't any pushback. I knew the Counselor in Rome and he was very easy to work with. I think he said, "That's fine. Don't worry about it. We don't do anything in Cyprus.".

Q: (Laughs) The kind of thing you would expect the Greeks to go completely crazy about, but all right. I mean when you think about what they did to Macedonia until it changed its name.

HIGGISTON: To be honest, we heard nothing about the trip or whether Greece raised any issues. I assume it was not a surprise for Greece given the fact that it is a hot button topic. Still, it was clear that we had to follow certain guidelines including traveling through Greece to Cyprus and not directly there. In addition, the fact that we had to walk across the border and not drive was probably dictated by protocol. Finally, we had to do a presentation to Cypriot business similar to the one we did in the north.

Q: So, it takes some logistical planning, I guess, to have cars at both sides.

HIGGISTON: State handled all the logistics for us.

Q: (Laughs) That's great.

HIGGISTON: And there was an American officer that traveled with us. I believe he was stationed in Cyprus. He was definitely not from Turkey.

Q: Well, I would presume somebody from the embassy in Cyprus would want to go along because—

HIGGISTON: Yes. I don't remember going to the embassy but most likely we did stop there.

Q: —you would have thought they wouldn't have that many opportunities to visit the north, so they would want to (indiscernible).

HIGGISTON: Absolutely.

Q: Yes.

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: Yes.

Did you have other kinds of programs, the exchange programs that you were so active in, for example, in other countries? Did you do those with the Turks as well?

HIGGISTON: Yes, we had the Cochran Fellowship program in Turkey and sent a delegation or two every year to the States. We used it mostly for commercial issues. However, we did send a group of Turkish agriculture parliamentarians to the States under State's Voluntary Visitor Program. They went to the States to look at the biotech issue. It came at a critical time because the parliament was discussing regulations on biotechnology. The folks in Public Affairs suggested using the program. We were even able to get travel funds for the group. That was the first and only time I used it. The nice part about the VVP was that we could put it together in a very short time. Our Cochran Program was done on an annual basis and money was allocated early on.

The other program we were able to use was the International Speaker Program. We approached Public Affairs, and they were able to recruit and pay for an expert to come to Turkey. Again, this was during the period that Turkey was discussing regulations for biotechnology. We were responsible for arranging meetings and speaking events. State paid for everything. That worked out quite well. I was very happy that we had an opportunity to use some other programs that we didn't normally have access to. Not sure the end result was positive, but it certainly gave us a better chance. Most USDA programs were focused on lower- or middle-income countries. Turkey was on the border, so they were not eligible for most programs.

On the other hand, our commodity associations did a lot of training and brought delegations to the States from the Turkish business community. They did a lot of technical assistance on how to use our commodities more effectively. These programs were certainly appreciated by local agricultural businesses.

Q: Was the U.S. importing food from Turkey and did you have anything to do with that if they were?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I think one of the biggest imports was hazelnuts. Interestingly, the United States grows hazelnuts in the Pacific Northwest. The Turkish industry did a lot of work promoting hazelnut consumption which benefited the U.S. industry which was much smaller. The U.S. industry did not raise any concerns with Turkish exports to the States. Since there was a sizable Turkish population in the States, Turkey exported a lot of processed products to the United States. They also shipped some cotton fabric to the United States. We exported primarily bulk commodities like corn and soybeans. Turkey's exports to the United States were more processed goods. Although it was not our job to promote Turkish exports to the United States, we would provide contacts in the States for them to use as well as guidance on regulations they would need to know about. But it was really the job of the Turkish embassy in Washington to help Turkish companies.

Q: I thought that was U.S. livestock into Turkey. Was Turkey sending livestock to the U.S. and—

HIGGISTON: I'm sorry—

Q: —the question was whether the U.S. was importing from Turkey.

HIGGISTON: In addition to hazelnuts, Turkey shipped a lot of pistachios to the United States. As I mentioned, we grew hazelnuts in the United States. The Turks put together a generic promotion program to increase consumption of hazelnuts in the United States which benefited both Turkey and the United States.

Q: So, it would promote Nutella, huh?

HIGGISTON: Actually, Nutella is produced in Switzerland, if I remember correctly. We visited the Turkish area where hazelnuts are grown. It's on the Black Sea near the border with Armenia. The geography was very similar to the Pacific Northwest. It was interesting.

Other than that, they shipped mostly processed products like candy to the United States along with textiles. Did you know that Godiva's parent company was a Turkish conglomerate? The Belgians were quick to point it out when I was in Brussels. In any case, Turkey was focusing on selling products to Central Asia, Europe, and Russia. There were a lot of Turkish supermarkets in Central Asia. Since the languages were similar, they had a relatively easy time establishing themselves there. In addition, there are a lot of golf courses in Turkey that cater to Russians. There are direct flights from Moscow to Istanbul and Adana.

Q: You mentioned the EU a couple of times. Was Turkey at this point on a path to join the EU and did that kind of dominate their thinking?

HIGGISTON: Well, it's an interesting question because the Turks really wanted to join the EU, but they were frustrated by the EU. We had good relations with the EU mission in Ankara, and they said there's no way that Turkey was going to get in. The Turks were

also sure that they would not get to join. In some ways, agriculture and labor was the main issue. There were something like 2 million farmers in Turkey, but like Poland, most were subsistence farmers. Turkey was pushing for EU funds to support all these farmers, but the EU was drawing the line on the numbers.

EU officials just did not see a path to absorb all these farmers. Plus, Turkey's economy had its issues and the EU was afraid that they would be overwhelmed by Turkish immigrants. Like in South Africa, the unemployed gravitated to the big cities looking for work. You would pass these towns springing up around Istanbul and Ankara. I think it was becoming a big issue for the government. On the other hand, the Europeans were concerned with the influx of Turkish unemployed.

Tukey was a real dichotomy. In Istanbul, there were a lot of modern industries. It also had a vibrant banking industry. A lot of folks we met with had gone to college either in the States or Europe. On the other hand, they had a large portion of the population that was uneducated and unemployed. As I mentioned before, cities in the western part of Turkey were very modern. But if you traveled to the countryside, it was a different world.

And then, of course, you had the Kurds, primarily in the east, who were causing havoc. When I was there, we had a couple of bombings. Again, not aimed at the United States, but it was always a concern being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I remember being in Istanbul and it was a couple of days, I think, after a big explosion. There was a bombing of the HBCU Bank, and it was on one of the main streets not far from the new U.S. consulate. I was in a taxi going to the consulate and we passed the HBCU building. The entire side of the building was heavily damaged.

Q: Of the consulate or of a different building?

HIGGISTON: No, no, the face of the HBCU Bank.

Q: Oh, okay, right, all right.

HIGGISTON: While I was in Istanbul the new U.S. consulate opened. The old consulate was downtown in an old business district. It was very exposed and, if I remember correctly, someone tried to shoot a hand-held rocket at the consulate. It bounced off the building and did not explode. The new consulate was up the Bosporus on a hill with a lot of land. It was certainly much more secure and safer.

Q: Well, this would have been just about the period when the Iraq war started, and we moved into Iraq and Turkey's a neighbor. Did that affect you at all?

HIGGISTON: Yes, the second Gulf War was certainly interesting. At the time there was some discussion about the United States sending troops from southern Turkey into the northern part of Iraq. There was a concern that Iraq would retaliate. The embassy in Ankara was within range of scud missiles from Iraq and the Turkish government was hesitant to allow U.S. troops to enter Iraq from Turkey. There was actually a voluntary

evacuation order for the embassy in Ankara and the consulate in Adana. Some families left, but most folks stayed. In the end, the United States did not enter Iraq from Turkey, but it forced Iraq to put troops on its northern border.

As an aside, our office was in a building right on the street with little set back. Plus, the building itself was not blast resistant. There was a gym in the basement of our building. I was down there after work and noticed that someone had cut through the support beams. If there had been an explosion, the building would probably have collapsed. They actually had to move us out for several weeks to reinforce the building.

Q: That's your office you mean?

HIGGISTON: Yes. So, our office building was right on the street across from the Iranian travel agency. There was very little setback. They wound up putting a reinforced wall in our office. We had a conference room at the front of our building. It had previously been my office. They moved us across the street in one of the old public affairs buildings and we were there for several weeks.

Q: How wonderful.

HIGGISTON: It was a nightmare. In the end we wound up being out of our building for a couple of months. The computer system did not work very well, and we were outside the walls of the compound. Luckily, if the phones worked it was fine. But I remember, they were holding a fire drill and our agency, and one other agency were in the building, and I was responsible for ensuring the evacuation of the building in an emergency.

In any case, I was responsible because it was just us and I think one other group, we were in that public affairs building, and I had to make sure everything was fine. But anyway, they were going to have a fire drill and they called me up that morning because it was raining heavily and wound up canceling the drill. However, when I looked out across the street to the embassy compound, I saw about twenty Locally employed staff (LES) standing under a tree with umbrellas. Apparently, they were not informed that the drill had been canceled. So, I had to walk over and basically said, "Go back to your offices, we're all right."

Like I said, it was a very disruptive time.

Q: Okay.

Well, Turkey was a nice place to live as well?

HIGGISTON: Turkey, however, was a great place to live. The people were nice and the food incredible. I do have a story related to Iraq that was interesting.

Q: Oh, okay, go ahead.

HIGGISTON: There was an organization to promote trade and investment between the United States and Turkey called the American Institute of Turkey, AIT. We had a good relationship with the organization. A lot of the American members were ex-military, but they wanted to branch out into other non-military commercial projects.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: I was in the office one day when my AIT contact called me. They were planning a trip for members of the organization including Brent Scowcroft who was the head of the organization. It was going to be Scowcroft's first trip to Turkey as part of AIT and they wanted to include a proposed agricultural project on his schedule. Anyway, my contact informs me that they were looking to establish a site to grow organic fruits and vegetables ostensibly to eventually sell to the European Union. I wasn't aware that Turkish farmers were doing any work in organics and that they used a lot of fertilizers that probably would preclude organic production. My contact assured me that the site had not been farmed for a number of years and that no agricultural chemicals had been used on the land.

I asked how they knew nothing had been grown there. And my AIT contact responded "Well, it's an old minefield that's located north of Iraq and Syria and nothing had been grown there for years because it's all been mined." Their plan was to bring Scowcroft to visit the site. So, I called the DCM and informed him about AIT's plans to take him to this former minefield. Without missing a beat he just said "No. That's not happening."

Q: They tried to get rid of Brent Scowcroft, huh?

HIGGISTON: I don't know if that was their intention but clearly the embassy was not going to let that happen.

So, Turkey was great. I know Melissa considered it one of her favorite posts. We traveled a lot domestically. From Ankara, we could drive north to the Black Sea coast or south to Cappadocia. Melissa was one of the CLOs and had a good working relationship with the American Research Institute of Turkey. It was a U.S.-affiliated group. Turkey had a lot of ancient ruins. Turkey had both Roman and Greek ruins throughout the country. For years there had been a lot of archaeological digs. A lot of U.S. universities would send archaeological students to Turkey for the summer to participate in these digs.

ARIT helped facilitate these digs; arranging travel, visas, and any other logistics needed for the universities. I believe Melissa sat on the board for a while. Because of ARIT's relationship with the embassy. They would arrange very interesting tours in all parts of Turkey. They would arrange everything, so you'd basically show up on a Friday evening to pick up a bus or take a flight to a site. They provided an interpreter to accompany the groups but what made it special was that you would be accompanied by an archeologist or a specialist throughout the trip. The specialists could put everything in context. It made the experience so much richer. One time we went to see where the Trojan Horse was supposedly located.

Q: In Troy?

HIGGISTON: Yes, Troy was located in an area in western Turkey. When we got to the site, it was just a big hole in the ground. But, because you were traveling with a specialist who could put the site historically in perspective, it immensely added to the experience. You could never really get that, visiting on your own. We did a number of ARIT sponsored trips during our time in Turkey and were never disappointed. They got us into a lot of sites that were not normally open to tourists. One of my favorite trips was to go to Syria. We flew down to Adana and then went by bus to Syria. We could only get a visa for 24 hours, so we drove to Aleppo and toured that city.

Q: This was before the Arab Spring and so forth?

HIGGISTON: Yes. We had to leave before the end of the day. And one problem we faced was that a lot of the military folks on the trip did not normally travel with passports. That delayed us for several hours.

Q: Really?

HIGGISTON: Yes. We were finally permitted entry after a couple of hours and drove to Aleppo, which was beautiful. It was so sad seeing what happened to Aleppo in recent years. We were there over Easter weekend and went to the Christian quarter of Aleppo and had lunch. We traveled around the city, visited the old town and the Citadel. But we were followed everywhere we went. It was a little like being back in the Soviet Union. But it was fine. On the way to Aleppo, our guide stopped the bus and there was a Roman road that cut across the modern road. The Roman Road was made with marble or stone bricks and went as far as the eye could see.

Q: Wow.

HIGGISTON: I mean it was one of those experiences that could never have been imagined. It really made being a Foreign Service officer very special.

We also went to the part of Turkey that was part of Armenia at one point. There were some old Armenian churches in the area. We did day and weekend trips with ARIT, which allowed us to see a lot of the country which we could not have seen on our own. I found it especially worthwhile because Melissa was working, and I was traveling so much for work. We really didn't have a lot of time to plan trips. Melissa would sign us up for a trip and I would just have to show up at the meeting point with my bag. It was great.

On our first trip, we flew to Van in the eastern part of Turkey. The guide brought us to a museum. We went to the second floor and there was an exhibit about the Armenian genocide. Except it portrayed the Turks as victims and not the Armenians. That was my first introduction to Turkish politics.

Q: Was Melissa able to work while you were there?

HIGGISTON: Yes. We were very lucky. Melissa was able to work at all our posts. Initially, she worked in the CLO office in Warsaw, Ankara, and Brussels. In Brussels, she moved over to Human Resources. When we moved to Pretoria, she was able to step directly into a position in HR. Melissa always could find something to do but it was nice for her to work.

Q: Okay. Well, let's take a coffee break and then we can turn to Central Asia?

HIGGISTON: I got to tell you one story about Turkey having to do with avian influenza.

Q: With which?

HIGGISTON: Avian influenza.

Q: Okay, go ahead.

HIGGISTON: We recently had one of the biggest outbreaks of Avian Influenza in the States recently. As a result, they had to cull about 30 million turkeys recently. Avian Influenza is not new, but it is quite virulent for birds. It is normally spread by wild bird populations, and they can infect domesticated birds. The fear among scientists was that the disease would "jump" from animals to humans. If that happened, it could be catastrophic.

While I was in Turkey, there was a big outbreak of AI in southeast Asia. It appeared to be a new virulent strain and it was moving west through Central Asia and Russia. Eventually, scientists felt it would soon reach Turkey. Turkey has a big commercial poultry industry, primarily in the western part of Turkey, south of Istanbul. Western Turkey was on the migratory path, so it was just a matter of time that it reached Turkey.

I was discussing the issue with one of my specialists and we decided to drive out and visit with the local officials and industry representatives. We had meetings with the local government, the veterinarian folks. We visited a number of farms although only the offices and not the facilities with birds. After a few meetings it was clear that the industry had a good handle on the situation. They had a plan in case there was an outbreak in the region including quarantining the farms to ensure that the disease was not spread. The industry was composed of large and small facilities and the larger facilities were helping the smaller ones.

Unfortunately, the local government officials did not seem to have a real grip on the situation. Basically, they indicated that the government had regulations in place that they felt would protect the industry. This was typical of a lot of less developed countries.

On the way back to Ankara we heard that there was an outbreak in the region we had just visited. We had a list of good contacts and began contacting them about the situation.

There was a large sanctuary near the commercial farms. Apparently, some wild birds had infected some of the commercial facilities. However, because the industry had a plan in place, there was no major outbreak. It really became a non-event.

However, around December there was a second outbreak but this one was in the eastern part of the country. The east is primarily a Kurdish area. While in the west the facilities were primarily large commercial facilities, in the east you had small family farms or simply households with chickens. There were several deaths in the area, mostly children. It made sense because children were often given responsibility for taking care of the family flocks. Moreover, because of the harsh winters, the birds were often brought into the households, which made it a perfect area to spread the disease.

It was a major event and had the concern of the entire U.S. government. The U.S. military were particularly concerned given the bases in Turkey and the Middle East. They arranged for a plane to take a group out to the east. We had several agencies involved including CDC, AID, and APHIS.

Local officials wanted to demonstrate that they had the situation under control. We visited one city where there was a mobile incinerator where folks were supposed to bring their birds. So, we arrive at the location of the mobile incinerator, with technicians in Hazmat suits. But the kids bringing the chickens to the incinerator were carrying them without any protection. The team had wanted to disseminate handouts giving locals instructions on how to handle the poultry and the dangers of AI. However, the problem was that we wanted to disseminate the information in Kurdish since that was the dominant language in the area. But the government refused to allow it. In the end we had to develop pictograms which showed folks how to handle poultry.

The other interesting part of the story occurred when we returned to Ankara. We went in to brief the Turkish officials. Our office had close contacts with the Ministry of Agriculture, of course, but also the Ministry of Health since we often discussed food safety issues with them. The AI issue was partly in Ag and partly in Health. The officials in both ministries had plans but unfortunately, they did not think it was important to share information between the two ministries. The ag folks were focused on the animal side and the health folks on human impact, but they did not see any need to share information. I'm not saying we have a perfect system and I've been in situations where agencies did not willingly share information, but the AI issue was so important, people were interested in all aspects of the issue.

Q: Wow.

Okay. Let's break for a couple of minutes and come back again.

HIGGISTON: Okay.

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Q: Today is April 22, 2022. This is Peter Eicher continuing with the second part of today's interview with Jim Higgiston.

Jim, do you have any more Turkey issues or stories you want to raise before we move to Central Asia?

HIGGISTON: I can't think of anything else. I think I touched on the major points.

Q: Okay.

Well, you talked about having to spend as much as 50 percent of your time in Central Asia. I know how difficult it is to travel there. But what kind of issues were you facing? Did you feel like you were back in the Soviet Union?

HIGGISTON: Just to clarify, I spent 50 percent of my time traveling, but not just in Central Asia. I also traveled a lot in Turkey.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were our primary focus, particularly with our two local staff. I had traveled to both of those countries while I was stationed in Moscow and had done some work in the other countries. It was interesting how the countries had changed. The private sector had made some great strides in the interim. It was clear that Kazakhstan was producing a lot more wheat and other agricultural products than they had in the past. The same goes for Kyrgyzstan. Over 10 years, they had transitioned from a food aid recipient to an exporter of wheat.

You still had to deal with Soviet era bureaucrats who were pretty conservative and not very forthcoming with information. I visited Turkmenistan to meet with officials to discuss the Avian Influenza situation since at the time it was starting to spread in southeast Asia and would inevitably hit Turkmenistan. I met with the chief veterinarian and asked whether he was concerned about the disease. His response was similar to the one I received from Turkish officials. He simply replied that, "We're not going to have a problem because we have a regulation against it, so it can't happen here."

Q: Was that the time in Turkmenistan, did they already have the big gold statue of Turkmenbashi that rotated to be in front of the sun and his picture everywhere as if it were North Korea?

HIGGISTON: Yes, they did have the statue in the center of the capital. They rebuilt the capital to the point that I did not recognize it from previous visits. In Kazakhstan, they built a new capital in the north dedicated to Nazarbayev who was the long-time leader of the country. The new capital, Almaty, had a big tower in the center of town with a globe at the top and Nazarbayev's hand on the globe.

It was interesting that we were able to travel pretty freely around the country. We never had to do diplomatic notes when we traveled internally. But we had a lot of freedom to travel. The embassies helped us out when we traveled to the countries. We weren't

necessarily getting a lot of information from these governments, but it was still worth the travel.

Q: Actually, pretty isolated countries from the U.S. perspective. Were they actually importing or exporting anything to the United States?

HIGGISTON: No. The Central Asian countries were not really trading partners. They were however major producers of cotton and wheat. Both countries were our competitors, and their exports had an impact on the international markets. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were major cotton producers while Kazakhstan was a major wheat exporter.

Q: Did you get down to the Aral Sea or some of what's left of the Aral Sea? Some of the cotton fields are down that direction, aren't they?

HIGGISTON: We didn't get there because there wasn't that much there. I think the remote sensing folks were following it using satellites, but it wasn't really an issue that we followed. I am sure the embassies were closely watching the situation.

Q: More to gather information than to actually have programs? There was no PL-480 or whatever going on in these countries?

HIGGISTON: That's an interesting question. We had some old food aid programs from the mid-1990s. At the time I returned in 2002, we still had some local proceeds and projects that still needed oversight.

Unlike AID, we did not have a lot of people on the ground in these countries to do detailed oversight. However, the officials were pretty diligent and did give us some good information and brought us to sites that benefited from the assistance. For some of the government programs like PL-480, we sat on committees that had to approve projects submitted to the government to use the proceeds from the sales of the commodities. There was one NGO that was working to upgrade a facility treating people with epilepsy. Soviet institutions were pretty miserable. Basically, in Soviet times they would send patients to institutions and never leave.

This NGO was looking to upgrade the facility and a school associated with it. They were also setting up a clinic. The place was run down and had dirt floors. I visited twice and the second time they had really refurbished the facility. It made a real impression on me. It was clear that we had a positive impact on the situation. It was something you didn't always see.

I was on one of my visits to Uzbekistan and they arranged a meeting of the committee to determine the use of proceeds. There was a fair amount of funds from the sale of the commodities and the government proposed a number of projects that more or less fit into the development plan we had all agreed to when the original agreement was negotiated. But we made a pitch to proceed some funds to this project for the rehabilitation of the

school and facility. The officials didn't have any objections to the proposal, and it passed easily.

When we visited the facility about a year later, the NGO had completely refurbished the facility. They had classrooms and dorms as well as a kitchen and a clinic. You don't often get to see the impact you might have on a situation.

We had a project in Turkmenistan that also illustrated the challenges of food aid programs like getting buy-in from the local populations. The project's goal was to improve the irrigation system in a rural area. The system was quite simple with little mechanization. Water from a stream could be diverted to vegetable and fruit fields using a "canal" system with metal plates used to divert the water and also prevent flooding. It was an old system that had become overgrown with weeds and grasses. Because of this, farmers had to carry water across a road to irrigate their fields.

Working through an NGO, we provided funds to pay someone to clear out the weeds and grasses regularly that allowed the farmers to effectively use the irrigation system. About a year after that, we met with the NGO. This was towards the end of my tour. In any case, the NGO reported that the funds had run out and that the farmers were not willing to pay someone to clear out the weeds and grasses. As a result, the irrigation system was unusable, and they reverted to carrying the water across the road. The NGO had created a local association that would keep the system clear, but farmers would have to contribute some nominal amount of money. Unfortunately, they were unwilling to fund the project despite the benefits.

They felt it was the job of the government to do this work and that the farmers should not have to pay for it. And they could not understand the connection between the two. I had a similar experience in Poland. I don't know whether it was a remnant of communist times or not. But it was clear that without buy-in from the local population, projects like these would not last.

Food Aid is a tricky business. Too much assistance and you could have a negative impact but there are times when the funding is invaluable. Since USDA did not have the staffing on the ground to do checks on a regular basis, I was glad that we had limited funds. We just simply could not do the oversight needed. I would say this, our Title I programs required countries to pay us back over 15 – 30 years, but at least it was not simply a grant. Working with NGOs was also easier because they did have people on the ground who could give us reports on the situation.

Q: Yeah.

HIGGISTON: And I think—

Q: Communist legacy, huh?

HIGGISTON: That was my thought. On one level they saw the need but on another, they did not think it was their responsibility.

Just to digress a bit. The first time I visited Central Asia was during my tour in Moscow in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I traveled with a friend from the embassy to Uzbekistan. We used to have a saying in Moscow, "There are a lot of places to visit, but there aren't many places that you wanted to go back to." Central Asia was one of those places you wanted to go back to.

As you are aware, Uzbekistan is along the ancient Silk Road. There were places In Uzbekistan that were unbelievable. Mosques and Madrassas that were decorated in blue tiles. It was also one of the few places where people were not used to seeing foreigners, especially Americans. Both times I went there while in Moscow, we met folks at the market, and they invited us back to their house. Turns out, both times there was a wedding. We were guests and sat on the dais with the bride and groom. It was very memorable. At the time, we visited Samarkand and Bukhara which were ancient trade hubs. Like I said, it was truly amazing. It was one of the most unusual places that I got to visit.

While serving in Turkey, I had two Secretaries of Agriculture travel to Central Asia. The first was Secretary Veneman, who traveled to Uzbekistan. If I remember correctly, the Administration was asking cabinet members to travel to Afghanistan to show support for our efforts there. At the time, the United States had a base in southern Uzbekistan and my area director in Washington suggested that she take the route through Uzbekistan to Kabul. The delegation flew through Europe and on to Uzbekistan. The natural route would have been through Tashkent, the capital. Instead, however, my area director suggested that they fly through Samarkand. Initially, my reaction was, "That's great, except there's nothing in Samarkand except historical sites." However, as we started planning, I received a call and was informed that, "The Secretary has agreed to travel through Samarkand, but she doesn't want to visit any tourist sites." I assumed it would not look good if she was shown visiting tourist sites." She was not in country that long.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: And I go back to Washington and ask, "What I was supposed to do?" So, I had to arrange for some government officials to travel from Tashkent to Samarkand for a meeting. Then I arranged to bus some of our Cochran Fellowship participants from Tashkent to Samarkand in order for the Secretary to give the participants certificates. The bus ride was a couple of hours.

The second thing that occurred was when the Secretary's flight arrived, and she debarked from the plane, and I noticed that she was on crutches. The thing about Samarkand is that it is an older city. The streets and in some cases the sidewalks were made of cobblestone and not particularly well maintained. It was certainly not the place for someone on crutches. So, as she is getting off the plane, I turn to my area director from Washington and I go, "What's this with the crutches? You served here and you know the place is all

cobblestones. The Secretary is not going to be able to maneuver on the streets." Anyway, his response was simply, "Oh, yeah, it happened a couple of weeks ago. She twisted her ankle when she was out on the farm or somewhere." I said, "That was a piece of information that I would have liked to have known ahead of time."

So, anyway, we put together a program as best we could, but I was determined to get her to some of the historic sites. This was really a once in a lifetime experience. So, I tried to arrange for some meetings or visits with officials that occurred near sites in Samarkand. There was a farmers' market that we visited downtown, and I explained how the agriculture system worked. Again, if I remember correctly, Secretary Veneman had never been to the former Soviet Union and certainly never to Central Asia. In any case, I chose that particular market because it was right next to an ancient mosque. The Uzbeks had supplied an interpreter who also knew about the sites and so the Secretary got a good overview of both the economy and historical buildings. For the Cochran event, we were able to arrange the ceremony in one of the most famous areas. There were two madrasas that faced each other on this square and we had her deliver some short remarks and give the participants their certificates. I felt good that the delegation had a chance to visit some of the most famous parts of the city.

Q: Yeah, why go there if you can't see what there is to see? My goodness.

HIGGISTON: Well, that was the reason my area director wanted to bring her there instead of Tashkent, which was hit by an earthquake in the1960s, I believe, and was pretty much rebuilt in the Soviet style. Tashkent would have been easier for meeting government officials. However, there was another delegation from State Department or the military that was going to Tashkent, so the embassy had a lot going on. We didn't really have a lot of people to bring with us to Samarkand for logistical support. But it worked out in the end.

In these cases, I had to step up and take care of a lot of details because there was no one else around. It's funny, I've had officers complain about having to carry luggage and take care of other things. On that trip, I had to do luggage call at 4 am so that the delegation could get to the airport for their flight to Kabul.

Q: Yeah, I guess it's kind of unusual, I suppose to have a cabinet secretary visit those places at those times as well.

HIGGISTON: Well, I also had another secretary, Mike Johannes visit Kazakhstan on the way to Iraq. FAS would put together trade missions led by a USDA official. Normally, it would be led by the Under Secretary or Administrator. There were, however, times when the Secretary led the delegation. This was one of those times. For the trade mission, I believe there were about 20 representatives from the business community along with the Under Secretary and FAS Administrator. Luckily, I was not involved in arranging the mission. Our office arranged official meetings and provided some business contacts for the trade mission.

To complicate issues, the trade mission traveled to both Almaty and Astana. Almaty was the old capital. Nazarbayev built an entire city in the north. At the time I served in Moscow, it was known as Tselinograd. It was in the northern part of the country in a wheat growing area. They build this entirely new city adjacent to the older one. Because we were going to two cities, we had to make arrangements in each city. It was double the fun.

The goal of the trade missions was to put U.S. companies in contact with local companies that might be interested in buying U.S. products. Although there were a lot more private enterprises in Kazakhstan, they still needed hard currency to make their purchases. The lack of foreign currency was the real challenge.

While the private sector meetings were going on, I accompanied the Secretary and his team to see farms up north. I think the Secretary enjoyed himself, but the Kazakhs dressed him in local garb and had him try roast horse meat, which is a real delicacy in Kazakhstan.

So, after that part of the trip, the Secretary and others in the delegation were scheduled to go to Incirlik, the U.S. military base in southern Turkey and then onto Iraq. USDA had some technical assistance programs in Iraq at the time. I went back on a separate flight to Istanbul and then onto Incirlik to meet the delegation. It was a long trip. I am not sure the Secretary actually recognized me in Incirlik.

I am not sure any contracts were signed but there was some interest on both sides. It was interesting how companies reacted when they came to the Soviet Union or former Soviet Union. I've seen American companies sign contracts that they should never have signed. I think a lot of companies saw a demand for products and an untapped market. The problem, of course, was that the country was very corrupt and these companies, like I said, could not get their hands on hard currency. A lot of foreign companies got stuck with lots of rubles, unable to convert them to dollars or some other hard currency.

Q: Yes, you talked about that with a couple other posts. Maybe it was Moscow.

HIGGISTON: Yes. That happened while I was in Moscow.

Q: Yeah.

HIGGISTON: We always advised companies to come to the embassy and talk with us before they signed a contract. It was obviously their decision, but the companies that usually wound up at our office had issues. I think the successful companies kept it quiet because they didn't want their competitors taking part of the market.

And it wasn't limited to the former Soviet Union. We had a company come to our office in Warsaw. They were in the meat industry, exclusively pork. Poland, of course, was a big producer of pork and ham. So, they were looking at investing in the meat industry, in the hope I guess, of positioning themselves to sell to the Europeans. We didn't hear from

them for a while and then read an article in the local papers that they had purchased an old parastatal. I believe they thought they could buy this entity and then fix it.

Unfortunately, they didn't realize that they also were buying all the entities associated with the company including a number of small farms and other facilities that were part of the overall company. They were now responsible for all the laborers. They couldn't simply fire everyone. It was a nightmare.

They came in to see us and said, "We're not sure how this is going to work, this is a huge amount of money." There wasn't too much we could do at that point. Interestingly, they repeated the same mistake in Bulgaria.

Other than reporting on commodities like cotton and wheat, there wasn't a lot going on. The visits were a good diversion. Interestingly, I never had a Secretarial visit to Turkey, but I had two to Central Asia.

Q: Okay. Well, good. Kind of exciting times.

Now, you were there from 2002 to 2006, so you apparently agreed to do the extra year that you talked about before?

HIGGISTON: Yes. We hated to move, so we stayed in each post for four years.

Q: And about the last year there, you must have been thinking about what comes next.

HIGGISTON: Yes. So, 2006 was an interesting year. We talked about the structure of FAS. In 2005 and 2006 folks in Washington made the decision to reorganize the agency. And it was a major reorganization. At the time, returning attachés would have to bid on Washington positions. However, they suspended the process that year because most folks did not fully understand the new structure. Plus, there were issues with the unions that made it easier to suspend the process. So, I returned to Washington in the summer of 2006.

Q: Now, hang on just a second there. So, there was no open assignments process? Had you even decided you wanted to go back to Washington after that?

HIGGISTON: Normally, we would come back after two tours and I always felt it was good to come back to Washington, to get a better sense of the agency. The other issue and probably the most important was that Melissa and I were dealing with family issues, and it was easier to be in Washington.

Q: Yeah, okay. So, maybe before we get into the Washington establishment, it's already just about noon, so why don't we leave that for next time rather than getting mixed up into it?

HIGGISTON: Yes. Good idea because there was a lot going on.

Q: Okay. So, you don't have to repeat yourself.

So, I will pause this for now, and we'll take up with Washington next time, okay?

HIGGISTON: Okay. No problem.

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Q: Today is May 5, 2022. This is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Jim Higgiston.

Good morning, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Good morning, Peter.

Q: When we left off at the end of the last session it was July 2009, and you were just about to leave Turkey for a new assignment in Washington. Maybe you can tell us exactly what the assignment was and about the transfer.

HIGGISTON: So, I returned to Washington in 2006.

Q: Two thousand six?

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: Okay, right.

HIGGISTON: So, I was in—we were in Turkey from 2002 to 2006.

Q: Okay, I'm sorry. Yeah, yeah.

HIGGISTON: In 2001, we left Poland to do a year of language training. I think we talked a little bit about being in FSI when 9/11 happened.

Q: Right, right. I just have a gap on your CV here, which ends Turkey in 2006 but starts Washington in 2009, so I'm missing three years. I mean, the mystery here is you can tell us about—

HIGGISTON: Yes. That's right. In 2006 I came back to the States from Ankara. The agency underwent its first major reorganization in quite a while. The agency had historically been composed of commodity divisions which dealt with trade data and marketing. The agency decided to eliminate all the commodity divisions. That work was put under a single division that did analysis of trade for all commodities. The marketing responsibilities were separated out. USDA commodity cooperators, like the U.S. Wheat Associates were traditionally handled by the commodity divisions. They were now

handled in a separate division. Trade Policy was in one division and scientific issues like biotechnology were handled in another division.

It was never clear to me why they decided to carry out the reorganization although there were plenty of rumors. The most popular rumor was that FAS wanted to cut the ties between our Cooperators, like U.S. Wheat and the Feed Grains Council and the government officials in FAS. If you remember, these Cooperators were created by Congress in 1953 or 1954. Their role was to promote the use of U.S. commodities. They would often bring in specialists and put on seminars. For example, the wheat folks would show folks the best method for using wheat in bread making. The feed grains folks would help with the formulation of feed using U.S. corn. In my posts we had people from livestock, poultry and cotton do projects. But to underscore, they were not there to sell products only to provide technical assistance. Under the old system, the commodity cooperators received approvals and funds from FAS. Perhaps, the commodity cooperators did not want FAS to have as much input but that's only conjecture.

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Q: This is Peter Eicher resuming the May 5, 2022, interview with Jim Higgiston that was paused inadvertently.

Go ahead, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Each year these non-profit cooperators organizations would submit a marketing plan for the coming year for countries around the world. The plans were jointly financed by FAS and domestic commodity groups and U.S. farmers. The marketing plans would be sent to the posts for comment and then to Washington for final approval.

Prior to 2006, each FAS commodity division had a section dealing with the cooperators. They would review the new marketing plans, raise any concerns, and visit their projects overseas. The posts were fairly heavily involved with the process. But in 2006 that changed. I think the biggest change was the fact that there were fewer analysts working with the cooperators. Time and time again after 2006, the cooperators would complain that they didn't understand the new structure and that they didn't know where to go to ask questions.

Traditionally, FAS did not have desk officers like the State Department. We had Area Directors in the Foreign Agricultural Affairs Division, but they focused on budget and management issues and not substance. These area directors were required to put together briefing papers for the agency. They had a dual function that did not seem to work as well. In 2006, I was brought back to be the Deputy Director for the Office of County and Regional Affairs (OCRA). We were divided geographically, and I was assigned to the Asian Division.

The desk officers prepared briefing papers for meetings or on topics affecting trade with those countries. We also prepared briefing books for any trips or conferences leadership was attending. One of the problems, however, was the fact that we were dependent on other FAS divisions to provide information on various issues. Now, we were dependent, that organization was dependent on getting input from everybody else in the agency. However, they were under no orders to help us. The other program areas did not want to share information and it seemed especially in the beginning that our desk officers were always fighting to get the necessary information.

I believe in the late 1990s, GAO issued a report indicating that FAS did not have a cohesive plan for the future. They felt that we were reacting to issues and not being proactive in identifying new issues.

The overseas posts, however, were not really affected by the changes. They still collected data from countries, worked with cooperators and helped U.S. companies become familiar with the markets. The big issue was the reduction in the number of people doing commodity analysis in Washington and, as a result, diminished our ability to train new offices going overseas. This was one of the main issues I dealt with when I became the Deputy Administrator for overseas operations.

Unlike previous years, when I got back in 2006. I was assigned to OCRA. Normally we would bid on positions. They did allow folks in Washington to move to different divisions after a short period of time, but it was pretty hectic. We were short staffed, and Washington did not prepare logistically for the changes. I got a call from my future boss, and he said, "We want you to come to work with us. You'll be working on stuff having to do with Asia." And that was it.

HIGGISTON: Yes, Our area was called OCRA.

Q: OCRA. Okay, that's a good agricultural name for it. (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: We basically worked for the Office of the Administrator because we were the ones that were putting together the briefing books and briefing papers for all the meetings and trips. Prior to that, it had been handled in what was known as Foreign Agricultural Affairs Division (FAA). And as I mentioned, we had no control over the other divisions. Moreover, we were responsible for all countries and not just the major ones like Russia or China. Initially, when I got back to DC, I was in FAA for a month or two just before they initiated the reorganization. I was responsible for all countries in Europe. The papers were incredibly long, often over 25 pages, because we simply collected papers and put them into a package for the principle. They were awful. There didn't seem to be quality control and they were always late. I would say, most papers did not reach the principle until an hour or so before the meeting.

Q: My goodness. The administrators and secretaries were not reading a twenty-six-page briefing thing for a meeting, I presume.

HIGGISTON: I doubt it but there was no one pushing to change the system. The creation of OCRA desk officers changed that to some extent. Desk officers in OCRA had fewer countries to cover and were not burdened with the administrative work that area directors in FAA had to deal with. One of the first things we had to deal with was the length of briefing papers. A friend of mine, Roberto Curtis, and I created a new format for the papers which reduced them to one page. It was up to the desk officers to consolidate the information from posts and other divisions and focus only on the highlights. We took the proposal to our front office and convinced them that this new format would be much better for the principles. We also sold it on the premise that the OCRA Country Desk Officers, s country experts, would be in the meetings to take note and provide additional information as needed.

I'm still not sure how we were able to convince them that we could distill information down to one page. In the end it worked out for the most part. Gone were the days of 26-page papers. Over the years, the papers were allowed to have additional material, but it was still manageable. However, we were not as successful in getting the Desk Officers in meetings. Believe it or not, most of the political appointees did not want us in the room during the meetings. So, we did not always know if there was some follow-up. During my time in FAS, we were always required to do hard copies of papers and send for clearances. Folks were very reluctant to clear papers online. That would have saved an awful lot of time. The Secretary did start using a tablet for work and we were allowed to send briefing books electronically. However, the folks staffing the Secretary still wanted physical books, which defeated the purpose.

However, the major issue we dealt with was the physical movement of people once the reorganization was put in motion. In the 1990s, the civil service union came into force and the relationship between the civil service and the foreign service was very bad. The civil service always felt that Foreign Service Officers got the best positions and had a more prominent role in the agency. I sat through a number of negotiations with the civil service that were very unpleasant. AT the time of the reorganization, the civil service union wanted to negotiate the physical space in the offices. So, if there were four people in an office, the civil servants could negotiate with management over the placement of desks in the office and which employee could sit in a specific desk. Instead of trying to negotiate with the union ahead of time, FAS leadership decided to put a hiring freeze on the agency, which in term would limit the scope of the negotiations.

That was a good plan except for the fact that 2006 was the start of our budget problems. Not sure if it was due to the Administration and Congress not agreeing or a general reduction in budgets. Regardless, there was a hiring freeze in 2006. We were down a lot of people, not enough to staff the new structure. It was another two years before we were able to hire new people.

Q: Oh, wow.

HIGGISTON: As a result, I had to cover seven or eight small countries in addition to my role as deputy director. Since they were minor countries, it was not a major lift, but I did

wind up covering Afghanistan for a while. We were not heavily involved in Afghanistan at the time, but I was called on several times to write background papers on the country. Luckily, we had been able to get our front office to agree to a one-page format for the papers.

They pulled the trigger on the reorg in November, but folks had to stay in place for several months. I had staff on different floors and different hallways. It was certainly a challenge. The other effect of the hiring freeze was on intake into the Foreign Service. Normally we were bringing in 15 – 20 new people a year. That stopped, of course, during the hiring freeze and it dramatically reduced the numbers of eligible employees taking the test. This was one of the major issues I worked on when I became deputy administrator for overseas operations and i.e. our Foreign Service.

It was interesting how our leadership handled the reorganization and how responsibilities for different tasks were handled. It was easy when it came to major responsibilities. However, there were a lot of minor issues that had not been decided. So, issues dealing with free trade agreements and multilateral agreements fell easily to the Office of Negotiations and Agreements. It wasn't clear who was going to be dealing with more informal meetings like TIFAS and CCAs. The front office left it up to the new divisions to negotiate the responsibilities. There was a lot of horse trading going on. Some issues were less important but required a lot of resources. None of the new divisions wanted to be saddled with those issues. In the end, for better or worse, it all turned out, but it was chaotic for quite a while.

Q: Sounds like it would have been. Just organizationally, you were the, you said, the area director. What would that mean? How many desk officers and other people would you have under you?

HIGGISTON: OCRA was divided geographically. Our section dealt with north and south Asia. On paper we had one of the larger sections in the division with at least 15 desk officers. Of course, it took several years to staff up. Our section also covered international organizations like the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Since APEC was non-binding, our office was responsible for it.

A woman that actually was one of my first supervisors, was the division director for North and South Asia. I was her deputy. At that point, I was an FO-1. Most of my desk officers were responsible for several countries except for the larger countries like Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, and India.

Q: So, sometime along the way you switched from Europe to Asia?

HIGGISTON: When I first got back, I was assigned to the Foreign Agricultural Affairs section which dealt with primarily administrative issues and our overseas posts. At that point I was responsible for Europe. Once the reorganization took place, I was assigned to North and South Asia under the new organization.

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Q: Today is May 5, 2022. This is Peter Eicher continuing today's interview with Jim Higgiston after Zoom unceremoniously terminated our earlier recording.

Go ahead, Jim. You said when you first got back.

HIGGISTON: As I mentioned previously, our leadership decided that the reorganization would occur in November. So, when I returned the old organization was still in place. In addition to management issues, FAA was responsible for briefing papers for meetings. At that point I was dealing with European countries. In November, we all moved to our new positions. I transitioned to be the deputy director of OCRA for North and South Asia.

Q: Okay, that's fine.

Now, was this reorganization politically inspired somehow, or was just administrative? This would have been during Bush II, I guess, huh?

HIGGISTON: Honestly, it was clear to me whether it was politically motivated. There were rumors that the leadership wanted to have a little more arm's length relationship with our commodity groups. Maybe they wanted to have the commodity groups have greater autonomy, but interestingly, it was clear that our commodity groups were not happy with the new organization.

The most important resource in FAS was our overseas offices. Their work did not really change. They were still doing commodity reporting, working on marketing events with cooperators and working with U.S. exporters. The major change was really in the Washington structure. In any case, the decision had been made and we just had to work with it.

Q: Okay, you had basically talked about the organization and what shifted over to the desk officers and what constituted Asia.

HIGGISTON: As I mentioned, I was deputy director, and the director was my friend. I had worked with her in 1984. She was actually my supervisor at the time. In addition to dealing with the new structure we realized that our filing system had to change. This was the first time we had shared drives on the computer. In the past every individual maintained their own filing system on the computer.

Perhaps it was due to the fact that we were short staffed, but we needed flexibility in filing papers and information. I think it was the head of OCRA that had us develop a nomenclature for our shared drives. We felt it was essential that there was a structure to our filing since we no longer kept paper files. Unfortunately, people would save things in different places and name files differently. No one else would know where the files could be found. So OCRA as a group, spent weeks putting together nomenclature for our shared drives. That included how we named files and documents. Each country had the same

files and would name documents in the same way. So, if I needed to find a document from the year before, I could easily locate it regardless of whether it concerned China or Ecuador.

No other section of FAS did that. It really was a life-changer because you had a lot of people moving around and you needed to be able to put your hands on specific documents. We spent several weeks just going over how we were going to name our electronic files and our documents. Basically, if I worked in South Asia, and this happened on several occasions, and I needed to get something from the Western Hemisphere division because there was some meeting that covered the same issue, I could go into their files and find the document. It made our lives so much easier and saved us so much time. As I said, no other program areas had the same system. When I moved to a different part of the agency, there was no filing system.

The position of desk officer was quite unique. They had the main contacts with our overseas posts, and they followed the overall situation in the country. I mentioned previously that we redid the format for our briefing papers which resulted in much shorter papers. So, our desk officers had to determine what the most important issues were at the time and which issues we wanted our principles to raise. This would sometimes cause problems because the other program areas each wanted their issues to be raised. Of course, time would not permit every issue to be raised. Our OCRA desk officers assumed that responsibility.

I mentioned that not all responsibilities had been decided for the new organization. As a result, there was often disagreement between program areas on who would be responsible. This was a real concern especially when a new issue came up. The front office left it up to us to figure it out. It seemed to some of us that our mid-level supervisors were the ones dealing with this uncertainty. A friend of mine, Aileen Mannix, and I were discussing this issue and put together a working group made up of these supervisors as a way to share information and issues they were having. I think the front office was a bit concerned about the group, although I never understood the reason. The group met weekly for about 2 years. We put together a presentation for the Administrator which outlined the discussions and possible ways to improve the situation. A lot focused on better communications. It was not rocket science nor were there any great revelations, but I do believe it gave folks an outlet. It showed how folks at all levels could contribute and the impact individuals could have on a situation.

The importance of communication and participation led me to volunteer on the testing process intake into the Foreign Service. At the time I joined the Foreign Service, candidates had to be in FAS for at least 2 years. This would give new officers a good understanding of not only the way FAS functioned, but the role of all USDA agencies. FAS is the only USDA agency that is 100 percent focused on international operations. USDA was for all intent and purposes a domestic agency. However, it was interesting to

learn that just about all USDA agencies had an international component whether it was food and animal safety, extension, or forestry. We always would have USDA personnel traveling overseas for one reason or another. As a new officer, it was important to know the role of these agencies and, perhaps even more importantly, know where to go for information to respond to host government queries. We often received questions regarding crop insurance or dairy programs. As a result, being in Washington to learn about these agencies was critical to our work.

I knew the process was critical and I decided to participate in the testing process. People had a good sense of "hallway reputations" for new candidates which meant that the oral test was less critical since folks had a sense of the candidate's abilities. However, at the same time, I mentioned that due to budget issues, general intake into FAS was limited and thus the "pool" of possible candidates shrunk immensely. As a result, unfortunately, in order to keep up with departures, I felt we brought some people into the agency that were not ready or did not have the qualifications needed to represent the department.

There was an application process as part of the test along with recommendations from your supervisor. Once their application was approved, the candidates had to take an oral test. The oral test process included 3 FAS FSOs and a representative from the State Department on the panel.

A Senior Foreign Service member would chair the panel. The panel members had a list of various questions that the panel members could pick but the questions could change depending on the panel. But there was no rhyme and reason to it. And you could ask one person one question but ask another candidate a different set of questions. My role initially was to observe the process but not actively participate. Basically, I was to keep my mouth shut.

I observed two panels. The first panel went fine. The candidate did fairly well, but he froze up on a couple of questions. The panel encouraged him to get more experience and take the test again the following year. Given that officers might be at post by themselves and face a similar situation. Within the first two weeks of arriving in Moscow, I found myself attending country team with the ambassador. And so, you really must know your portfolio, and you have to be able to deal with questions. When the ambassador asks "Well, what about this?" You have to be able to give him a reasonable response, because if you can't, they're not going to be happy with you or your boss. And your boss will not be happy with you.

I sat on a second panel in the afternoon. The second person was married to a State FSO and had been teleworking for the better part of 4 years working on food aid and technical assistance programs. While this was an important part of the FAS work, our major work focuses on commodity and trade analysis, trade policy, and marketing. Moreover, not all our posts were involved in food or technical assistance programs. As the panel began, I was thinking to myself that, given the candidates background, I would ask questions on trade policy or commodity analysis. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the FAS panel member asked a question on food aid, which the candidate had worked on for several years.

Having worked on food aid programs for several years, I knew the answer to the question. The response however was wrong. In my opinion, the person did not have the proper background. However, to my surprise, the panel voted to bring her into the Foreign Service.

Even though I was not to comment, I could not help myself. I pointed out various issues I had with the candidate included the fact that the candidate did not show a good understanding of the agency and its role overseas. Moreover, FAS had just gone through a major reorganization. The candidate had been overseas during this process and had no concept of the new structure. It was hard enough for people in Washington to understand, let alone a person who had been overseas. I made my case, but the panel member simply said he didn't know the answer to the question anyway.

At that point, I knew the process had to change and we had to figure out a better way to do the testing. When I took over as Deputy Administrator it was one of the issues I felt needed to be addressed. Two FSO took the lead on that in putting together a new test working with the State Department folks, the examination folks, on how we would change the test. One of the more important parts was to have each panel work from the same questions and working with State, to be able to determine whether the response was adequate. I felt it was a huge step forward. The test has evolved even more over the years and includes group exercises. I had the opportunity to observe the new testing process when I returned to Washington as acting Administrator. I was impressed by how it had changed.

So, that was one of the things that we worked on in order, I think, to kind of weed out some of these—because the problem was, as I mentioned, we weren't hiring people, which meant that instead of looking at a group of fifteen, you were looking at a group of six. And there was a tendency to say, Well, we need to bring people in, therefore, we're just going to push people in, which in the end hurt us because we had people that were not ready for it and were not—did not have the background or the ability to deal with that stuff overseas, and you said that was going to hurt the agency. That was just not something that was going to be helpful.

So, we put that in motion at that point. And like I said, I had two friends that basically worked on it. And there's a point I just want to make, that I kind of—when I got back to DC, and even before then, I tried to get across to folks that even though you have a good program, even though it's worked for a number of years, it's always good to evaluate, you know, reevaluate how it works. So, when I was working in the food aid side, we redid the way we allocated our credit programs. So, it's worth just going back to that for a second.

Q: Can you put that in context for me, the assistant deputy administrator for—what does that mean?

HIGGISTON: Okay.

Q: Start at the top and go down.

HIGGISTON: In USDA we had the Secretary and the Assistant Secretary. We did not have a great deal to do with the assistant secretary. They stood in for the Secretary.

Under the Assistant Secretary, we had, I believe seven Under Secretaries. The real power was at the Under Secretary level. Our undersecretary dealt with domestic commodity programs and overseas issues. At the time I was in FAS, there were two Deputy Under Secretaries one on domestic and one on international issues. Under the Deputy Under Secretary was the Administrator of FAS. Under the administrator he or she had two associate administrators, okay, and then you had the Deputy Administrators over each of the program areas. In the program areas there were two deputy assistant administrators and division directors.

I was a deputy director for Asia and South Asia when I came back in 2006. I was promoted to senior Foreign Service after a year back in Washington. I then applied for a deputy assistant administrator in OCRA.

Q: Okay. So, you became one of them.

HIGGISTON: Yes. I eventually moved up to deputy assistant administrator for a while, and then from there, my last year there I became the acting deputy administrator of OCRA. At the time, I had been approached to become the deputy administrator for Foreign Service Operations. However, it was a year before I assumed that position.

One of the other things I changed was the administering of the Foreign Service oath. When I joined the Foreign Service, I took the oath five minutes before lunch with the other new officers during our training process. It was in a basement training room and no one else attended. It was quite underwhelming.

I wanted to make the process special. I was aware of the State Department process and thought we could use it as a model for FAS. I was working in OCRA at the time. I basically put together a program where we would have a swearing in ceremony in the administrator's office—sorry, the agency's conference room. We would ask the deputy undersecretary, to swear people in and present them with a flag from the country they were assigned. We also invited families to attend. It's probably one of the things I am most proud of. The ceremony continues to this day. It has been moved to the atrium in the Whitten Building where the Secretary's office is located. It is a nice event.

Q: That's really very nice. And tell me, as a Foreign Service officer in the Agricultural Department, did you get a commission as well?

HIGGISTON: Was I commissioned? I got tenured.

Q: Okay, you got tenured, but you know, for whatever historical reasons, Foreign Service people at State get an actual commission signed by the—

HIGGISTON: Oh, yes.

Q: —president and secretary and you know that they're an officer of the United States.

HIGGISTON: Yes. Once we pass the test, you have 5 years to be tenured. That would ensure you had at least one full tour overseas. I did receive my commissioning signed by the President and I received a signed certificate from the President when I got into the SFS and when I was promoted to Minister Counselor and Career Minister.

Q: Yeah, okay.

HIGGISTON: But again, neither the Department nor the agency did anything special. If you are in Washington, there may be a retirement party but not when you are overseas. Good thing for Facebook or Teams. When I was retiring my staff put together a Teams meeting, and a number of my colleagues spoke. It was nice.

Q: Yeah.

HIGGISTON: Regardless, I always felt it was important for these new officers to get off on the right foot and to realize this is something special. We have a very small Foreign Service, only about 150 commissioned officers out of about 1500 total FAS employees.

It was one of those times when I felt that someone needed to do it because no one else seemed willing to do it. But I always thought it was one of the—one thing I was particularly proud of.

My deputy administrator in OCRA, who eventually became the administrator, approached me to ask whether I would take over the office of Foreign Service Operations and become the deputy administrator. In that position, I would oversee assignments, the budget, intake as well, at the time, our work in Afghanistan.

Q: Okay.

Jim, let me take that as an occasion to stop us because my computer is telling me they're going to log me out in two minutes because of Zoom.

HIGGISTON: Okay.

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Q: Today is May 12, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher starting a new interview session with Jim Higgiston.

Good morning, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Good morning, Peter.

Q: When we left off last time it was 2010. You were just about to—you had just finished your assignment in the Office for Country and Regional Affairs and had been asked to move over to the Office for Foreign Service Operations. So, maybe you can talk about what your position was and what your office was like and what you were doing.

HIGGISTON: So, the Office of Foreign Service Operations (OFSO) was responsible for a number of issues. First, they handled the recruitment process, which included the Foreign Service test. OFSO was also in charge of assignments and dealt with the day-to-day operations of all overseas posts. I had two Assistant Deputy Administrators (ADAs), one that dealt with the traditional part of the Foreign Service. We had area directors that were in touch with our overseas posts and did their annual reviews. We also had a number of administrative folks that handled the funds.

The other side of the shop dealt with Afghanistan. This was new to Foreign Service Operations. Afghanistan had originally been operated out of the Office of Capacity Building and Development (OCBD). Prior to my arrival in August 2010, the assigning of people to Afghanistan was transferred to OFSO, given its experience in placing people overseas. Unfortunately, the assignment process was ad hoc in Afghanistan. There were no position descriptions and at times we had lower ranking personnel supervising higher ranking personnel. We had two offices in Afghanistan. One was a traditional Agricultural Affairs office. The second dealt with the placement of USDA personnel to Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). At one point USDA had over 65 people working in Afghanistan. At that point, OFSO handled the personnel side and OCBD handled the technical assistance programs.

Q: Really? Sixty-five people, sixty-five ag people in Afghanistan?

HIGGISTON: Yeah.

Q: My goodness. That's bigger than some embassies.

HIGGISTON: Yes. It was a bit complicated. The majority of our folks were assigned to PRTs. The funding for Afghanistan came from the State Department since we had no funds in our general authorization to cover this work. Interestingly, it was a bit controversial. A lot of the rank and file as well as our private sector partners felt that our work in Afghanistan and in some ways Iraq took FAS away from its traditional work. However, it really didn't affect our budget and a lot of the folks who were in Afghanistan were not traditional employees.

As I mentioned, responsibility for recruiting and placing folks in Afghanistan was transferred to OCBD in early 2010. I became the Deputy Administrator for OFSO in August 2010. When the transfer occurred, the Assistant Deputy Administrator at the time, Bobby Richey, found some concerns including the fact that we had lower ranked personnel supervising higher ranked personnel. We knew that had to be changed so that there was a clear line of supervision. As part of that issue, we discovered that there were

no position descriptions for folks in Afghanistan. That also needed to be changed. I think when USDA first started working in Afghanistan, the goal was to get personnel on the ground. We were able to accomplish that task, but it came with problems. Because of the issues I mentioned, we needed to course correct and that was our goal for the first year and second year when I came to OFSO.

I also mentioned previously that in Afghanistan we had two offices. The first was a traditional Office of Agricultural Affairs. The second dealt with the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Those were the folks that were out in the field.

Our office in Washington dealt with both sides of the operation. We assigned attachés as part of the normal process. The head of the office was a member of the SFS. We had at least one or two other Americans assigned to that office. The second office dealt exclusively with the PRTs. That had an American heading the office but was also responsible for the folks out in the field which reached between 65 and 70 people at its highest point.

Again, the majority of the USDA folks that we had in Afghanistan were out on the PRTs. We had, I think, two, maybe three Americans in the traditional office, and one or two people in the PRT office, and they were supposed to be supervising them on a daily basis about what was going on and so forth.

Because agriculture was an extremely important part of the economy, we wound up working with the university out in Monterrey, California. We put our people through the course, but there were a number of folks in the military that participated. The impetus behind the training was that our military folks often were talking with local officials and agriculture was extremely important.

The United States wanted to improve the agriculture situation and encourage folks to raise crops like wheat. The major impediment was that the Taliban wanted farmers to raise poppies for opium. The impediment unfortunately for farmers was that there was no support system. The Taliban could provide funds for inputs to the formers for seeds and fertilizers, for example. The government could not necessarily provide the same funds. That was a real issue. The farmers are basically off on their own for the most part. And so, it was very hard to convince them to go into traditional agriculture, although a lot of them did. But this was one of the things we were up against, trying to do.

Most of the USDA people were stationed on PRTs. Our folks would help them on traditional extension service work supporting basic agriculture. Their other role would be to help local officials to put together proposals for funding to send to the central government. As you know, the Soviets were in Afghanistan for quite a while and officials there followed the traditional agriculture model. The center would make all the decisions even if those decisions were not appropriate for the region. It was not tailored to the needs of the local farmers. We tried to break that system and have localities have more control. Our folks helped them put together budget proposals with their specific needs.

Our folks were also involved with basic extension work including setting up some farmers markets in the countryside.

I think I mentioned from my experience in Uzbekistan that it was probably beneficial that we did not have a lot of funds to utilize. We had some funds, but the majority of our support was in human support. Ours is more of an advisory role in the countryside. There were always personnel issues that we had to deal with in Afghanistan. When the military would go out, they often wanted a real expert that could address some of the agriculture issues.

The problem was that sometimes we got involved in some things that we really didn't want them to be involved in. One day we found out that we had one of our people going out with the military folks and wound up carrying ammunition and, if I remember correctly, was involved in a firefight. Our leadership really did not want us involved in that type of situation. Luckily, no one got hurt. Prior to my arrival, we did have someone killed by an IED. That was the only USDA person killed in Afghanistan.

So, the question came up regarding the personnel in Afghanistan. I mentioned that we had between 65 and 75 people from USDA stationed in Afghanistan. However, they were all from different parts of USDA and from state departments of agriculture. The problem we faced was that we had no mechanism to pay these folks. FAS received funds from State for Afghanistan, but the funds could only be used in FAS. We had no mechanism to pay someone from another USDA agency or a state agency. And FAS did not have enough personnel with technical skills to staff Afghanistan.

The Administration tasked all departments to help out in Afghanistan. So, our secretary encouraged agencies to recruit personnel to serve in Afghanistan. However, the caveat was that the agencies could not backfill these positions, which often left some agencies short staffed.

The majority of our volunteers were excellent and very dedicated. But in some cases, agencies could not necessarily afford to lose good people for two or three years. So, in some cases the volunteers were not the best. Some were close to retirement and the payday in Afghanistan was quite good. Many of them wanted to stay more than a year, which caused other problems.

But by far the biggest administrative issue when I arrived to OFSO was that there was no mechanism to pay the folks from non-FAS agencies or organizations. There were some people that had not been paid despite serving in Afghanistan. This was something we had to resolve.

Q: That must have been popular.

HIGGISTON: And it went on for at least two to three years.

Q: Oh, my goodness. Seriously?

HIGGISTON: Yes, it was not good. So, my HR specialist, Audrey Armstrong, put together a proposal, but we had to get the secretary to sign off on it. The solution was to bring all these volunteers into FAS. This would initially increase FAS personnel numbers, which the secretary's office did not necessarily want to do. In the end, the secretary agreed, and we were finally able to pay the volunteers. And it was quite a lot of money. Plus, the volunteers got 3 R&Rs during a one-year tour.

Q: How can you even recruit anybody new to go out there if they know they're not getting paid?

HIGGISTON: Exactly. So, that was one of our major arguments. I think people knew they would be paid, but eventually people would refuse to go. It worked out in the end but it was a major issue.

As bad as it was, there were some funny things regarding the mission there. The ambassador at the time was Eikenberry who was former military. He liked the work that our folks were doing, and he wanted more people from agriculture to be there. We had some good volunteers who were advising the ministry of agriculture as well as advisors to the agriculture university.

I mentioned that we needed to put in place a system to assign appropriate people to positions. In order to do this we slowed the assignments until we had appropriate position descriptions and people to place in those positions. We also wanted the volunteers to have some training about Afghanistan. But this process took several months to accomplish.

Unbeknownst to me, someone at some point had promised State that we could put 95 volunteers in Afghanistan. When we had slowed the assignment process, Ambassador Eikenberry went to Secretary Vilsack to complain that we had not done as promised.

In any case, we were called into the Secretary's office regarding Eikenberry's complaint. As I mentioned we were in the process of putting the right structure in place along with a recruitment plan. We felt that we could staff up in the near future given the new process and training. I was responsible for briefing the Secretary. My plan was to walk him through the process and assure him that we could easily put 75 people in the field in a month or two and then add an additional 10 people out in 4 or 5 months.

I started to go through my explanation and maybe to about two or three sentences out before he stopped me in my tracks. He said something along the lines of, "I don't care what you think you can do. I don't care what you believe you can do. You haven't been able to do it." The Secretary then asks for me to draft a memo and give him a number that I can absolutely guarantee, and it would be on my head.

That's not a straightforward task. You never know how people are going to react going to Afghanistan. Someone could arrive, get off the plane and say "Whoa, I am not sure this is what I signed up for, and get back on the plane to go home." So, I go back to my office

and start drafting the memo to the Secretary. Since it is my head, I write that we can absolutely guarantee 45 people on the ground. I wanted to keep five people in reserve because you just never know how people would react once they arrived

So, I write the memo outlining our plans to have 45 people on the ground at all times. I send the memo up the line, and it goes to the deputy undersecretary, who was really good. She also was designated by the Secretary to ensure that everything went well in Afghanistan. Later in the day, she calls me and says, "I just got your memo. Do you think you could deploy a couple of more people over the 45?"

I answered that I believe we could do a lot more but given the Secretary's demand I am not sure how many more people I feel comfortable guaranteeing." In the end I changed it and we, in fact, were able to deploy between sixty-five and seventy-five people, over the course of the last couple of years that I was there.

Q: Let me just stop you and ask you, do you remember who the secretary was? This was—you didn't meet with the secretary very often, it sounded like.

HIGGISTON: It was Secretary Tom Vilsack, who lasted the entire 8 years under Obama and came back under the Biden administration. I had a couple of meetings with the Secretary but only a few where my issues were the focal point of the meeting. I probably had more contact with Secretaries of Agriculture overseas. My main contacts with the administration were at the Deputy Under Secretary and Under Secretary level. I do have a couple of funny encounters with the Secretary if I can digress.

This goes back to my days in OCRA. As I mentioned, we were responsible for putting together briefing books for secretarial travel overseas. Although he had been there for a while, this was one of his first big overseas trips. The trip was to Africa to participate in a meeting.

Q: The African Union?

HIGGISTON: No. It was for AGOA, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). The meeting occurred in Kenya. USDA was not a major player, and he was asked to go to the conference.

The Secretary's immediate staff was very much involved in the briefing materials. We had to write numerous papers to Secretary about the visit and the program. It was interesting to see the questions that came up, especially about the questions the press would be asking. It was really impossible to prepare for every issue, but we were asked anyway.

Our usual process is to put together a draft table of contents, which listed all the possible topics and background papers that we believed should be included in the book. We would send that up to the Secretary's office for approval and begin working on the papers. We then worked with our office in Kenya to put together a schedule and possible meetings

and site visits. Once that was approved, we put together scene setters and collected bios for all the major contacts.

It was during this trip that I realized that all the people around the Secretary would tell us authoritatively what the Secretary wanted. What became clear during this process was that the staff really had no idea what information the Secretary wanted and that they were just guessing most times. We would meet with the staff and explain what we were doing and make some suggestions. Each time, however, the response was a definitive "No", and they would give us specific instructions.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: The other issue was that everything turned on a dime. The whole idea behind circulating a table of contents would be to solicit everyone's thoughts and have everyone take a cut at the materials. Once we had everyone's input, we could begin putting the book together.

I had a process for doing a briefing book. We would put together a table of contents first and I'd send that up. Everybody got a cut at it. The book contained scene setters and background papers,

The books were hefty with over 50 different tabs. So, I suggested that we prepare 2 books, one with background papers and one with scene setters and bios. That would allow us to put together one book which could be given to the Secretary before the trip. The second book could be done a bit later once the schedule was solidified. My suggestion was turned down. That is, until about a week before the trip and the staff informed us that two books would be preferred.

Well, at least we had a week to redo the briefing books. It was bad enough if a paper had to be changed and put in 15 – 20 books because everyone wanted a copy of the book. But at the last minute one of the assistants came to our office and wanted to change the order of the papers in the background book. That would require changing the table of contents in all the books. Taking out the papers and putting them in a different order. And they came to us at 3 pm and wanted it all done by 6 pm. And I simply said "It's not going to happen, especially when the papers themselves were not being changed. Just changing the order of papers for no reason made no sense.

Anyway, so, we were going through this whole thing, and it was really tortuous. Then we had the issue of site visits. In Kenya, we had to bus people to a central site in order to cut down on travel. At one site, we were bringing in women farmers from different parts of the country to meet the Secretary at a training facility. The Secretary would have several things to do at each site. We scheduled 2 or 3 site visits with each visit lasting about an hour or two.

One of his staff came to me and asked whether the Secretary had to stay that long at each site. He wanted to simply do a "drive-by" and only spend about 15 minutes at each site.

And I responded emphatically "No! That would be rude given that these folks were traveling quite a distance to reach the site." Luckily, we resolved it, and he stayed the entire time. But his staff had all sorts of suggestions. One person had a contact at a farm and wanted to take the Secretary there. We looked at the map and realized the Secretary would have to be in a car for 5 hours, be there for an hour and then return for another 5 hours. We knew the Secretary had a bad back and the thought of him traveling on African roads for 10 hours did not seem like a good option. In the end, he did not go. We go through this entire process, get the books done and deliver them on Wednesday or Thursday before the trip and the Secretary is scheduled to leave on Saturday for Kenya.

On Friday, I get a call from the FAS front office to go to the Secretary's office because he wants to talk about the trip. It's me, another Deputy Administrator who is in charge of technical and food assistance, someone from Foreign Agricultural Affairs office and a couple of other folks. There were about five or six of us in the room.

In any case, the Secretary comes in and we are expecting some questions about the meetings or site visits. And he comes into the room, and he looks at us and asks, "So, why am I going on this trip?" and "What am I going to accomplish?"

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: I kid you not, I said, "Didn't you get the memo?" (Both laughs). The Secretary was very goal oriented. If he took a meeting, he wanted something accomplished. Of course, that's not always going to happen, especially in agriculture. We had a saying that if it was easy to resolve an ag issue, it would have already been resolved.

Q: Well, sure.

HIGGISTON: There are stories about the Secretary walking out of meetings because he didn't feel like they were going to get anything done. In any case, I noted, "To be honest, Mr. Secretary, this is the situation. We're not going to gain that much from the visit and the meetings. We don't have that much trade going on. It's mostly assistance programs and so forth." But I said, "The fact that you're there, because agriculture is so important, will mean something to them." And I said, "In this instance, the messenger is the message." I said, "They will really appreciate just the fact that you're there talking to them, spending some time with them, listening to their concerns and what they're doing, what the challenges they have." And luckily, that sold him. (Laughs)

Q: That's great.

HIGGISTON: And he took it and ran with it. And I'm just like, I can't believe I did that.

Q: Okay. That's perfect.

Well, Jim, let me stop you there because the Zoom clock has wound down to _____ minutes.

HIGGISTON: Got it.

Q: So, I'm going to end this meeting and we can sign on and take off from there.

HIGGISTON: Okay.

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Q: Today is May 12, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher continuing with the second half of today's interview with Jim Higgiston.

Okay, go ahead, Jim. You were talking about your experiences with Secretary Vilsack.

HIGGISTON: The Secretary actually came to Brussels when I served there, and he seemed to enjoy himself which is something given relations with the EU on agriculture. I really enjoyed working with him over there.

The African trip was my first experience with him. The second time was the meeting on Afghanistan to discuss the number of people being deployed. He was not happy, but I think the Deputy Under Secretary helped smooth the situation. I mentioned that Afghanistan was fully funded by the State Department, but we never knew whether we were going to get the money.

Every year it was always something, the budget was always a question, how much State would give us. It often went down to the very end, and I don't know how many times I had to get on the phone and call State, telling them that without funding, I was going to have to pull all our people out of Afghanistan. It worked out but it was never easy.

Q: You had plenty of volunteers?

HIGGISTON: Yes, a lot of people wanted to go. Some went because they were dedicated and wanted to do something good, and others went because it was a good payday. It was normally a one-year assignment, but a lot of folks wanted to stay for a second and even third year. What we experienced was that after the first year, people started to act out or simply shut down and not be as productive. Some folks did not want to leave the PRT.

Our folks were very dependent on the military. If we left a PRT we had to have a military escort. In the beginning, the military were very willing to go out and wanted us to go with them because they were getting a lot of questions about agriculture. But my impression was that as the war dragged on and new military units arrived, they were a lot more risk averse. I visited in 2013 and at the time, the Obama Administration had announced that we would be out of Afghanistan by 2014. (That subsequently changed.)

A lot of the military folks at that time were reservists and they didn't want to take any chances specially to escort an ag guy to a village. That became an issue as time dragged on, and so a lot of our folks, some of our folks, if they were there, if they were supposed to leave in six months, did not want to leave the compound. The situation in Afghanistan was continuously deteriorating in my opinion. The security situation in the field and in Kabul seemed to be on a downward trajectory.

Q: What can you do if you don't leave the compound if you're an agriculture person?

HIGGISTON: Precisely. Like I said it wasn't widespread, but it was something that we had to be aware of. I think there were some folks that followed the money. I always felt that we had to watch to make sure the wheels did not come off. I think it was natural to be more conservative and less willing to take chances as tours were ending.

Obviously, we would want to extend folks if they were doing good work but \we had to be careful to make sure they didn't shut down. Over the course of my four years in OFSO and dealing with Afghanistan, I increasingly felt that FAS was not fully equipped to handle the situation. Historically, FAS was not involved in countries where there was active fighting. However, that changed in Iraq and Afghanistan. FAS was called on specially to provide technical assistance. However, we were not equipped to deal with the issues associated with this type of work. For example, FAS and USDA did not have any real programs to deal with folks returning to the States who might have PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) issues. State had specific programs in place, but we did not have access to their programs. USDA had an employee assistance office, but it really wasn't set up to deal with war-related issues. I always felt that that could be an issue as time went on, and I raised that with the administration just before I left in 2014. I wrote a memo regarding issues that could come up in the future.

In addition to Afghanistan and Iraq, we were involved in other issues, like the earthquake in Haiti. The administration really wanted to change our focus and become more like AID. But this caused issues within the agency and with our commodity groups. They argued that our work in Afghanistan took valuable resources away from our core work. To be honest, funding for Afghanistan and Iraq, came from the State Department or AID. Although we had some career employees working on these issues, a good number of folks were contract employees.

My biggest concern was that FAS did not have the experience to respond that quickly to a situation, like Haiti. We had expertise in helping a country maybe 1 year after the crisis when local institutions needed help but not immediately. That was AID's forte. Even our food aid programs were not meant for emergency relief. It took a number of months to negotiate an agreement, sign it, and then ship commodities. It took most of a year to respond to a crisis. There was definitely some head butting on this because they wanted us to do some things that we were not really capable of, and then they blamed us for not doing it.

Q: Who were they?

HIGGISTON: I am talking primarily about the folks that worked in the Administrator's office.

Q: Okay, within the department then, yeah.

HIGGISTON: Yes. These were political appointees, Schedule Cs. Haiti was a good example. At the time, I was acting Deputy Administrator for OCRA. It was around 5 or 6 pm, and I happened to be in the gym at the Department. I was watching the news and there was a bulletin about the earthquake in Haiti. I sent a note to the division director for Latin America, suggesting that we get together the next morning to discuss the situation.

About a week later I got called into the front office and told to write up the division director for negligence for not being in the office that first night to deal with the situation. I have to mention that we did not have an attaché or an FAS office in Haiti. If it was covered, it was out of a regional post and the information we were receiving was probably better than theirs. The appointee had wanted the staff to be there all night. Not sure what they would be doing since the situation was changing by the minute. In any case, I noted that we cannot just order career civil servants to work all night. I'm sure they had a different perspective, but I just think there were unreal expectations about what we were capable of doing.

To be honest, we couldn't even get into the meetings at AID. The relationship between AID and FAS has always been a bit contentious. The Haiti situation clearly fell in their portfolio, not hours.

Q: What do you mean, that State would not let you in or—?

HIGGISTON: AID was running the meetings and we really had no role. I think if they had invited themselves to sit in our meetings, we would not be that welcoming. Again, our role was 6 months to a year down the line but we were not there for disaster relief. We just did not have the people or did not have the capability.

Q: Yeah. Well, this job that we've been talking about seems to be a fundamental shift from what you had been doing from the policy program side to the management/ administrative/personnel side. How did you feel about that? Did you like it as much?

HIGGISTON: Well, one thing I have found about FAS is that it can adapt to different situations. So, when the Soviet Union broke up, we had an office to specifically deal with that situation. Once the crisis had ended there, we disbanded that office. Same thing occurred in the Balkans. We shifted focus on that area of the world for a while and once that crisis ended that office was disbanded. I think the biggest example of this was the office dealing with Afghanistan. We had a fairly large office to deal with our programs in Afghanistan. That office was put together, lasted for several years and then disbanded. At the same time, we continued to do our traditional work.

Regarding the administrative work, I actually enjoyed the administrative and personnel side of the work. We didn't have much control over the policy side. The Administration would set the policy and we would carry it out. Policy was not something we had much, On the other hand, I really did enjoy the HR side of the operation. A lot of folks did not like the administrative and particularly the personnel work.

I found one could have a real impact and make real changes on the administrative side. I mentioned the changes to our briefing materials as well as implementation of a formal induction ceremony for new officers. There were also major changes in our Afghanistan hiring and assignment policy.

One of the first things I worked on when I became the Deputy Minister for Foreign Service Operations, was the intake process into the Foreign Service. Two officers approached me about recruitment. There was an FAS program area, the Office of Capacity Building and Development (OCBD) which had a lot of contract employees. They did an excellent job and had great backgrounds. Unfortunately, under the recruitment system at the time, we were unable to bring these folks into the Foreign Service. As a result, they would end up leaving for AID or the State Department. In addition, as I mentioned we were not hiring as many new employees due to budget concerns. That reduced the pool of people we could choose to join the Foreign Service. In any case I can get into that initiative in greater detail later.

To get back to the point, I liked the administrative side of the work and how to manage people. I very much encouraged flexibility on the part of our employees, whether it was in OCRA or OFSO. I think as Foreign Service officers we would handle any task that might come up. I never heard an officer say that something wasn't their job. I talked about setting up the electronic filing system that would allow everyone in the program area to work in all the geographic regions.

Q: Yeah, we talked about that last time, right.

HIGGISTON: If there a big trip coming up in, let's say, China, I could get people from the South America section to come over and work on that issue because they knew what the format was for the papers, they knew what the scene setters would look like and what information we would need. So, it gave us a lot more flexibility to be able to move people around from one section to the other and not have a steep learning curve to contribute to a project. So, I thought that was important. Unfortunately, I don't think the agency appreciated that as much and under the latest reorganization in 2020, they did away with OCRA, which was unfortunate.

We had to get involved in a lot of unusual events, often at the last minute. As an example, there were trilateral meetings held in Washington with Pakistan and Afghanistan. I got a call from the Secretary's office that the secretary wanted to hold a meeting in our building. He didn't like going to the State Department. But we had a conference room in the Secretary's building specifically built to hold this huge historical conference table. In

any case, the secretary wanted to hold a meeting with his counterparts the next morning. And so, we had to put that all together really at the last minute. We met with the Secretary's staff in the afternoon to discuss the logistics.

As were we discussing the event, the staff asked about the secretary and where he would be at the start of the meeting. I replied that it really was up to the Secretary. There were a lot of options. He could meet them on the steps of the building, inside the foyer or in the conference room itself.

The response was that the Secretary would wait in his office. Once the guests arrived and were escorted to the conference room, we were to call the Secretary's office. The Secretary would enter the room, and everyone was to stand up. In response I said, "Well, that's one way to do it."

I think the meeting started at either 8 am and the participants were to arrive at 7:45 or so. I was waiting with my staff in the foyer. It was a little after 7:30 am when the Secretary's car arrived. However, instead of going to his office as expressed by his staff, he went directly to the conference room, closed the door and was talking with his staff and the State Department representatives. At this point, the guests began to arrive, and I had the ministers of agriculture from Pakistan and Afghanistan waiting for the conference door to open. Everybody is mingling at the entrance.

Well, I decided to go to the conference room and (I don't think I even knocked) entered the room and announced, "Mr. Secretary, your guests are here." I left the door open, then people started funneling in.

The next day, I had a meeting with the Administrator and commented that it was a real pain in the butt. "It was a real screw up." And in response, he said, "Yeah, what did you guys do? How come you got it so wrong?" Not exactly what I wanted to hear, and I said, "Hold on." "We didn't get anything wrong." I said, "The Secretary's staff had no idea what the Secretary wanted or what he would do.

Q: You raised a couple issues, which I had a couple of questions about as you started. Maybe we can go through a couple of those?

HIGGISTON: Yeah.

Q: For one thing, you talked about training the military a little bit out in San Diego. I mean, this must be kind of unprecedented for the department to be training military people, or was this an ongoing program of some kind?

HIGGISTON: It wasn't run by FAS or USDA. I am not sure who exactly paid for the training, but Monterey put together the program. I believe this was on the civilian side of Monterey.

Q: Right.

HIGGISTON: It was a while ago, but I believe we used funding from State or AID. We may have used the University of California at Davis, which is the big ag school out there. In the end the training was opened up to PRTers as well as military folks.

Q: Okay. And then, I was curious, you talked about sending extension people from Iowa or Montana or wherever out to Afghanistan. Did you ever get a reaction from these people? I mean, that must have been culture shock in a big way for many of them.

HIGGISTON: Well, I think I mentioned earlier that USDA is primarily a domestic agency dealing with domestic issues. The extension service was probably one of the premier agencies that started during the Depression. They were often called on to work in developing countries to help them put together a similar service to help farmers. During my tours in Poland and Turkey, the Extension Service had initiatives. So, while Afghanistan was different, especially working in a warzone, the work itself would not be that different from other developing countries. I met folks particularly when they returned to Washington, and I would say the vast majority liked the Afghans and enjoyed the work there. Like every other country, I found programs like this to be well received, but once the experts leave or the money ends, it was not clear that the program would continue. I had the same experience in Poland.

Of course, operating in a warzone was a big challenge, but our extension folks were used to dealing in these countries.

Our biggest problem with many USDA agencies was their lack of understanding on how an embassy functioned. I spent a lot of time in Washington, meeting with different agencies, explain to them that they couldn't just show up in a country. Ambassadors were not happy if someone showed up in a country without notice. I had more than a few ambassadors read me the riot act and threaten to refuse country clearances.

HIGGISTON: But a lot of our folks had experience going into disaster areas and so forth. Not so much the FAS people but others from different agencies. But you are right. going from Iowa to go over to someplace like Afghanistan and working there was out of the ordinary.

The Extension Service folks were experienced in working overseas and the protocols. The ones that I met really enjoyed working with local farmers even if it required them to work through an interpreter. I had a group of Extension folks going to Armenia to help out for several months. When they returned through Moscow in 1992, I met with them. Turns out one gentleman, who had never been overseas before, wound up being the godfather for a child of a farmer he worked with. Pretty impressive.

I think we are very fortunate for Foreign Service officers to get to live overseas for an extended period of time. However, for someone who primarily works domestically, the

opportunity to work overseas even for a short period of time can be quite heady. Still, you needed someone that could operate independently and not be tethered to a home office.

I found these folks to be greatly suited to the work overseas. After all, they were there to provide guidance to local farmers. These folks had the ability to work with farmers in any country. Many of the problems they encountered were probably recognizable. However, they still needed to buy in. I accompanied an extension team to Armenia. We were there for several days and met with a lot of officials. However, the head of the Extension Service delegation found that they were not getting answers to their questions from Armenian officials. At one point, he decided that they would not meet with folks until they got the answers to the questions they were asking. If they were going to design a program, they needed this information. Well, it only took part of a day, and we were called into the Deputy Minister's office. The head of the group explained that they were there to help but if folks were not willing to answer questions or share information, there was no real reason for them to be there. The Deputy Minister read his folks the riot act and we were able to get the information we needed. Honestly, I think the locals did not want to admit they had problems.

Q: Good.

I noticed my clock has ticked down to three minutes in our current Zoom session, so let's repeat the process and we can finish up in the next session.

HIGGISTON: Got it.

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Q: Today is May 12, 2022, and this is part three of today's interview with Jim Higgiston.

Jim, I was going to ask whether you yourself had gone to Afghanistan during this period.

HIGGISTON: Yes, I visited Afghanistan for a supervisory trip in 2013. As I spoke with folks, they noted that in the past we could go out to restaurants in the city and stuff, but now the security situation is such that we're not able to do that. That had already ended when we were there and after we left the restrictions got even worse. We had a meeting with folks from the PRTs as well as visiting the university where we had 3 specialists stationed. They briefed me on their work and noted that their travel had become more restrictive.

The security to and from the airport was not that tight either. We went in unarmored vehicles. There were 3 or four vehicles with us, and we traveled through the city to get to our compound. I remember getting stuck in traffic and was glad the situation was pretty calm because I was definitely concerned. And clearly, what I came away with in talking with people who had been there for quite a while, was that the situation had gotten worse, and they were much more conscious of the security situation and their ability to get around. And after I left, I found out that the embassy had changed its policy and that you

couldn't travel to and from the airport by car. Folks had to travel by helicopter for safety reasons. Our folks stationed at the university could not stay there overnight and could only travel during the daylight hours. Mortar attacks on the compound and in the center of Kabul increased and it was much more difficult to retrieve these folks from the university. Eventually, we had to close down that program.

It was interesting that there were these huge buildings being built on and around the compound. Across the street from the compound, there was a new Marriott going up. I believe they wanted to house visitors in the hotel since the accommodations on the compound were very limited. However, and I am not a security expert, the hotel looked directly onto the compound and if the building was breached, the bad guys could do a lot of damage from the upper floors.

I heard a story after I had visited Kabul. Not sure how true it is but it resonated with me. According to the story, a high-level official from State who was in charge of Afghanistan visited Kabul. They brought this person to the top of the chancery and showed them all the construction going up. So this was 2013 and the Obama Administration was looking to begin drawing down in 2014. In fact, we put in place a plan to get our folks out of Afghanistan by the fall of 2014, which we wound up doing. In any case this official was incredulous since he believed we would be winding down operations in Afghanistan and he wanted to know why we were constructing all these buildings.

It was clear to me that, while we were doing some very good work, I felt the situation was going to be untenable. When I returned from the trip, I briefed the Deputy Under Secretary and we had a conversation about our role in Afghanistan. I may have mentioned that the Secretary had put her in charge of day-to-day operations in Afghanistan. At that point, she instructed me to start putting a plan in place to get out of Afghanistan.

We didn't want to disrupt operations and just start pulling people out willy-nilly. Instead, we would be closing positions in PRTs as the military began shutting the PRTs down. As a PRT closed, we would withdraw people and then we wouldn't replace them, and we wouldn't move them around to other places. It was my understanding that folks from other non-USDA agencies would just move around the country and, in some cases, folks in Washington, could not keep track of their folks. Again, I don't know if that's true or not, but we made sure that we knew where our people were. This was important, that in some cases the money was so lucrative, they didn't want to leave.

Q: But that's scary, agencies don't know where their people are.

HIGGISTON: Absolutely. And like I said, this is what I was told, whether it was true or not, but it makes for a good story if not.

But it seemed like there was always something happening in Afghanistan. There were many a morning when I would stop by my Assistant Deputy Administrator, Bobby

Richey, who was in charge of Afghanistan and who really did incredible work for the program in Afghanistan.

So, my first question every morning was "What happened last night?" True story, we had a PRTer who had gotten hold of a bow and arrow. He somehow had been pulling an arrow out of a target and had impaled himself in his leg and had severed an artery.

Q: Oh, my god.

HIGGISTON: To make matters worse, it was a hunting arrow with razors and not an arrowhead. He had to get airlifted out to the military base in Bagram, and then to Germany to have an operation. I would note that having a bow and arrow on a PRT was totally against military rules. While he was convalescing in Germany, we had to make a decision on his future. But we found out that the military was about to close that PRT, and we basically ended his work in Afghanistan and released him to go back to his home agency. I think he grieved us because the military folks packed him up at the PRT, but they took the bow and arrow away because you weren't supposed to have bow and arrows on these military compounds. So, he was upset because they had taken away his bow and arrow when they packed him up and sent his stuff back to the States.

That was one of a number of stories. In any case, whenever we heard something that had happened overnight, we immediately went over to see the Deputy Under Secretary to inform her. We never wanted the Secretary to find out about an incident without the Deputy knowing.

I was very fortunate because the woman who was the administrative assistant in the Under Secretary's office used to work in FAS and were good friends. I would call her up, and I said, "Debra, I just need to see her for five minutes, just five minutes." And we'd run over there in the morning and brief her. And I can't tell you how often we had to make those kinds of calls. And luckily, she was a great person to work with and was very calm.

We eventually closed the PRT office in Kabul, and that work was handled out of our Agricultural Affairs office in Kabul. I left OFSO in February 2014 to go into language training. However, some of the people who had worked on Afghanistan were very supportive of the programs and lobbied for us to stay. However, as far as I was concerned, we would continue with our plan to draw down unless I heard differently from the Secretary. There was no question that we were doing good work, but we were really not equipped to deal with this type of operation. It was kind of out of the normal FAS realm. And I think there were a lot of people within the agency and outside, our partners that basically were not happy that we were focusing on these types of things rather than on trade promotion, trade policy and so forth, because they felt like with that administrator, that had taken a backseat to what traditionally FAS did. I would also note that State was happy that we had a plan to reduce our numbers and I never heard from State to continue the PRT work.

As I mentioned previously, FAS was able to adapt to current situations without changing the overall structure of the agency or putting in place permanent structures. This was also true of our work in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans. By 2014, we were not hiring, training or deploying personnel to Afghanistan. As a result, once the majority of folks were out of Afghanistan the PRT office was no longer needed, and the residual work was done by our Agricultural Affairs Office.

Another factor was the budget. Since Congress never provided funds for these types of operations, we normally would receive money from State or AID. Traditionally, we were never given total responsibility for the funds. That is, AID provided oversight and was responsible for reporting on the budget. FAS provided the expertise.

For example, if there was a need for someone to deal with water resources, we could recruit someone from USDA or an agriculture college to perform the work. AID would still be responsible for the funds and oversight.

For whatever reason, there was a movement in a part of the administrator's office for us to take over the total responsibility. I assume by doing this, we could approach Congress for more funding. However, there was a lot of opposition from our commodity groups that we were being diverted from our core work. So, my gut always told me that Congress would never go for this. The other problem was that we were not set up to take over this oversight. We simply did not have the personnel either in country or back in Washington. I called in the Special IG for Iraq because the Special IG for Afghanistan and Pakistan had not been set up. I wanted someone to look at what we were planning.

I called them in unbeknownst to my front office, and I basically asked them to look at our capabilities in handling this type of funding. After the review, the person from the IG's office came in, and reported. I'll be honest. You guys really are not set up to deal with these types of programs and oversee this type of money. Normally, the money coming in from outside agencies was bigger than our entire GA, but this would be a big leap for us.

Q: Wow.

HIGGISTON: It was a lot of money and I honestly felt given past experience that the front office would not support us if something went wrong. We clearly did not have enough people or the experience to do proper oversight of this type of program. We had very few people on the ground and certainly had no accountants or others with the needed expertise. That was the reason, we always had AID take responsibility for oversight of the money. We could set up a program, hire the appropriate experts, deploy them and take care of them overseas. When the Special IG for Iraq came in and gave us his thoughts, I knew we were going to have a problem. We were, in fact, able to put the kibosh on the proposal. Although some folks in FAS wanted us to take on this work, I don't believe the Secretary's office was even aware of it. As I mentioned, I think some folks thought it would give us more clout and open up the possibility for Congress to give us more funding. Again, there was a lot of opposition to FAS doing this type of work so I really

doubt Congress would give us additional funding. I was very afraid that we would take on this new work and not have the structure to successfully carry it out.

By the time I was set to leave OFSO in February 2014, we were well on the road to pulling out of Afghanistan. In the end, the United States wound up staying in Afghanistan longer, but the mission had changed, and we weren't being asked to continue the work we had been doing previously. The situation continued to deteriorate in Afghanistan especially in the countryside. I believe we were probably doing some technical assistance programs in Afghanistan, but it was being managed from Washington and we did not have permanent staff in the field.

Q: Okay. Well, it sounds like you had an interesting two and a half years, if that's correct.

HIGGISTON: Well, that's just Afghanistan, that's not the other side of the operation.

Q: Oh. We still need to go through to the other side then, okay. Good. Let's talk about that then.

HIGGISTON: It is amazing that we spent so much time on Afghanistan given that the traditional side of overseas operations was so significant. As I mentioned back in 2006, the budget became an issue. At one point the Secretary was closing domestic offices in the field. The Administrator at time, received a call from the Secretary's office asking for a list of overseas post closures. The feeling at the time was that both the domestic and overseas operations would share the pain. It was up to my office to come up with a list of closures. I don't ever remember FAS receiving that type of request. I had a lot of issues with this, most importantly, the roles of domestic and overseas offices were quite different. I think there was a law that stipulated there had to be another office within 25 – 50 miles from the office that was being closed. In that way, one office could take over the work of the closed office.

That was not the case in our overseas offices. The distance was hundreds of miles and the work was quite different from one country to the next. In any case, we came up with a list of 5 – 7 positions to be closed overseas. Every few months we would get calls for the Secretary's office asking whether we had closed the offices. The kicker was that they also asked who was taking over the work, which in some cases like Syria, no one took over the work. In any case, that was not a pleasant time.

There were a lot of day-to-day issues that we had to deal with. I remember when I first started as Deputy Administrator for overseas operations, a colleague advised me that I would find out a lot about my colleagues that I did not want to know. Although the vast majority of folk did a great job, there was the occasional situation that had us all shaking our heads.

But the budget really became a major issue. We needed to bring in new people to backfill the numbers of folks retiring. You could manage the situation if you're bringing thirty new people into the agency every year, maybe half of them want to join the Foreign

Service. But after 2006, we did not have that luxury. For several years, we were bringing in, maybe hiring five or six people a year so we did not have an adequate pool of people to choose from.

That was an issue because I think for a little while we brought in people who frankly were not suited to work overseas. You needed to work independently and to exhibit good judgment. I always felt that we weren't doing anyone any favors by sending folks to work overseas who did not have the needed skills. And, in the end, we would have issues with them. As I mentioned earlier, I always hated to hear from State colleagues about one of our officers that was not contributing to the embassy work.

Q: Right. You talked about this at some length, I think, in the last session, yeah.

HIGGISTON: Yes, part of the issue was the test and we set in motion a process to redo the test. The second part was the overall recruitment process. I had a couple of officers that suggested we bring in folks who technically were contractors in the Office of Capacity Building and Development (OCBD). These folks had great backgrounds. A lot were former Peace Corps volunteers and had experience in FAS but because they were contractors, we were unable to recruit them. A lot of them wound up going to the State Department or USAID. We had something like 200 to 300 people that were contract workers, also known as Schedule Bs. But as contractors they had no standing in the agency, meaning that once their project was over, they had to leave the agency or go to another agency.

Moreover, under the traditional recruitment process, you could be in the Foreign Service but decide not to stay and simply transfer back to the civil service as long as you were not tenured. To be honest, reality hit folks once they went overseas, and they decided not to continue.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: Again, the agency could deal with this situation if we were bringing in fifteen or twenty people every year into the Foreign Service annually. But if you were only bringing five or six and two people or three people decided to go back, then you were stuck, and you found yourself short staffed. And, of course, FAS had limited hiring ability. I think the agency never wanted to RIF people and so they were very conservative in their approach to hiring. It wasn't like I could go to the administrator and say, I need to hire more Foreign Service people.

A lot of our folks, especially in the Foreign Service but really throughout the agency came to FAS by word of mouth. We had a lot of folks that had been in the Peace Corps, but also folks from a lot of the agriculture universities applied to FAS. We had contingents, especially from Florida A&M and Cornell, for example.

In addition to the budget, officers hired under prior to the Foreign Service Act of 1980 were beginning to retire in the early 2000s. Some of these folks who grandfathered into

the system were ready to retire. This put an extra strain on the service and exacerbated the budget issue.

There were several people that wanted to change our recruitment process. I was lucky. I knew what we needed to do, but I wasn't sure how we would accomplish it. I had several people working on this task including Audrey Armstrong from HR. A lot of folks contributed to the process. Allan Mustard, who was our Ambassador to Turkmenistan, had some excellent suggestions. It was a real team effort.

The idea behind the new process was to put out an all-sources advertisement. People could apply from outside FAS. There would be an application process and oral test. However, if they decided to leave the Foreign Service, they could not necessarily become civil servants in FAS. We had permission to hire a certain number of officers which would allow us to fill our growing number of vacancies.

The challenge, of course, was to convince the administrator and the other deputy administrators to agree to the new process. This meant that the agency would have separate hiring practices for civil and foreign service employees. I spent a good deal of time briefing the other Deputy Administrators on the process and it paid off in the end. It was not a perfect process, but we wound up attracting a good pool of new officers. I even had someone from the civil service side ask whether something similar could be set up on the civil service side.

Q: Uh-huh, okay.

The Deputy Administrators, who were in the Foreign Service, supported it but some of the Civil Service Deputy Administrators were on the fence. However, since a lot of their staff were Schedule B contractors, they wound up supporting the new process. Even some of the Foreign Service Officers were not necessarily thrilled with the new process, but I felt strongly that this was the only way we were going to be able to staff up and maintain a Foreign Service rather than having civil servants staff our offices overseas.

Tenure was one of our challenges, but Allan Mustard helped us out with this issue. Under the old system, people had more experience in the agency before joining the Foreign Service. However, under the new process, folks would be recruited off the street, so to speak, most without any experience with FAS or USDA and they would need to go overseas almost immediately. This was an issue, but Allan came up with a solution. Under the Foreign Service Act of 1980, we could bring people in as Foreign Service Trainees. That would allow them to come to FAS, be assigned to a Washington position, get trained and still be able to serve in at least one post before going before the board for tenure. The tenure clock would not start until they went overseas for their first tour. This gave us some time to better evaluate the new trainees and perhaps suggest additional training.

IT wasn't a perfect system, but most folks were pleased with the folks coming into the agency. As an aside, I always felt it was important to keep evaluating a process and make adjustments to a constantly changing environment.

One of the issues under the new system that I believe needed to be addressed is the educational requirements. When I entered the agency as an international economist, I needed to have 21 credit hours of economics. It wasn't required to have an economics degree, but you needed to have the credit hours. However, as officers you needed to have some understanding of economics. Under the new system this was eliminated. I always thought that requirement should have remained in place. Others felt differently. Recently, FAS decided to reinstate this requirement. Some people have noted that they would not have been able to get into FAS if that requirement had been in there, but I think these qualifications were very important. Time will tell.

I mentioned that in 2006 we restructured FAS. All the commodity divisions were eliminated and there was one program area that dealt with analysis. However, the analysis program area could not train all the new employees. So, we had to put in place a training program called the Ag100 class. The trainee brought in folks not only from across the agency and USDA but also representatives from commodity groups and the interagency. Foreign Service Trainees were required to take the class, but it was also opened up to new civil service employees.

Q: Was it like a six-week course or something like the A-100?

HIGGISTON: Actually, the class met a couple of times a week for 3 hours each session. The class went for the better part of a year.

Q: Oh, wow, okay. This is much more significant than A-100 then.

HIGGISTON: Yes, but obviously, it wasn't full-time.

Q: Oh, okay.

HIGGISTON: And I think they would meet two or three times a week for two or three hours each session.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: I always felt it was important to review programs from time to time. When I came back in 2018 to be acting Administrator, I asked the head of Foreign Service operations to ask the heads of office overseas to report on any improvements needed in the training. Were there any things that needed to be changed, added, or tweaked. We were able to get a survey out to posts and the response was that the new trainees needed work on the analysis side. As a result, we put a second training program in place devoted to analysis.

Q: Okay, Jim, we're once again down to our two- or three-minute warning on Zoom, and this is our third session for the day. So, why don't we call this a stopping point, and we'll take it up again next time?

HIGGISTON: Okay. That sounds great.

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Q: Today is June 29, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher starting a new interview session with Jim Higgiston.

Good morning, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Good morning, Peter.

Q: At our last session just over a month ago, I guess, we had covered most of your time as the deputy administrator of the Office of Foreign Service Operations. And I'll give you a chance to make any last reflections on that that you want to before we move onto your next overseas assignment.

HIGGISTON: Well, I've been thinking about it, and a lot of times when you go into a new job, sometimes you're not sure exactly what you want to accomplish, whether it's going overseas or a new position in Washington. But I remember going to the Office of Foreign Service Operations. It was really the first time I felt that there were some specific issues I wanted to address.

There was a lot of day-to-day work. The budget was always an issue. But in addition, I would say there were probably four things that I focused on during my time as Deputy Administrator. When I was in OCRA, I wanted to introduce an official swearing-in ceremony for new Foreign Service officers. I modeled it on the State Department's flag day when new officers were given a flag for the country the officer had been assigned to. I felt like it was important to send our new people off with a good start. And it was good. We were able to get the deputy undersecretary to speak the first couple of times, we have the undersecretary now. It's an annual event in the main hall in the main building. Everyone seems to embrace the event.

When I became the Deputy Administrator for Foreign Service operations, I focused on two issues that I already touched on. One was the change to the Foreign Service test itself because I felt like it was too subjective and left too much to chance. One panel might interpret answers one way and others differently. We had our folks work with the State Department exam folks to put together a test that I believe was much fairer and gave panels better direction.

The other big change was to bring folks into the service from an all-sources announcement. This broadened the pool of candidates rather than depending on the

internal candidates. In the end, we found that the candidates had very good qualifications. At least that was the feedback I received.

I would say this, I don't believe that we should be complacent. No matter how good a program is, the programs must change to adapt to the current environment. I've tried to communicate that to the folks that came in after me, that regardless of the programs, everything needed to be looked at to see if there were any improvements or changes that might be made.

Included in that was the new training for our officers. Under the old structure, there were plenty of training positions. However, after 2006, the number of these positions decreased. As a result, we had to set up our own training program. This training would incorporate general information about the agency, the department and the interagency. This was essential information that a new officer would need overseas. We brought in speakers from a wide range of organizations to brief our trainees including USDA commodity associations. We required all our new employees, not just the Foreign Service ones, but the Civil Service ones to go through that program too. That was very important and something that I think was good for the agency.

And of course, we needed to put in place a framework to deal with the recruitment and supervision of our folks in Afghanistan. We got involved very quickly in Afghanistan and a lot of the initial program was put in place on the fly. By 2013 or so, our focus was on getting our folks out of Afghanistan. At the time, the Administration had indicated it wanted the United States to be out of Afghanistan. That date subsequently changed but at the time, we worked on the 2014 date. I obviously depended greatly on my Assistant Deputy Administrator, Bobby Richey, to design and implement a plan.

I would say, those are the things that were really important to me. I think the budget was always an issue. There were times, I think the administration did not necessarily understand the difference between a Foreign Service post and a domestic USDA office. As you know, the Farm Service Agency had all these offices around the country to help farmers with various programs. According to the law, if you closed a domestic office, farmers had to have access to another office. I believe, if I remember correctly, you had to have another office within 20 miles. That obviously was not the case with overseas offices.

Q: Wow. My goodness.

HIGGISTON: Yes. USDA has huge domestic programs which have to be administered. There were a lot of reporting requirements for farmers, and they might have a lot of questions on our loan programs and planning requirements.

I remember during the first couple of years in the Obama Administration, the agriculture sector was seeking cutbacks. In any case, one of the initiatives was to close some of these domestic offices. I remember getting a call from our administrator. The secretary had indicated that both the domestic and foreign sectors had to share the pain. Basically, I had

to come up with five posts to close. I kind of fudged it a little bit. I closed five positions. We had one LES in Syria, and he had already moved to Lebanon. He was unable to do much work for us, but we officially closed that position. I also closed our office in Stockholm. We had earlier removed the American position from Stockholm.

For many years, Europe was a real focus in FAS. We had many offices and positions in Europe. Once the European Union came into force around 2000, Brussels was really the focal point for EU policy. We still had reporting requirements, but policy became very concentrated. I think over 10 years or so, we eliminated something like 35 positions, both American and local positions. The overwhelming number of these positions were transferred to Asia and Latin America, which were growing markets.

But anyway. So, I closed a couple of American positions. One was Bulgaria because I didn't think we really needed it as much. One was Syria, which was just an LES post. One was Sweden, which was LES. And then, I closed two American positions. Like I said, one was the assistant in Kenya and the other one was the assistant in Bulgaria. And that was fine and all well and that placated everybody. All of the LES at the closed posts wound up working for other agencies in the embassy. And it was—although it was painful on level, all the LES wound up getting jobs at the embassy, like all the folks in Sweden got a job at the embassy working for Commerce or State and so forth. So, the impact was not as bad as it could have been. But I remember I kept getting calls from the secretary's office asking whether we had closed those positions and kept them closed. And I had to confirm that we had.

Same thing occurred when we were going to close our office in Venezuela, although for political, not budgetary issues. The administration wanted us to cover the country out of Colombia. Of course, it would be impossible to assume that work. Besides the fact that the distance was prohibitive. The Venezuelan government was not giving permission for officials to travel there.

Each year, it seemed that our overseas operations were targeted for reductions. Let's face it, it costs a lot to keep people overseas. It is not something you can avoid. There were times when I was not sure how we would operate. However, the agriculture sector was very dependent on exports and lobbied Congress on our behalf. Every year, the administration would propose cuts and every year, Congress would increase our GA.

Besides the budget, personnel issues dominated our work. I remember when I became the Deputy Administrator for overseas operations, someone telling me that I was going to learn a lot about my fellow Foreign Service officers that I really would not want to know.

I would say 99 percent of the folks were really good. They were very helpful and did what they were supposed to do, but there were always some outliers. We would be sitting around our conference table in my office having a conference call, listening to some of the unbelievable things that people were doing. It seemed to me that these folks took a lot of energy to come up with these things.

But like I said, that was a small group of officers that had issues. It's something that you dealt with every day. It always struck me the inappropriate things people would put in emails. I think new officers had a harder time than folks that had started earlier. When I started, I remember getting advice from a veteran FSO. He said that when you are overseas something will always happen. It is going to make you angry or frustrated with Washington or some exporter. He advised me to write a letter to Washington, express my concerns, put the letter in my top drawer and wait 2 days. After 2 days, he said I should take the letter out and shred it. Clearly, nothing was going to be gained by venting with Washington.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: You need to get your frustrations out, but you need to shred the letter because you don't want to send a letter like that. Now, of course, we have the internet, and it is just too easy to hit the "SEND" button. I remember I was on vacation on the Eastern Shore, over Labor Day weekend. I got a call I believe from the secretary's office. Apparently, one of my officers had sent an email to an exporter telling them to go elsewhere if they didn't like our service. That was bad enough, but the attaché did not realize that the exporter was a friend of the Secretary's.

Q: Whoops.

HIGGISTON: And so, I spent time trying to save this guy from himself. Clearly, I did not want to yank this officer from his post. In the end, we were able to rectify the situation. These were the types of things we dealt with in Washington. But I had a great staff in Washington, and they would just try to resolve as much as possible before it hit my desk. It was a real challenging position, and it was definitely a bit of a burnout position. There was a lot of tension. As much as I like it, I was happy when I got the chance to leave. I was there for a little over three years, so I didn't feel like I abandoned the office.

Just one last story, just to give you a sense of some of the issues I had to deal with. One day, I came to the office and someone on my staff came to my office. She worked on getting folks out of posts for medevacs. She would send the fund site to pay for the medevac. Anyway, she comes to my office and says, "I need your help. The budget office will not approve the fund for this medevac. The spouse of one of our officers stationed in China, was pregnant and coming back to the States to give birth. State had sent a cable authorizing the medevac.

Q: Yeah.

HIGGISTON: And so, I go up to the head of the budget office and I ask why he was refusing to approve the funds. I explained that State had authorized the medevac and that we were obligated to fund it. It was not something we could ignore. I told him, "God forbid something happens to this woman overseas and we're going to be liable." In response he says, "Given the money we will be spending, you could have sent them all in first-class." I had no idea what he was talking about. I look at the cable and it indicates

that she had one or two kids traveling with her. Of course, they were accompanying her, and she would need housing.

The amount indicated on the cable was approximately $15,000. For whatever reason, he thought we were hiring a private jet to go to Beijing, pick them up, and bring them back to the States. Of course, fifteen thousand dollars would get a private jet about ten miles off the coast. I said, "You've got to trust us on some of these issues. My staff had years of experience dealing with these types of things. But he came from outside the agency and had no real understanding of the Foreign Service and the costs of working overseas. In some ways, it was good they didn't know, because paying for education was a huge cost. But I could just imagine them saying, "Okay, nobody who has kids in school can go overseas." (Laughs) That would have been their reaction.

I was definitely glad when I was assigned to Brussels. I'd always wanted to work in Europe. I'd been in Poland, as you know, but I really—for my entire career I really wanted to do something in Europe. I thought it would be a lot of fun.

Q: Let me just interrupt for a second to get our chronology on the record here. You were in the office of the deputy administrator of the Office of Foreign Operations from 2010 to 2014. Then it would have been in the summer of 2014 that you were assigned to Brussels.

HIGGISTON: Yes. So, I started as Deputy Administrator for Foreign Service Operations in August 2010. I finished in February of 2014 there, and I went in for a couple of months for language.

Q: I presume French rather than Flemish for Brussels?

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: Okay, tell us the genesis of that position as well. Were other people bidding on it? Were you in such a position in Washington that you could just choose your post or how did that work?

HIGGISTON: Well, I had reached my mandatory limit for being in Washington. Since I had to go out, my choices were limited, but because I was the Deputy Administrator for the Foreign Service, it was kind of a foregone conclusion that I would get my choice, whatever it was.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: And again, I went to Melissa, and I said, "How would you feel about Brussels?" And she was happy with that decision.

But like everything, a lot depends on the timing. If Moscow had been open at that time, it might have been my first choice. Of course, Melissa would not have been happy about that choice. So, it all worked out for everyone.

Q: And was it like an eight-year rule that you could only stay in Washington that long?

HIGGISTON: Yes. So, for us, it was an eight-year rule. I think State Department is six, if I'm not mistaken.

Q: They've changed it many times over the last four years that I've been aware of, from five to six to eight to four, depending on circumstances at the time.

HIGGISTON: Our limit according to the AFSA agreement is eight years. There was some discussion about changing it, but nothing ever happened. Most of our officers preferred being overseas, so it was not a real issue.

When we came back, we had several family issues. My mom, Melissa's parents and her sister all had health issues. We also had friends that were ill. I might have left in 2010, but when they offered me the job as deputy administrator, I felt like it was important to commit to the position for a decent amount of time. I didn't think it was fair for folks if you were there for a year or two and then left. I think it was too important a position and you needed the continuity. So, I committed to staying there. But in the summer of 2014, I had leave. When Brussels became available, I jumped at the opportunity.

Our section was responsible for organizing postings. We would draw up a list of available positions and circulate it among all officers. In general, you could bid on one or two stretch positions. The rest had to be at grade positions. My area directors would look at the posts for their geographic region. They would look at the bids and then come up with a recommendation. As a group, we would go through the lists. Once our suggestions were finalized, a book was circulated to all the deputy administrators (six including my position). We would have a meeting with all the deputies and come to a decision on the postings. Every once in a while, there were disagreements but for the most part, it went smoothly. Assignments for first tour officers was OFSO's responsibility. We would make the assignments and just inform the deputy administrators.

One of the lessons I learned was that you never go into a meeting without knowing the outcome. And so, I would go around to each of the deputy administrators, and basically go through our recommendations. I would try to address any issues they might have or answer any questions. If there were any major concerns for the majority of deputy administrators that we could not address, we reassess that choice. That did not happen very often.

Sometimes the deputy administrators did silly things, despite their good intentions. We had an officer whose spouse had health issues. He wanted to stay in the service and had lobbied the deputy administrators to go to Australia which was a shrink position for him. We wound up assigning him to Canberra although I disagreed with the choice. But he had not done his homework. It turned out that he could not get the care for his wife that he needed most importantly, in-home assistance. In the end, he wound up curtailing the assignment and I think he retired. That was an unusual situation. If there really were

significant issues with an assignment, we would change it. But like I said, for the most part, it was easy. But I think it helped going over the list ahead of time with the other deputy administrators.

And that's how I approached the changes in the Foreign Service recruitment because it was controversial, and it was critical that I meet with the deputy administrators and get them on board. For many, it would really separate the foreign service from the civil service. Under the old system, if an officer decided not to stay in the foreign service and it was prior to being tenured, you could revert to the civil service. However, the FAS budget prior to the early 2000s was good enough to bring in more people and a bigger pool to choose from. Now however, the situation had changed, and we could not afford to hire enough officers. Let's face it, during their first tour, an officer could decide that this was not the life that would fit with their families.

I went around and met with the leadership in each program area and spent time going through the new process and my reason for doing it. I truly believe that sitting down with the FAS leadership helped get its approval.

Q: Makes a big difference to big management.

HIGGISTON: Absolutely.

Q: Before we start on Brussels though, French language training. This would have been like your fourth language or fourth foreign language? You'd already done FSI for Polish and Turkish if I recall correctly?

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: And you'd done Russian separately, and now French. How was French training? How did it compare to the rest of it?

HIGGISTON: I enjoyed French training. I think it was especially good after being in Washington for almost 8 years. I worked with a contractor in Roslyn and had one-on-one training for 5 hours a day for 5 months.

Q: So, you were not in the regular FSI French course?

HIGGISTON: No. Because I started so late in the year, I decided to work with a tutor.

Q: Oh, okay.

HIGGISTON: I liked going to FSI for both Polish and for Turkish, but the timing did not work out for the French. And also, I still had a lot going on in the Department, so it was nice having a little bit more flexible schedule. If I needed to go back to the department during the week, I had time to do it.

Q: So, it was one-on-one?

HIGGISTON: Yes, it was one-on-one. I did the same thing with Russian. Because I had studied Russian in college. My schedule didn't really fit into one of the FSI courses.

Q: Was Melissa also able to take French?

HIGGISTON: No, Melissa did not take French, but Melissa knows French. She spent a year in France during college. She did take some Polish and Turkish at FSI, but not French.

Q: Okay.

Jim, I'm getting a Zoon message that our session's going to end in about four minutes, so maybe this is a good place to pause and login again separately. So, I will end the first section of today's interview now.

HIGGISTON: Okay.

Q: And then, just login to the same coordinates I sent you before and that should work.

HIGGISTON: Okay. Great.

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Q: Today is June 29, 2022. This is Peter Eicher continuing with part two of today's interview with Jim Higgiston.

Jim, we just talked about French training, and then, I guess, it must have been summer of 2014, that you moved onto Brussels.

HIGGISTON: Yes. FAS had about 10 Minister Counselor positions overseas. Most of the positions would require long term training. Honestly, I was not as interested in spending a year learning a language at the time. I was lucky that Brussels was opening when I was ready to leave Washington.

As I mentioned, OFSO oversaw assigning first tour officers overseas. I think part of the reasoning was that you wanted to make sure their first supervisor overseas would "teach them the ropes" at an embassy. I always believed that all our officers spend some time in OFSO to give them a sense of the issues they would face overseas including budgets. Plus, they would have a better sense of the types of personnel issues that they should be aware of. I would probably have to say that people who work in Foreign Service Operations had a little bit of a leg up in terms of postings. That would also be true of second and third tour officers.

In short, yes, I arrived in Brussels in August 2014. It is a good time to arrive and get settled because Brussels shuts down in August for vacation, so it is pretty quiet.

Q: Maybe you can start by setting the framework of how your job fit into the embassy and who your staff was and then move onto things you actually did.

Q: In fact, you can tell us which of the embassies in Brussels, we've got three ambassadors and missions there, which one were you assigned to.

HIGGISTON: It is interesting. Up until 1993 we had officers assigned to both the U.S. Mission to the European Community and one to the bilateral embassy with Belgium. I think in the early 2000s, we started to shift personnel from Europe to other parts of the world. At that time, the decision was made to have bilateral issues with Belgium handled out of the Hague. It was never clear to me, but two years into my tour, we shifted responsibility for Belgium bilateral issues to our office.

In any case, the U.S. Mission to the European Union became our main office in Europe primarily because trade policy was handled out of Brussels and not the member states. That is not to say the member states were not important. I often met with member state representatives in order to get a sense of the disagreements among the member states.

At the time I arrived the United States and the EU were engaged in negotiations to sign a free trade agreement. Agriculture, of course, was one of the more controversial issues that needed to be addressed. The United States and Europe approached agriculture in completely opposite directions. In my position, we supported the work USTR was doing on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Honestly, it never seemed like we would ever reach agreement. At one point, both sides were looking to eliminate agriculture from the negotiations and deal with it later. I think our agriculture sector was not happy. In any case, by 2016, the Trump administration dropped the negotiations. Nonetheless, I still did a lot of work with the Commission, the European Parliament, member states and business associations.

Despite all the issues we have with the EU, many U.S. companies invested a lot in Europe. I think a lot of U.S. companies felt comfortable working in Europe. There was a rule of law which was not always the case in other countries. Despite the difficulties, Europe was still a big market for certain U.S. products.

It may not be the same as the United States, but at least there were rules and regulations that they could understand and count on. This is not to say that Asia and Latin America were not important, but I think a lot of companies starting out in international trade focused on Europe. My sense was that U.S. companies had a higher comfort level in Europe than other places.

Brussels was the focal point for regulations and laws that affected U.S. exports. In addition, in the early 1990s, Europe began to expand particularly with new members from Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, Scandinavian countries like Sweden

joined. As a result, not only did we draw down on the number of American officers stationed in Europe, but those Americans that remained started covering more countries. Warsaw, for example, was responsible for the Baltics and, at one point, the Czech Republic. In addition, we previously assigned officers to posts. In many cases, we eliminated those positions and depended on local staff. While we counted on many of these offices to report on crop production, trade issues were all run out of Brussels.

At the time, I had been promoted to a Minister Counselor most probably due to my position as the Deputy Administrator for Foreign Service Operations. I was probably one of the higher-ranking officers there. I had a big section. I had three Americans, two first tour officers and a second or third tour officer.

We also had six local staff. And like I said, we were the ones that dealt with overall policy issues. Again, there was still a lot of reporting that had to be done on commodities. The way it was dealt with, each member state took the lead on specific commodities. Strangely, biotech reporting was handled in Paris. In the case of commodities, each post in the member states provided data on commodities and one post put all the information together.

Q: Jim, why don't we just get a clarification there. Was it your staff who was preparing the reports on grains, or was it one of the EU countries that was preparing the reports on grain?

HIGGISTON: Our office was responsible mainly for reporting primarily on policy issues. Some of the larger producers like France, the UK or Germany would submit country level reports too.

Q: You mean the national government of the countries as opposed to our embassies in the countries?

HIGGISTON: No, our FAS staff in different member states would gather and coordinate the reports.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: Not sure I covered this, but we had two types of reports "required" and "voluntary". The required reports were done on an annual and, in some cases, a semi-annual basis. In Europe, these reports focused on the entire EU. However, some posts with significant agriculture sectors might submit a voluntary report that addressed specific issues in the individual member states. Traditionally, prior to the early 2000s, each big producer would submit their own reports. After that time, there were combined annual reports. It's been a while and I had to think about it for a second.

Q: Each of the embassies?

HIGGISTON: Yes, sorry. We had offices in just about all of the EU countries. Not necessarily with U.S. officers. In fact, most just had local staff. Some of the smaller countries had no offices and we worked with the economic sections in those countries.

Q: Right.

HIGGISTON: And once they created a single market under the Maastricht agreement our coverage changed. I am not sure what year that agreement came into force.

Q: I can't remember exactly the year.

HIGGISTON: So, basically at that point, yeah, at that point they basically assigned each of the commodity reports to a different embassy in the European Union.

Q: Okay. So, just for example, our embassy in Madrid might be doing grains and our embassy in Rome might be doing livestock or whatever?

HIGGISTON: Exactly.

Q: And most of this has now migrated to Brussels? Or was—

HIGGISTON: No. What I was trying to say is, prior to, I think 2000, 2002, each of the embassies did their own report. After that, they consolidated the annual reports, so there would be one report for the European Union on grains, one report on livestock, one report on horticultural products. However, as I mentioned, those were required reports. Many of our posts submitted voluntary reports particularly in the larger producing countries.

Q: And that might be prepared by any one of the embassies that happened to get that assignment. Okay.

HIGGISTON: And it was their responsibility to gather the information from the other embassies and consolidate the data and then submit the reports.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

HIGGISTON: But again, each of the embassies might do a voluntary report if there was significant production in those countries. Again, there were required annual and semi-annual reports that were required and those would be the consolidated reports. But, if there was a significant event in Poland, for example, that post would submit a voluntary report. Posts were also responsible for their marketing events like trade shows or promotional events.

But policy was the primary focus for Brussels. So, if there were discussions on the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) or EU wide changes in certain regulations, we were involved and reported on it. To be clear, however, I did not supervise the other posts. I could ask them to research an issue on the member state level, but I had no authority over

them. I had no problem with this set up, but there were definitely times when you had to ask them for help on an issue which might not be their priority.

Q: Their priority was not necessarily your priority.

HIGGISTON: Exactly. I think it was important to know what the member states were thinking about an issue. Whenever we had to go to the member states, it could take time. So, one of my proposals was for our office to take over responsibility for U.S.-Belgian relations, which to me made a lot of sense since our bilateral embassy was right across the alley from the Mission to the EU. I may have mentioned it before, but up until that point, The Hague handled bilateral issues.

Q: The bilateral agriculture was handled out of The Hague.

HIGGISTON: Yeah.

Q: Yeah, okay.

HIGGISTON: I think the change was okay with everyone, since our attaché in The Hague did not have a lot of opportunities to come down to Brussels. And we were right across the street. So, I basically asked to take over that, mainly because it would give one of my first tour officers some responsibility on dealing with a single country. It would also give us some insight into what the member states might be saying about something that was going on in the commission. So, if something came up, instead of having to ask Berlin or another office in Europe to go in and inquire, we could go directly to the contacts in the Member State offices to get their take. Also, a lot of member states like the Netherlands and the UK were supportive of international trade, the Belgians were not as friendly. It was good to get their perspective.

Interestingly, I found that the member states had a lot more wiggle room to operate than I thought. They don't necessarily have to follow everything that the commission says.

Q: Oh, really?

HIGGISTON: Absolutely. While external trade rules were uniform across the EU (as well as tariffs), implementation of some regulations could be different. There were several times when disagreements arose between Belgium and the Netherlands over implementation and enforcement of agriculture regulations. I always felt a certain tension between the member states and the Commission. It didn't necessarily affect us directly, but it was something that we needed to follow.

It was good to have that insight and be able to speak with folks and get some information on the situation. I liked working with the commission. They were not very helpful at all times, but they were very pleasant. If I needed to see them, I could easily get a meeting. I liked working with them. I mean, if I needed to go in, I could go in and get a meeting

especially for visitors whenever I needed as opposed to, let's say, trying to see someone in Pretoria.

While I was there, we hired someone who had worked at the parliament. Prior to that, as far as I know, we did not have many contacts in the parliament. It gave us a new source of information and perspective. We went to Strasburg several times to see members of parliament. There was very little around the parliament in Strasbourg so we kind of had a captive audience. My new staff member had worked for the head of the agriculture committee, and we were able to see him whenever we needed to. I remember the chairman explaining the difficulties they were having in passing legislation. He noted that in the past, there were many more members who for lack of a better term, moderate. The center of the parliament was much larger than the extremes on both sides. Now the center had shrunk while the extremists on the left and right were much larger, and it took a lot more effort to try to get something approved. I felt like it mirrored the situation in the U.S. Congress.

It was really to our benefit that we had those contacts in the parliament. When Secretary Vilsack came to Brussels in 2017, we were able to arrange for him to speak to the agriculture committee in the parliament. He spoke for about 45 minutes and then took over 20 questions from the members.

The other funny issue that I would point out to visitors. We would pass by the European Parliament building which was huge. I would then tell them that the EU has another building in Strasburg that was just as big and that the parliament moved between Brussels and Strasburg several times a year.

Q: Well, explain for the uninitiated such as me the European Union administration, organization, the commission and the council and the parliament and all of these other bodies. Was there something that was equivalent to a ministry of agriculture within that, and would that have been what you were dealing with?

HIGGISTON: Yes. Sectors of the European economy were led by DGs.

Q: Director generals?

HIGGISTON: Yes. There was a DG for agriculture, and their building was right up the street from our building so we could walk to our meetings. There were DGs for environment, trade, industrial policy and so forth. What was interesting was that, of course, the European Union was basically an economic organization. Most foreign policy was handled in the member states.

So, they were dealing more with economic policy on industry and so forth and regulations on the environment than they were doing on, let's say, what our position might be towards Europe.

Q: Okay. I don't know exactly when that started. I know as early as the early nineties there was something called the Common Foreign Policy, and they were working on that, but I was never involved enough to know what the rules or anything were.

HIGGISTON: Right. But it was interesting because we had a political section in the mission to the EU, and I always felt they were looking for a purpose because most of the focus was on economic issues. We were doing a lot of work on CAP reform and trade. TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) was very much a focus and we often had visits from USTR and were supporting the negotiations. We also had someone from USTR at the mission, one of the few posts overseas where they worked.
So, it was kind of interesting for me to be in a mission where the primary focus was on the economic side. Not that the political people didn't have a lot to do, but it was mostly dealing with visitors.

Q: Yeah.

HIGGISTON: So, we were involved with obviously things like TTIP and where the negotiations were going. We would be at the table when negotiating sessions were held on agriculture.

Q: TTIP?

HIGGISTON: Yes. TTIP was the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership initiative. I knew you were going to ask me.

Q: You also mentioned CAP.

HIGGISTON: Common Agricultural Policy. Basically, the CAP outlined agriculture policy for the entire EU. In the United States, we pass a Farm Bill every 5 years or so. In the EU, they use the CAP.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: TTIP was the proposed trade agreement between the EU and the United States.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: However, once the Trump Administration came in, they basically ended the negotiations.

Q: Ah. But that was after your time or while you were still there, I guess, huh?

HIGGISTON: TTIP was shut down while I was there. I think negotiations ended in 2017. That was during the Trump administration.

Q: It was afterwards. Trump came in, when?

HIGGISTON: Trump was elected in 2016. Inauguration was in 2017. Negotiations ended soon after.

Q: Sixteen. Oh. Okay, so you did have some of that, yeah.

HIGGISTON: Yes. There were periodical negotiations while I was there. So, I worked on TTIP for 2 – 3 years. We still had a way to go. Agriculture, as usual, was a problem and, if I remember correctly, at one point there were discussions to try to reach an agreement without agriculture. Agriculture would be handled separately. Seemed to me, agriculture was so sensitive that reaching an agreement would be difficult. However, I am not sure we could have gotten it past Congress without an agreement on agriculture.

In any case, shortly after his inauguration, President Trump shut down the negotiations. It was bad but not as bad as TPP. Negotiations had been completed with that agreement. Same with NAFTA, although NAFTA was not jettisoned. There were changes made to the agreement, but the agreement was not eliminated.

Q: Right. Okay.

So, you were involved, I would guess, both in reporting on negotiations of the Europeans among themselves as well as the negotiations between the Europeans and the United States, is that accurate?

HIGGISTON: Well, since we had a representative at post from USTR, they handled the reporting. Plus, to be honest, I had the staff sit in on the meetings. I would come for the opening session, but I didn't really have a role.

Q: Yeah, vaguely.

HIGGISTON: I think I spoke about this. When I worked in Warsaw, the Economic Counselor was John Hoover. He was a nice guy, and we were friends. Anyway, when he retired, he moved first to Italy and then Brussels. He had married someone from the European Commission. Before the end of my tour in Warsaw, we visited him in Brussels. He was driving us around the city. It was the first time I had been in Brussels in a number of years. In any case, we're driving around the city. Brussels is an interesting city, a combination of old buildings and modern buildings.

We seemed to be in an older part of the city, and I remember going down this one street. There was a huge building at the end of the block, and I said, "What is that?" He says, "That's the European parliament." And I said, "I can't believe how big that building is!" Without missing a beat, John says, "If you think that's big, they have a second one in Strasbourg." I started working in Brussels in 2014 and visited Strasbourg for meetings because it was a lot easier to see some of the members because the Parliament building

was away from the center of the city. It was a low-key area and there wasn't that much to do in Strasbourg except be at the parliament during business hours anyway.

And we would go there, and I would have meetings sometimes arranging meetings for the ambassador. I found it very helpful. In Brussels, each of the member states had representatives in Brussels and I found them to be very helpful. They were always willing to discuss the agricultural issues affecting trade.

The Dutch were very good; I thought their attaché had very good insight. Whenever we had a high-level visitor from Washington, I always tried to arrange a meeting with him. The British and Germans were also very good. They had very good insight especially into the TTIP negotiations. They would offer what they thought would be difficult issues.

One thing I particularly like was the reduced travel compared to my time, especially in Turkey where I was traveling 50 to 75 percent of the time. I enjoyed the fact that I didn't have to do a lot of really long trips because it took a lot out of me when I was in Turkey. It was easy if I had to speak in France. It was only a two-hour train ride. I could do it in a day if I needed to. Or I could go to Amsterdam or the UK by train. It was not stressful. And even if I had to fly, it was usually a short flight. I spoke at a couple of events in Croatia, and it was only an hour or so to fly there. I did enough travel, but it was travel that was manageable and I enjoyed it.

I think most of my contact with Washington was with USTR. That was due to the fact that we were not necessarily a traditional FAS office. When I first arrived I did very little commodity reporting compared with other posts and we were focused primarily on trade policy issues with the EU. Obviously, TTIP dominated our work until 2017. As a result, I found myself dealing with USTR more than FAS. In order to discuss our approach on issues like beef trade, for example.

Q: So, USTR was actually leading the TTIP negotiations, but were you part of the delegation that was involved in that but doing the agricultural side of it?

HIGGISTON: Yes. USTR led the negotiations. They had an agriculture person so they would take the lead. I believe she worked at FAS early in her career. I would normally sit at the table, but I didn't have a real role during the talks. I did a lot of follow up on the negotiations and on specifics. I never traveled to the States when negotiations were held in Washington. I'm sure USTR and FAS would have supported it, but I didn't really see a need. When I did participate, I did not have a significant role. If there was a question, I might be asked for input, but, as I mentioned, I was mostly an observer.

Q: So, this was clearly very different from work as a bilateral agriculture attaché, very multilateral kind of situation?

HIGGISTON: Totally different. For example, in a traditional office we did a fair amount of marketing work, going to trade shows or holding special events. But we were not doing that much in Brussels. I think there were one or two trade shows that we would

attend. When we assumed responsibility for the bilateral embassy, we did a bit more. Again, I already mentioned that the bilateral Ambassador's residence was next to the Mission to the EU. It was downtown and we certainly had a lot more participation by European representatives because of the location. It could take 40 minutes to get to the Ambassador for the EU Mission. At the bilateral Ambassador's residence invitees could get there in no time. We wound up doing a marketing event for the U.S. Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. U.S. bourbon and whiskey were popular products in Europe. They brought in a mixologist to demonstrate the use of U.S. products in cocktails. It was a nice event, but the bilat ambassador did not attend.

I really liked our time in Brussels. It was a good place to live and work, especially after my time in Washington. For me, it was a lot more manageable. I had much more control over my schedule than in other places, like Turkey.

We had a fair number of visitors. The secretary came twice. And it really gave me insight into recognizing what the secretary's strengths were or what he enjoyed doing. Secretary Vilsack was a lawyer from Iowa.

Anyway, the Secretary was traveling to Paris to attend COP 21 at the end of 2015. At the time, the DG for Agriculture was going to hold a big conference in Brussels, similar to the USDA's annual Outlook Conference. Commissioner Hogan had invited the Secretary and because of the timing of COP 21, he agreed to attend. In addition to several meetings, we were able to arrange two events. It was a full schedule because he came one morning and left the next evening for Paris.

My impression at the time was that the Secretary did not particularly like meetings. He really wanted to accomplish something when he had a meeting. This was true in Washington as well when he was traveling. Many times, meetings are used to establish some type of working relationship. The majority of times, you are not going to have any major breakthroughs. A lot of times meetings were a way to understand each side's priorities. If the Secretary had a full day of meetings, you could tell that he was not happy.

In any case, because of our relationship with the chair of the EU agriculture committee, the Secretary was also invited to speak to the committee members and answer questions from the committee. Before the event I asked the Secretary if he wanted to take 3 questions at a time. Instead, he said he would take all the questions at once and then answer all of them. The Secretary spoke for around 20 minutes and after his presentation, he took about 20 – 25 questions from the members, taking notes after each question. He grouped similar questions and spoke for over 90 minutes. He was phenomenal. I think the parliamentarians really appreciated the time he spent with them and his insight into the world agriculture situation as well as agriculture policy in the United States.

The second day he participated in the EU agriculture conference. Commissioner Hogan invited him to have some opening remarks and then take questions from the audience. I think he sat there with Commissioner Hogan for over an hour answering questions.

That afternoon, he asked me to accompany him to the train station for his trip to Paris. He was in a great mood, and I realized that both events played to his strengths. He likes talking to audiences and having these types of conversations with people as opposed to being in a meeting talking about market access issues. I gained a greater appreciation for his skills as a politician.

Q: Okay. I've got a couple of more questions, but I think we're down to about five minutes here, so let me log us out and log us back in again, if that's all right?

HIGGISTON: Okay.

Q: Okay.

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Q: Today is June 29, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher continuing with part three of today's interview with Jim Higgiston.

Jim, I wanted to ask you, you seem to have enjoyed working with the EU bureaucracy, but generally speaking, the EU bureaucracy has a horrible reputation around Europe and the world as just being this giant, behemoth, impossible to deal with kind of place. Was that the impression you got of it?

HIGGISTON: Sure. Maybe I had low expectations, but I knew what the EU bureaucracy was like and so, nothing surprised me. I knew that I was not going to change their minds on our major issues. I have to say that, while we were not particularly pleased with a lot of EU policies, it was still a big market for us. I also have to say that the EU folks would be willing to meet with me on short notice. If I received a request from Washington in the morning, many times I could set up a meeting with them in the afternoon, to at least deliver the message from Washington.

Also, I also realized early on that it was important to speak with representatives from the member states. You could see that the relationship between the Commission and the member states had its issues. It seemed to me that a lot of member states were not happy with the commission. They didn't necessarily like Brussels and felt that Brussels had too much power. I was also there when the run up to Brexit was occurring.

Q: Ah.

HIGGISTON: I found that I enjoyed dealing with the folks in Brussels. They were very direct, which I appreciated. Obviously, as I mentioned, USTR oversaw negotiations for TTIP. Going to Europe and trying to change minds about biotechnology or the safety of U.S. products was not going to happen. More experienced and smarter U.S. representatives had the job before me and were not able to solve these issues. So, I just tried not to make things worse.

But I butted heads from time to time. I remember our main contact from the Commission on the working level could be pretty difficult and we would often get into an argument. But for the most part, it was fine. Talking with representatives from agriculture associations was very helpful and as I said, representatives from the EU member states were very helpful. The Dutch were very cooperative, and we probably had more in common. One of the deputy commissioners had been the deputy minister of agriculture in Poland when I served in Warsaw. He was a good person to discuss issues with.

We also had a good group of agriculture attachés from the other embassies or member state offices in Brussels who were very helpful. Depending on the post, these groups were a good source of information. We had a good group in Moscow. I think it depends on the access to information. In Moscow, we exchanged a lot of information, information that was not readily available. In Poland and Turkey, these groups were not as important.

A lot of the agricultural attachés in the group in Brussels were from non-EU countries. In many countries agriculture was handled by an economic or commercial officer. That was the case in Turkey. But in major countries like the USSR or the EU, the attachés were specifically agricultural. We would get together and discuss various issues that were affecting our countries like Argentina, Brazil, or Mexico.

Attachés from Asian countries also came to our events. As I said, it was a good opportunity to talk to them to get some insight into how they were approaching different policy issues with the EU. Compared with most of my posts, I really enjoyed living in Brussels. It reminded me of living in Washington. It was a normal place. I could easily commute to work on public transportation. On top of that, as I mentioned, my official travel was a lot easier. For one thing it was less of it compared with Turkey, for example, with all my travel to Central Asia.

I didn't have any great expectations that I was going to change policy, but rather give folks in Washington insight into what the Europeans were thinking. I always felt that it was one of our most important roles to give folks in Washington perspective. We live with these things every day. Sometimes you don't realize how much you absorb living in a country. Time and time again, we would have visitors from Washington that had a very different understanding of what was happening on the ground. It is not just the decisions that are being made by host countries, but the reason why those decisions are being made— what went into the decision and how the different players in a country contributed to the decision.

I liked that type of analysis, trying to explain that to folks in Washington. I got the impression from people in Washington that the EU was a cohesive block that agreed on most issues, and that was not necessarily the case. I enjoyed that part of the job because I truly felt it was an area where we could contribute.

Q: Right. Now, were you dealing with some of these big issues, or did you have problem issues? We're constantly reading in the newspaper about, oh, my goodness, Europe has

banned poultry imports because of whatever, bird flu or the United States has banned wine imports for whatever reason. Were those the kind of things that came to your desk sometimes?

HIGGISTON: Obviously, any major issues affecting our exports to Europe would find their way to my desk. However, there weren't many issues that we were not aware of. Unlike the USSR, Turkey or Poland, there weren't many surprises. We had a good sense if changes in policy were being made. You mentioned poultry. That was an issue that had been banned as early as the 1960 or 1970s because of the way we produced poultry. The things that came to us dealt with labeling of products or the banning of certain herbicides which might affect our exports.

We had another issue, regarding labeling on wine. The EU wanted wine to be labeled differently depending on the alcohol content. One of the things I learned overseas was the importance of mutual interests. I mentioned Poland a while ago. The Poles wanted to ship canned hams to the United States, and we wanted to ship poultry through Poland to Ukraine and Russia. Well, it was to both our benefit that this trade continued and so it was in both our interests to keep our markets open.

So, obviously, in the case of wine, the Europeans were selling a lot of wine to the United States, so if we had an issue, it was a little bit easier for us to negotiate with the EU because they wanted to keep our market open to their products. Same situation with distilled liquors. We wanted to sell to Europe, and they wanted to sell to us. We were able to get distilled liquor into Europe because they were selling things like scotch and Irish whiskey to the United States, so they had a stake in the game. And you had folks, even on their side, in the industry side that would support us. If we had an issue, they would go into the Commission and tell them that they could get hit with the same restrictions.

On the red meat side, we had an agreement with the Europeans, and at times it wasn't clear whether they were really meeting their obligations. But USTR had negotiated that agreement and the U.S. industry would complain to USTR, and we were there in a supporting role. So, the issues we faced in the EU were quite different from the ones we faced in developing or middle-income countries. Most of our issues with Europe were long term issues. There was a hope that the more difficult issues would be resolved in the TTIP negotiations.

Q: Mm-hm. And you would apparently put a lot of work into TTIP, as I guess a lot of others had. How did you feel when that was suddenly yanked off the table?

HIGGISTON: Well, at the time the negotiations were canceled there was actually some discussion around having an agreement without agriculture. I think the issues that needed to be addressed were a non-starter. I think the farm industry in Europe was adamant about keeping U.S. products out. We never got to the point of pulling agriculture out of the agreement.

Personally, I thought the TPP, the Asian agreement, was much more important. And, given that the TTIP negotiations were still in progress, I felt it was much more disappointing that TPP was jettisoned. We weren't going to have a lot of major breakthroughs in TTIP, but TPP would have been essential in responding to China and to Europe. The Europeans were signing agreements left and right, while we were really not making much headway. TPP would have been a FTA with about 14 countries.

I think the opposition to these types of agreements was growing in the United States. U.S. trade policy starting after World War II was basically the United States opening up our markets in order to generate business for the world. After all, after the war, ours was the only economy that was not destroyed. We agreed to lower our tariffs while most other countries, including the Europeans, were allowed to keep their tariffs high. That was okay when the rest of the world was still recovering but by the 1960s and 1970s, our economy began suffering from imports, especially on the industrial side. We have been pretty competitive especially for soybeans and corn but in terms of products that others produced we became non-competitive. I think what we have been seeing is a reaction to the trade policy of the last 50 years.

The postwar period was extremely important. That's when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were created. Officials recognized that countries used high tariffs to respond to other countries. As a result, the depression deepened and lasted longer than necessary. There was definitely a recognition on the part of the United States and Great Britain that the world needed to avoid that situation. Trade, however, was still very sensitive. Today, we have the World Trade Organization (WTO) but right after the war, there were serious discussions about creating the International Trade Organization (ITO) but most counties were still fearful that imports would displace domestic industries. As a result, the countries agreed to the creation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT}). That resulted in a series of trade negotiation rounds beginning in the 1960s with the Douglas and Tokyo rounds. Each of these rounds tackled various trade impediments until we reached the Uruguay Round and the creation of the WTO. Interestingly, agricultural products were not covered under the GATT, and it wasn't until the 1990s that the world agreed to establish rules governing trade in agriculture.

However, the lowering of tariffs had a huge effect on our industries like steel, autos, and furniture, for example. It negatively affected employment in these areas. On the other hand, prices for these products fell precipitously and made a lot of products more affordable to Americans. The downside, like I said, was that employment in a lot of areas really suffered. The negative reaction by many people not only in the United States was due to the policies begun in the 1940s.

For agriculture, lower tariffs and the opening of markets meant that U.S. consumers had access to products that had in the past been unavailable. I grew up in New York, and during the winter, we had very little in the way of citrus products. Fruits and vegetables just were not available. You didn't have things like oranges from Mexico or grapes from Chile. As European wines were imported into the United States, it contributed to the U.S.

wine industry. Like everything, trade is a mixed bag. There were both good and bad things that occurred due to free trade.

So, to answer your questions. I wasn't happy about the negotiations stopping but I didn't lose any sleep over it. Perhaps we need to definitely look at all the implications of trade agreements. Most importantly, we need to be aware of the negative aspects.

Q: Okay. You mentioned Brexit in passing. Were you just a spectator, or did that involve your work—did that affect your work?

HIGGISTON: I was in Brussels in the run up to the vote in the UK over Brexit. We were not involved, and we certainly were not asked to comment on the situation. It was an internal issue for the EU and the UK. Our role was to get a sense of the reaction and consequences for the agriculture sector. Obviously, the folks in the UK were following that issue much more closely.

I think we benefited greatly from having the UK in the EU. We received good information from them, and they tempered the more radical countries like France and Italy who were less supportive of trade with the United States. We felt that there would be a shift in influence in the EU. With the membership of the Scandinavian countries and the UK along with the Central European countries, there seemed to be more support for opening Europe to competition. With the UK leaving, that support would disappear.

I do remember that we had someone on my staff from the UK. He insisted that the vote would fail and that it would never happen. Of course, I think the UK leadership was complacent and felt the same way. Unfortunately, the pro-Brexit contingent resonated with the British who were not happy with Brussels. In any case, we woke up the morning after the vote and here we are. I think a lot of Brits are just now realizing the difficulties they will be facing.

Q: Yeah, wow. Yeah, it was really something.

Now, you haven't told us who your ambassadors were and what you thought of them.

HIGGISTON: The Ambassador to the European Union was Anthony Gardner. He was Ambassador during my tour. He was very supportive of our work. He was, like, tell me what you want me to say, and I'll say it. "Write me something and I'll do whatever you want".

I remember him being a very pleasant to work with. Never saw him get mad. He was very willing to meet with our visitors. I always tried to protect my ambassadors from people coming in, but if there was someone that I thought was worthwhile, especially on the industry side, and he was always willing to meet with them.

Ambassador Bauer was the bilat ambassador and she is now ambassador to France.

Q: (Indiscernible) honestly, she's a big name in Democratic politics somehow, I guess. I'm assuming she was a political appointee.

HIGGISTON: Oh yes. I think for the most part the Ambassador to the EU and the Ambassador to Belgium were usually political appointees.

Q: Okay. And that would have been the first one. It must have changed in the beginning of 2017 when the administration changed, when Trump would have come in?

HIGGISTON: When I finished in Brussels, the Mission was headed by a chargé. The Trump administration did not appoint ambassadors very quickly.

Q: You didn't have an appointee. Wasn't there one who became a big name in the Ukraine fake voting, whatever the Trump Ukraine scandal was?

HIGGISTON: You are thinking of Gordon Sondland but he was not appointed until the end of June 2018. I left post in August 2018, but my replacement had already arrived, so I had no contact with him.

Q: That was after you.

HIGGISTON: Yes, he came in June 2018. I arrived back to Brussels in July and left for Pretoria at the beginning of August.

Q: In the department you mean, yeah, okay.

HIGGISTON: Yes, I was acting Administrator beginning in January 2018 and he arrived in June 2018. But it was the same thing in Pretoria. We didn't have an ambassador there for most of my tour. The appointments were very slow, but I think that is now the rule rather than the exception. I hear the Biden Administration has been pretty slow too.

Q: Yeah, it's just shamefully slow how that goes, and I don't think you can blame it all on Congress. Some of them, I don't think, have even been named by the administration, so.

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: Okay. Well, it sounds like it was an interesting assignment. It was supposed to be a three-year assignment and turned out to be a three-year assignment?

HIGGISTON: No, it was a four-year assignment in Brussels, and I was there for three and a half years.

Q: Oh, okay.

HIGGISTON: So, I was supposed to be there until the summer of 2018. I was there till December 2017 returned to Washington in January 2018 and returned to Brussels to pack out and move to Pretoria at the beginning of August 2018.

Q: Okay. Well, that's obviously big and important, and congratulations to you, being appointed acting administrator is really something. But I think given the timeframe on this, it would probably be a neater interview if rather than getting into that for ten minutes we would save it for next time.

HIGGISTON: The only thing I would probably bring up was the bombing in Brussels, which occurred when we were there. The airport and metro were bombed on March 22, 2016. The metro that was bombed was right down the street from our office. I think twenty people were killed on the metro and a number of folks at the airport. We knew the person killed at the airport.

Q: Uh-huh.

HIGGISTON: And that really changed the environment there. We had people in the embassy that would not take the Metro anymore. I don't know if anybody curtailed at the time, but it definitely made a big difference in the way you felt about things. You just had a different feeling going out and walking around the city. Seemed like anything could happen. If you were getting on a tram or there was a box or package on the street it made you very uncomfortable. For whatever reason, it was different after 9/11. I think it was due to the fact that there were a lot of attacks or bombings going on in France and Belgium. It just seemed more personal. It really changed things. It really affected the latter half of our tour there.

Q: Who were the perpetrators?

HIGGISTON: I think it was ISIS if I'm not mistaken. There was a huge North African area in Brussels. We were told to avoid it and it seemed to me that the local police did not have good control over it. I mentioned the attacks in France. I think in the end, the Belgian government was accused of being hands off with the North Africans. I seem to recall that the Belgian government believed that Belgium would not be a target if the government was not strict. I also think that some of the attackers from one of the incidents in France came from Brussels. So eventually, the Belgian government and police force had to change its tactics.

The police were a lot more present and visible after that, both on the street and in the Metro, for example. But it was definitely a game changer, I think, for a lot of us, so.

Q: No, no, that's sad, indeed, and there's so many places the same kind of thing has been happening.

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: The world has changed in that way.

HIGGISTON: Exactly. And like I said, I could tell the staff was pretty shook up about the whole thing and so forth, and it was just one of those things. I mean, you just have to carry on at some point, but it was—it made a big difference in the way we operated, anyway, so. It was nice to be able to walk to places, I'll have to say, and not have to worry about getting on the Metro or getting in a taxi. That really changed.

Q: Okay. Well, let's leave it there for today then. I'll stop the recording and we can look at our calendars.

HIGGISTON: Okay.

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Q: Today is July 14, Bastille Day, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Jim Higgiston.

Bonjour, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Bonjour.

Q: When we left off last time it was the end of 2017, beginning of 2018. You were still in Brussels, but you were about to leave there for Washington. So, why don't you tell us about that and how it happened and why.

HIGGISTON: So, my tour in Brussels was supposed to end in the summer of 2018, but in November, right around Thanksgiving, I got a call from a friend of mine, Holly Higgins, who was the Minister Counselor in Ottawa. She had been brought back to Washington right after the election to be the acting Administrator of FAS.

As I said, she was stationed in Ottawa, and the Secretary asked her to come to Washington to be acting administrator. As you know, under the Trump Administration they had been slow in putting in political appointees in many of the positions, and the administrator slot at FAS had not been filled. So, they asked Holly to come back and be acting administrator. I think by the end of November, she was ready for a change and to go back to Ottawa and to her family. As a result, they needed someone to take her place. I was one of the highest-ranking officers in our Foreign Service and I knew Holly. Nothing was going on in Brussels with TTIP negotiations halted.

I think it was probably one of those situations, right place, right time, and they needed someone. Holly and I had started around the same time in the FAS and had known each other for close to 30 years. Holly called me up and basically said that I was going to get a call from the undersecretary at the time, and that they wanted me to take her place as acting Administrator.

I was definitely hesitant. I had some issues with some of the folks in Washington including my boss at the time who was also in charge of the budget. We did not see eye to eye on a lot of things, and I knew that if he was there when I came back that that would not be a good thing. I gave Holly a lot of reasons why I thought it would be a bad idea and why I was the right person for the job. However, after I had given my reasons, that I would be coming back because she was definitely not going to stay. In December the undersecretary ostensibly came to Brussels to meet me. He wanted to see if we could work together. We had a meeting and had dinner that night. He was a very nice man. At dinner, he talked about his agenda and what he wanted to do. He asked me a lot of questions and that sealed the deal.

I got there towards the end of January. Initially, FAS had wanted me to move to South Africa immediately, but I didn't want to just move and leave Melissa there by herself for 6 months. It was going to be a tough move anyway, so I declined and preferred leaving her in Brussels where she was working and where she had a good network of friends.

I arrived towards the end of January and was acting Administrator for about four months. In February a permanent candidate had been announced but it would be another two months before he would assume his position.

I stayed through June and stayed for our summer attaché conference. It went pretty quickly. I had temporary housing in Pentagon City. It was a short commute to the Department.

During my time as acting Administrator, I dealt a lot with the budget and the reorganization of the agency. I had to brief the Secretary on our budget, and he did not make it easy. The Administration always wanted to cut our budget but had a lot of friends in the industry and we normally did well and received more money than expected.

The reorganization of the agency that had started about two years before I arrived in January 2018, and it was starting to pick up steam. There were a lot of internal discussions among all levels of staff in the agency. Industry was also brought in for their thoughts. I was part of that discussion, but I think my primary role was to keep the discussion going and encourage folks to participate. I knew we were not going to finish the project, but I wanted to do as much as we could for the new Administrator.

It was kind of interesting. I tried not to do anything that would hurt the agency. Knowing early on that a permanent administrator had been announced, I tried to prepare for his arrival. I didn't do any traveling during that period. As I mentioned I dealt with the budget and some personnel issues. I tried to reassure the staff who I think were a bit unnerved having 3 administrators over 6 months. I also had the opportunity to brief the undersecretary once every two weeks and would have an hour to discuss any issues we felt he needed to be aware of.

When I first started at FAS, we had an undersecretary for domestic programs and international issues. That was a huge portfolio. As a result, the undersecretary had two

deputy undersecretaries, one for domestic and one for international issues. Under the Trump Administration, the structure of USDA changed, and our undersecretary was only responsible for international issues. That led to the elimination of the deputy undersecretary positions. So, as acting administrator of FAS, I reported directly to the undersecretary. I felt very fortunate, because the deputy secretary had worked in FAS and led one of our most important cooperators. The undersecretary, Ted McKinney, was great. Very easy to work with and very open to hearing our thoughts. He had worked in Indiana as ag commissioner under Mike Pence who was governor at the time.

Ted was very receptive and very willing to hear my take on a situation. He didn't necessarily agree with everything, but he would at least hear me out before making a decision. I think that is all you are really looking for.

During my time in Washington, we had a situation with someone at FAS, in a high-level position, who was disruptive. There was an internal event, and the undersecretary recognized this person's role to the audience. I think he felt that by complimenting this person, they would be more cooperative and more of a team player. Unfortunately, I think it just had the opposite effect because this person was emboldened, and the staff felt that the undersecretary was condoning this person's actions. During my one-on-one meeting with the undersecretary and tried to explain the situation. In fact, in the end they moved that person out right when the new administrator took office. Again, the fact that he was willing to hear me out, was much appreciated.

I was very happy to work with the political appointees at USDA. They were very knowledgeable and easy to work with. Some other departments had issues, but we did well by our appointees. In general, there is not a great change in agriculture policy, especially international affairs. Both parties supported trade because agriculture depended on open markets. I know Secretary Vilsack and Secretary Perdue knew each other and got along.

I always felt that as career people, we had feet in two different worlds. Of course, we were there to carry out the administration's policy. On the other hand, I always felt it was important for us to look at where the agency would be in 10 years.

But like I said, I mean, that wasn't a huge difference in administrations. I mentioned that FAS was very flexible and could adjust to a changing external situation. When there was a crisis in Russia, we could target our programs there. When the Balkans were a concern, we changed the focus. But remember these were "temporary" changes reflecting the situation. In the end, we always focused on our core work.

I helped with the transition with the new administrator. I also had to take the required security training for Pretoria. The so-called crash and bang course at the training center. It was required of all officers, but it was difficult getting into the program. My folks were able to get me into the program because I was acting administrator. That saved a lot of time and eliminated the need for me to come back to DC later.

Q: Let me stop you before you start moving into the next assignment and just ask you a couple of questions about this. You know, you were now suddenly for four months sitting at the very pinnacle of the agency you've been working for decades, and first of all, congratulations on that. That's quite an honor. But looking down on your agency, did you find some lessons learned? Did you understand better what the people above you had been saying at times? Did you have better advice you could give to people below you because you had been through this? Or did you even have time to deal with that kind of conceptual issues?

HIGGISTON: Given my situation, I knew I would only be there a short time. Plus, I was there in February when they announced the permanent administrator. So, my time was even shorter. Policy issues were not much of a concern because we continued to do our basic work. The major issue we were dealing with was reorganizing the agency. And I think there was a lot of concern over what direction the agency was going to go in. And so, I just encouraged some of the folks that were running the feedback sessions to make sure they were very inclusive, and to bring as many people in as possible at all levels so at least they could provide input. I always believed that more information was better. I tried to reassure people. I would always walk the halls and talk to people in the halls, just to see how they were doing and so forth. Most of the other Deputy Administrators were fine with this, but I did have one Deputy that didn't like it.

One of the other things I did affected my senior staff meeting. I noticed everyone being on cell phones during the meeting. I thought we only met for an hour a week and that our attention should be on that meeting. So, I brought a basket to the meeting and asked people to put their cell phones in the basket for the duration of the meeting.

Q: Oh, my goodness.

HIGGISTON: Yes. I thought it was strange. I tried to assure this person that I was not sitting there talking about them. I knew a lot of people in the agency, and I wanted to get their thoughts on the agency.

Going back to the Hill, like I said, agriculture depended on trade and so, the industry really supported our work. And, because the industry supported us, the Hill supported us. To be honest, our budget was fairly small compared to the majority of agencies in the government. One person characterized our budget as a "rounding error".

My sense was that FAS, for the most part, got along with the folks up on the Hill. I had to go up to the Hill on a couple of occasions. The first time I went to the Hill was back in 2013 or so regarding Afghanistan. But since, State and AID were funding us, the staffers didn't have much concern over our work. When I was acting administrator, I had to make a presentation on the budget to staffers. Again, it was low-key and informal.

The staffers usually wanted to know what was going on in the agency and if we had any concerns. During my tie as acting administrator, there weren't that many issues. I think when the Obama administration wanted us more involved with Afghanistan, the Hill was

certainly concerned that we were being taken away from our core functions. That was not the case, of course. Plus, it did not impact our staffing or budget. But again, the one or two times I went to the Hill to speak with staffers was never an issue.

Q: You said that you only met with the undersecretary every couple of weeks, which kind of struck me. That sounds like you were very much on your own.

HIGGISTON: Yes and no. First, my one-on-one meetings were every other week, but the FAS senior staff (about 10 people) met with the undersecretary every week to brief him. There was also a meeting once a week with the agency heads and the undersecretary. In addition, because the deputy undersecretary positions had been eliminated, the undersecretary had a trade advisor, who had worked for FAS and USTR. We met with him quite a bit and he followed our issues very closely. I think I mentioned before, but given my short time there, I tended to focus on administrative issues like the reorganization or budget issues. I could not follow in depth every single issue and trusted the deputy administrators and the experts to deal with the issues. I only asked that I be kept informed if I could not attend a specific meeting.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: So, if I needed to see the undersecretary, it was very easy. And if I needed to go to his office and participate in a meeting, it was not a problem. Again, given my short time there, I just didn't feel the need to be in every meeting as long as I was briefed at some point. But to get to your point, for the most part yeah, I was free to run the agency the way I needed to. The undersecretary's office didn't get involved in the day-to-day operations. And like I said, I was very confident in our trade policy people to be able to deal with a lot of the issues that came up. And plus, you know, life changed quite a bit in the trade area because USTR had the dominant role in trade policy and negotiations.

Q: I just had one more question. You had mentioned being well briefed when you went up to the Hill, and I remember at some previous sessions you talked about being at lower levels and difficulties you had with how to prepare briefing books and what was useful to put into them and so forth. How did you feel at the top? Were you getting good briefing material that you wanted? Were you able to say, Oh, my god, no, you people are doing too much work, I don't need all this stuff? How did that go?

HIGGISTON: The times I had briefing papers, I also had an expert in the room with me. Plus, I was less particular on formats. To be honest, I don't even remember getting many briefing papers.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: You know because the undersecretary was focused exclusively on international issues, he took a lot more meetings with foreign officials. I was briefed by

staff which I found more helpful. And I depended on my staff who were much more knowledgeable than me on the specifics.

I think the most difficult meeting I had was with the Secretary to discuss the budget. We had put together a briefing on the budget and had given it to his staff. The feedback we received from his staff was that there were no questions or additional information was needed. Of course, I should have known better. The Secretary had a number of questions that came out of left field. We had to go back and redo the budget to address his concerns. It took about 2 weeks to develop the new presentation. However, his chief of staff, who had worked with him in Georgia, had been away from Washington during our first presentation. She would normally have been in the meeting. We submitted our new information and were preparing for a new meeting. She apparently spoke with the Secretary and our budget was approved without having to brief him again. You never know if his staff would be helpful. In this case, his chief of staff really helped us.

Q: Yeah, I remember a couple of stories that you had said previously just exactly on this issue.

HIGGISTON: Yes, it was under the previous administration and the event was a meeting with Afghan and Pakistan officials in the South Building. But with Secretary Perdue, he clearly had issues we had not anticipated. He seemed to zero in on specific topics. Never having been in a meeting with him before, I really didn't have a feel for him. We were definitely caught flatfooted, to be honest, and we had to go back and respond to his questions.

Q: Jim, I'm going to have to stop you there because we've got about thirty seconds before Zoom cuts out on us. And so, I will end this, and logout and we can start again in a minute. Sorry.

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Q: Today is July 14, 2022. This is Peter Eicher continuing with part two of today's interview with Jim Higgiston.

Okay, Jim, you're just talking about your amusing story with Vilsack. Anything else you want to say about your time as acting administrator?

HIGGISTON: Actually, as acting administrator, I was dealing with Secretary Perdue. Secretary Vilsack served under Obama and Biden. In terms of Perdue, we had no major issues, other than the budget, that came up during the four months I was there. I had mentioned previously about our work in Afghanistan, which took a lot of time when I was deputy administrator, but we had been out of Afghanistan for quite a while, so that really wasn't an issue. We weren't really engaged in any of those types of countries in 2018. We were out of Iraq; we were out of Afghanistan. So, mostly, the budget was the main issue we were dealing with. To be honest, of all my positions in FAS, the acting administrator position gave me the least heartburn of any of my positions.

I knew the staff and they really took care of me. I had good folks in the front office who could get me the information I needed. But it was funny that you should ask me about briefing papers. The most papers I had was for that meeting for the secretary and it was probably the worst meeting that I had.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: I had a lot of people that I had started with that came in and saw me, and I met with a lot of the industry people who I had met during my career. But the undersecretary really wanted to get involved and, as I said, without the deputy undersecretary, he took a lot of the meetings, particularly the industry reps. He wanted to know what they were doing and their thoughts on issues. I would sit in on those, but he was probably the lead on most of these meetings. I was dealing with a lot of the management issues that were coming up. I think I mentioned that I enjoyed the management side of the job. That was true throughout my career. I was definitely nervous about taking the position, but it turned out to be a lot easier than I initially thought it was going to be. And again, I was only administrator for four months, rather than the six, so half the time it was preparing for the new person to come in and what that person was going to be doing.

Q: Okay.

So, meanwhile, you've already been assigned to Pretoria as your next assignment, and you just stayed on in Washington for some additional training?

HIGGISTON: Well, they wanted me to stay for a couple of months for the transition when the new administrator came in. The new administrator, Ken Isley, was also very easy to work with. If I needed to discuss something, he was very willing to listen. Again, he might not take my suggestions, but he was very willing to listen. There were no concerns of raising any issues with him. I enjoyed working with him.

Q: Okay. Well, that's good. How long of an overlap did you have with him, do you recall?

HIGGISTON: So, I stayed the full six months.

Q: Oh, okay.

HIGGISTON: I was there for, let's see, from April to July. He came in at the end of April and I left for a week of training soon after. At the time, I was sitting in one of the associate administrator's slots of which there were two. I went to the attaché conference the second week of July and returned soon after to Brussels. I had some personal things come up during this time also.

Q: Okay. So, the only training you took was the FASTC training, that's the defensive driving—what does FASTC stand for? Do you remember?

HIGGISTON: Crash and bang we used to call it.

Q: Yeah, right, okay.

HIGGISTON: I took the course in Shepherdstown, WA for five days. I think they have actually changed the program quite a bit since it first started. What I found interesting—it was not until the last day of the course, they started to talk about mental illness and how stress can affect you especially being overseas or in highly stressful situations.

And you know, I mentioned that things changed quite a bit. While I was in Moscow, the Soviets were constantly watching us, but I never felt really that uncomfortable. It was just something you had to accept and live with. But I think, for example, the bombings in changed things quite a bit for the people in the embassy and Foreign Service in general. I just think it made you think about being out on the street, and what could possibly happen. And I think it's become more and more of a problem. I think the concerns over terrorist threats and living during the COVID pandemic really affected people mentally too. And that is something we are really not trained to identify or deal with.

So, at the training in Shepherdstown they did not address this issue until the afternoon on the last day. I thought they did not give it the time that it deserved because it's really an emerging issue that we're seeing both domestically and overseas. So, that was the only thing I would have changed in the course. I think it should have been covered earlier in the week and for a longer time.

The State Department required that training for all posts, but it was not easy getting into the program. Luckily because I was acting Administrator, I was able to get into the training. Since that time, State has opened up its own facility down in Blacksburg, Virginia dedicated specifically for the Foreign Service.

Q: Oh. Wow. And even though this was going to be your first assignment in Africa nobody suggested you should do some African area studies or something like that?

HIGGISTON: No, that was not something that FAS emphasized. I did some reading on my own about the history of South Africa but not much on the other countries in southern Africa. I did more consultations with people in the agency about their work in the region. I also spoke with some folks that had served there. My predecessor retired in December 2017, so I did not have much of an opportunity to speak with her.

I found that in each of my posts, I depended a lot on my local staffs, and they did a good job educating me on the country. I tend to ask a lot of questions. But unfortunately, I did not do any area studies at the time.

Q: Yeah, no, that's true, but did they give you any break? I mean, you'd been away from Melissa for months and months at this point and then you had to go back to Brussels and go start a new job.

HIGGISTON: Not really. I returned to Brussels the third week of July, packed out and then traveled to Pretoria.

Q: Did you lose your home leave because you were back in the States for a few months?

HIGGISTON: I did lose my home leave, but I preferred getting to South Africa. During my time in Washington in 2018, I wound up seeing friends and family, which was good.

Q: Yeah.

HIGGISTON: They sent me back to Brussels once or twice during that time, so I got to see Melissa. Looking back, Melissa came to the States once during that time, when her nephew died. She kept working and getting the house in shape for the move. As I've gotten older, I have not liked long flights.

Q: Well, it's not that short from Washington to Brussels. That's an overnight flight.

HIGGISTON: It is, you are absolutely right. But it's not, you know, a fourteen-hour or even twenty-two hours, like it is to South Africa.

Q: Yes.

HIGGISTON: So, that was it. They brought me back a couple of times and Melissa came back for the funeral but that was the extent of it.

Q: Okay. So, summer 2018, and you're off from Brussels to South Africa. And I guess like with your other posts, maybe you can start by telling us about the embassy in South Africa and how you fit in.

HIGGISTON: In Brussels and Pretoria I was probably one of the highest-ranking Foreign Service officers. For FAS, both of those posts are OC positions, counselor positions. The year I got to South Africa, I had been promoted to a career minister, based I think primarily on my role as acting Administrator. In any case, I was probably one of *the* highest-ranking Foreign Service officers there. Our office was based in Pretoria. I had two American officers and six local staff. We also had local staff in Angola and Mozambique. Overall, our office had regional responsibility for something like 11 countries. Most were minor countries with not much going on.

South Africa is very interesting. It was a big post. In addition to Pretoria, we had three consulates. In Pretoria we had the chancery but also a separate compound for the Peace Corps. We also had a huge AID contingent. AID was doing a lot of work with HIV. CDC also had a lot of people there.

As I mentioned, one of the benefits of coming back to Washington to be acting FAS Administrator was that I was promoted to career minister. That allowed me to stay there two and a half years until I was 65.

As usual, our office was at the embassy. The Trump administration had been slow in appointing political ambassador. We had a chargé, who was very nice. I was golden because the person I replaced (who was only there from January to June) was not well liked. I always found it was always helpful to come in after someone who people don't like.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: Unfortunately, according to the folks at the embassy, he did not ingratiate himself with the chargé and so, I was a welcome sight, I guess, just being able to show up to meetings and talk coherently about our issues. For me, it was interesting because it was the first time I was at a post where, you know, the security situation, the personal security situation was obviously very difficult. As bad as Moscow could be with the surveillance, you knew you were going to be safe there. And going to South Africa and living behind eight-foot walls with all the security at the house was quite a change for me. And so, it was a big departure from all my previous posts. And the RSO (Regional Security Officer) there definitely put the fear of God into you about what the security situation was and how careful you had to be.

Q: So, crime was the problem or—?

HIGGISTON: Yes. The embassy had a couple of break ins. Other countries had more difficult situations. The Brazilians had several home invasions. We were in a standalone house in a good neighborhood. We were surrounded by other residential houses on all three sides, and we lived on a street that was not isolated. So, I never felt like we were in any real danger there at the house. But you never knew. There was a British woman who was followed from the airport to her home, and they held her up. But luckily, we never had any serious issues. I was more concerned with Melissa because I know she likes to go out and go to different places. That was not something you couldn't do in South Africa. You really had to be very much aware of the situation around you. You couldn't walk around.

Q: Really? Even downtown Pretoria?

HIGGISTON: Well, especially in the central business district. They didn't want you to go near there.

Q: Oh, no kidding? My goodness.

HIGGISTON: Oh, yes. South Africa was something of a mall community. You could go to the malls because security was considered much better. But really, the embassy really discouraged you from going downtown. There was a shooting with someone from the

embassy just prior to our arrival. But it was not unusual to hear about things like that happening. So, you had to be careful.

I think for me the most concern was on the highways. People following you home from the airport or a mall. Again, you just had to be very conscious of your surroundings and who was around you. Getting off the highway at the exits, you would find people hawking some items and while you were distracted, they would smash the windows in the back seat and grab something. There were some carjackings and so forth. You had to get used to that. There were areas we could go to, but it was not the same as what we had like I said we had in Brussels and so forth where you were pretty much free. Even though there was crime in Brussels, it was not the same in South Africa.

Anyway, I was part of the senior staff, and we had meetings every day. It was a little strange because like I said, some of the other agencies were in places like Joburg (Johannesburg), and they didn't have offices in Pretoria. Most did not come to Pretoria for senior staff, and we didn't have a secure connection so that they couldn't call in. For example, the commercial counselor, who I had served with in Brussels, very rarely came up. There were a couple of non-State agencies in Pretoria, but mostly State people attended senior staff.

Q: Most of the agencies were based in Joburg rather than Pretoria?

HIGGISTON: We are always in the capital. But some of the other commercial offices like Commerce or TDA (Trade Development Agency) were in Johannesburg.

Q: There used to only be about an hour's drive or something when—back in the eighties when I was there—sorry, seventies when I was there.

HIGGISTON: Traffic was especially heavy in the morning, but it was probably over an hour to drive from Joburg. So that ate up a good portion of your day. In any case the chargé did not require them to come to Pretoria so the senior staff meetings were a little bit smaller.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

HIGGISTON: The chargé was Jessye Lapenn who is now the U.S. Ambassador to the Africa Union.

Q: At that point you did not have an appointed ambassador yet?

HIGGISTON: No. We did not have anybody there until over a year later.

Q: Wow. Okay. That's a long gap.

HIGGISTON: The inauguration was in January 2017. I arrived in July 2018, but it wasn't until November 2020 that the new ambassador arrived.

Q: So, three years with no ambassador in a country as important as South Africa?

HIGGISTON: That's right.

Q: Wow.

HIGGISTON: Exactly. And I don't know how many other countries had chargés in African countries. There was an ambassador in Brussels that had to leave and the ambassadors in Germany and the Netherlands had issues. It just didn't seem to be a priority for the administration.

As the chargé, you know, they were limited in their access to high level officials. And couldn't get in to see everybody. The host countries basically wanted an ambassador and the South Africans were a bit miffed that one had not been appointed. Our chargé did better than most and she got in to see a lot of people, but clearly, there were still some things that she was not going to be able to do without being an ambassador.

Q: Well, yeah, I can imagine not, although the embassy staff may have been more pleased to have a career person there than a political ambassador.

HIGGISTON: Yes, she was well liked.

Q: Who are we talking about now? The ambassador when she was finally appointed as the chargé?

HIGGISTON: The chargé. Jessye was very good. People at the embassy liked her. She was very personable. We did a couple of events with her. We also had an acting DCM for quite a while.

Q: Okay. So, when you—just since we're on this subject, when you did get an ambassador, do you remember when it was and who it was?

HIGGISTON: Yes. The ambassador was Lana Marks. She arrived in November 2019. She arrived in November. It was an interesting time. Shortly after she arrived, she fired the DCM who was there. She then fired her office manager, and a woman from AID. This was all within 3 months or so. It was very disruptive.

Q: My goodness. She was a political appointee, I take it.

HIGGISTON: Yes. She was from Mara Lago. She was a designer of high-end handbags.

Q: Okay. Well, that's good credentials to be ambassador to South Africa.

HIGGISTON: She was born in South Africa. Her parents emigrated to the States, I think, in the late fifties, when she was a child. And eventually she wound up in Mar-a-Lago.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: I assume that was her connection to the President. She brought her son with her as an advisor, and that was a problem because she had him in official meetings and he often introduced himself as a U.S. official. State didn't necessarily think it was appropriate for him to attend. I heard from some folks that he had a calming effect on her in a lot of ways, but State was very concerned with how he was being portrayed and how he was portraying himself.

Q: Did he actually have an official position at the embassy?

HIGGISTON: Well, he said he did, but he actually didn't. I don't think he had any sort of clearance.

Q: Oh, my. Okay.

HIGGISTON: I heard that State had asked the DCM at the time to advise her about her son. Again, this was the rumor at the time, but State had given him the unpleasant task of having to inform her that her son was not to attend official meetings or portray him as an advisor. I served as acting DCM a couple of times during the beginning of her stay. I would go around and talk to the folks in the embassy and the sense was that people were afraid that they would be asked to leave if she did not like them. You could imagine how that affected morale.

I honestly think my stint as acting FAS Administrator helped me because Ambassador Marks visited with USDA officials prior to arriving in South Africa. These were the same officials that I served with and with whom I got along fairly well. So, I don't know for a fact, but I assume they were supportive of me during the meetings. And I think that protected me unlike the State folks.

Our bilateral trade with South Africa was not very big. South Africa had a trade agreement with the European Union, which made our products a lot more expensive. South Africa sold a lot of citrus products like tangerines, to the United States along with wine.

South Africa naturally wanted to expand its exports of citrus to the United States. Only parts of South Africa were eligible to ship products to the United States due to certain pests that existed. It was a plant disease rather than an insect. The South Africans would approach the Ambassador for her help.

There were a couple of times when the Ambassador would have staff meetings in the morning and she would tell me that she needed to speak with Secretary Perdue that day. At first, I was like "Oh, crap, what am I going to do?" But then, I realized that it was simply not going to happen because the Secretary had a busy schedule and was not going to take a call right away. Luckily, our Undersecretary was always willing to engage. The

Ambassador also had met our Undersecretary before she left for South Africa, so she felt comfortable speaking with him.

But Ambassador Marks could be a challenge. There was an issue regarding South African imports, and I had spoken with both the Brazilians and Europeans about the issue since they were facing similar difficulties. In any case, I briefed her one morning and mentioned my discussions.

And she stops me, and asks "Why are you talking to them?" And I explained that I wanted to see what was going on, see if they had a different perspective. She tells me that I shouldn't be talking with these other embassies because they lie" And I'm sitting thinking, this is how we do our job. We need to gather as much information as possible in order to address an issue. The idea that I shouldn't talk to representatives from other countries was just strange.

Q: My goodness. Did you really cut off all your diplomatic contacts for the rest of the tour?

HIGGISTON: No. We had to do our jobs and that included speaking with other attachés to get as complete a picture as possible. I just don't think she had a good grasp of how an embassy worked and what our role was in the embassy. But I was excluded from some meetings and found out about meetings after the fact. It was just very, very strange. So, anyway, it made life quite interesting.

Q: Yeah, it sounds like it would have been quite a difficult operating environment.

HIGGISTON: It was. And you tried to avoid her as much as possible. I only had about a year to go before I retired. The acting DCM was scheduled to leave, and I was asked whether I wanted to be acting DCM. I had served as acting DCM for about 3 months during my tour and given the short time I had left so I declined.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: I was pretty lucky for the most part. Others had it much worse than I did. I think the military guys had a real tough time. She wanted military ships to visit South Africa and had very specific requests highlighting her role. I know it wasn't fun. State wound up sending a high-level team from management to get a sense of the situation on the ground. I also think they wound up meeting with her. It wasn't clear what they told her. And since she was a political appointee there was not much they would or could do.

Q: Well, I guess if she had the backing of the president there wasn't much they could do.

HIGGISTON: Absolutely. But it was still disappointing because it was really disruptive when she was there.

Agriculture did not have much of a robust trade relationship with South Africa. The South Africans had much closer relations with Europe, although it had its problems. The market was pretty closed to our products. A lot of U.S. exporters would transship products to southern African countries through South Africa. Our Undersecretary led a trade delegation to South Africa 2019. We had representatives from about 25 companies accompany him.

But despite the lack of trade, South Africa was extremely important to food security in the area. South Africa grew corn which was an integral food crop for other countries. If South Africa had a problem with its crops, it could be a major problem with the other countries in the region. Every year, we did a crop assessment with AID. While I was in South Africa there was a concern with drought conditions, and we wound up spending a lot of time monitoring the situation.

Q: Okay, I want to hear about that, but Zoom's telling me I'm down to a minute and a half. So, let me log us back in and we can move in that direction.

HIGGISTON: Okay.

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Q: Today is July 14, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher continuing with part three of today's interview with Jim Higgiston.

Jim, you were just about to talk about regional responsibilities.

HIGGISTON: Yes. We covered all southern Africa, from Angola and Mozambique south. It was a large territory. Angola was very big on our sights, as was Mozambique. We had a lot of technical assistance programs in Mozambique while Angola was interesting because it was a market for beef and poultry for us. We were also monitoring the Chinese influence in the region.

South Africa was still our most important market. It was a big market for U.S. poultry. A couple of years before I arrived in Pretoria, there had been a WTO case and the South African agreed to allow poultry into the country. However, they would put up all sorts of impediments to make it harder to import. Our job was to monitor the situation and we had one local staff exclusively dedicated to the issue.

I have to say that in all my years overseas, the South Africans were not the easiest to deal with. The Soviet were not very helpful but expected it from them. Even the Europeans were easier to deal with. I mentioned that I could at least get a meeting with the Europeans quickly.

With South Africa, I could wait months before I could get a meeting. When I finally got a meeting, I realized the Europeans were also meeting with the same officials. And when

we left our meeting, the Brazilians were waiting to meet with them. So, it was clear they set one day aside every couple of months to meet with the embassies.

I remember one of the first meetings I had with my contacts in South Africa. I had one very simple issue that we wanted to discuss with them. In any case it should have been a short meeting. However, as I walked into the room with one of my local staff and there were thirty people across the table from us.

Q: Oh, my goodness.

HIGGISTON: And they had their laundry list of things that they wanted to go through even though we were not really prepared. I think that's how the South Africans operated. I think they basically could report to their superiors that they raised all their issues with us.

On the other hand, the South African industry representatives were easy to deal with. We could get to see them regularly. But of course, that was only part of it. Most of the farming and agricultural sectors were controlled by white South Africans.

The big issue for our administration when I was there was farm violence and the killing of farmers. It was an extremely sensitive and controversial issue. To be honest, it was really a case of the haves vs the have nots. The economy in South Africa was really doing poorly primarily due to a number of things including graft. Unemployment among black South Africans between the ages of 18 and 35 was officially 50 percent and most felt that was an underestimate. In general, farmers were isolated and the police were not very effective, so these rich farmers were really targets. I seem to remember that a lot of the attacks were also inside jobs.

I remember Deputy Secretary of State Sullivan visited South Africa and, at the time, there were some white South Africans at the Mexican border, seeking asylum because of the situation in South Africa. But what we had found was that while a lot of farms that were being attacked were owned by white farmers, it was because whites owned those big farms. But we had a number of black farmers that we worked with and who had traveled to the States for training had also been attacked and their farms robbed. This one farmer who had a small herd, maybe twenty-five to thirty head of cattle near Johannesburg, He had people come in and steal some of his cattle. And of course, the police there were not very effective.

The police were suspect to begin with, but in the rural areas, they just did not have the capability of policing all these remote areas. A lot of these farmers that were out in these rural areas were isolated and there were a lot of robberies and murders. But it was not exclusively white farmers. But it seemed that this message was not reaching Washington.

We spent time reporting on the situation as we saw it. We worked a lot with the political section and somewhat with the economic section to get this message back to Washington.

I was a little bit surprised at the Deputy Secretary's reaction. He seemed unaware of this assessment.

The government was not very effective and was not very good at supporting farmers. There was a private infrastructure that helped support white farmers, whether it was for loans or technical support. I got the sense that black farmers did not have the same level of support.

In some ways, the situation in South Africa was like the situation in Poland. If you remember, there were a large number of farmers in Poland and South Africa but not all could be considered commercial farmers. Many were subsistence farmers. The government seemed to believe they could support ALL farmers, but that was an untenable situation. The smaller commercial farmers were the ones that needed help. The problem, of course, was that with unemployment so high, they needed to keep farmers working. I felt the government had to have different programs to address the different needs of these farmers. Unfortunately, the funding was not available. Commercial farmers had other needs.

Q: Was there any big land reform program after apartheid ended that tried to get more land into the hands of the have nots?

HIGGISTON: There was a program to turn over land held by the government to black farmers. The critical problem was that a lot of this land was owned by municipal governments and this land was not necessarily suitable for farming. It was more suitable for housing or opening a small store. But during my time there, there was no major land reform program.

Q: And did you have the same kind of problems they have in Brazil, say, of farmland starting to encroach on wild areas, game parks, that kind of thing?

HIGGISTON: Not really. You know, what you saw—it reminded me of Turkey a lot in that when you were on the outskirts of Istanbul, you had a lot of these shanty towns. Lot of these folks in Turkey had migrated from the countryside to the city because they were unable to support themselves in agriculture. In South Africa, you saw a lot of these areas but less so near the game parks. South Africa benefited greatly by the tourism brought in by their parks. They did not want to endanger the parks by increasing farmland.

In fact, the land surrounding the parks was white owned. They were essentially private reserves. Initially, these private lands were fenced off from the parks, but the fences were eventually taken down to allow the animals to roam more widely. Of course, there was no hunting allowed on these private lands outside the parks.

But I never had any concerns about land in the national parks. There was plenty of land that was not being used in the country. The issue was how to develop this land. There was a greater need for decent housing especially in the cities. As I mentioned, the land around the parks was not developed and you did not have any large shanty towns in the area.

Q: Yeah.

HIGGISTON: I would see these undeveloped areas in Pretoria, Cape Town and Johannesburg, but I never saw it near any of the parks. The land around these parks was pretty much pristine from what I remember.

Q: Okay. There's—certainly have been reading the paper for the last couple of years about the horrible droughts and so forth, and I forget what you had already mentioned and how Cape Town was running out of water. Did this affect your job in any way? Were we involved in any programs to try to deal with this?

HIGGISTON: So, Cape Town was probably the worst situation. They initiated severe restrictions on water use. Even when the drought lessened during my time there, they continued to have these restrictions. We had a delegation from California that visited South Africa and was looking to develop a relationship to exchange information on water consumption. We didn't have any problems up in Pretoria, I didn't see anything in Johannesburg as—was an issue. Unfortunately, a lot of the wealthier areas near Cape Town, had lawns and swimming pools and people were using water to grow grass, where it should never have been grown.

One of the big issues for farmers, especially small black farms and subsistence farms was the availability of water for irrigation. It was very interesting how the rain patterns would work in South Africa. You would be traveling through the farmland, and you would see small strips of land that were very green and other strips nearby that were dry. The rain pattern would be restricted to that small area and other parts of it were not. I was traveling south of Johannesburg from the western part of the country to the east. We crossed the main road, and it was like night and day. In the western part of the country, it was pretty dry. In the eastern part, where they were growing wheat, they had plenty of rain and water. Drought was always a concern.

I'd have to look at the numbers, but the most productive land was irrigated land. And the irrigated land was from aquifers. I forget what the numbers were, but they were, like, two or three times more productive in terms of yields on land that was irrigated versus non-irrigated land. One of the topics that was raised at times was the situation in Zimbabwe when a lot of the white owned farmland was taken away and distributed to black farmers. However, the land that had access to water especially for irrigation was given to friends of the president which meant the majority of farmers did not have access to water and as a result, production went down. Zimbabwe went from being a powerhouse in ag production to an importer.

In South Africa, approximately a quarter of the land was irrigated and the rest rain fed. I remember being told that South African farmers made the most money from irrigated land. If there was enough rain, the rain-fed land added to their profits.
But farmers were never able to count on rain-fed land being as productive from year to year, whereas the irrigated land they could. And that basically evened out your profits.

You knew you had a stable income, but you also knew that some of your land that was not irrigated would not be productive.

While I was in South Africa we had record years for corn and wheat production. It was interesting however how rain patterns changed even when I was there. The major rains would normally arrive at the end of November and December, and we would closely watch the weather during that time. However, during the time I was there, the rain patterns changed quite a bit. The major rains would come as late as April and May. Normally, with rain coming that late, there would be a concern with frosts given that South Africa was heading into its winter. Because the temperatures did not get that low, they were able to get very good production. They did not have any issues with frost.

Q: So, let me go back to the regional for a minute. I mean, you've been talking about Zimbabwe. There were fourteen countries, I think you said, that you covered. Did you have ag locals at these embassies? Did you visit all of them? Were there issues you got caught up in?

HIGGISTON: So, we had local staff in Angola and Mozambique. We had one person there in each country. Mozambique was important for sugar production, and we followed that crop very closely. Angola was a trade hub, and we were selling a lot of poultry and red meat there, so they were of particular interest. Most of the others we did not deal with as much because they were not major producers. We did not cover Zimbabwe which had the potential to be a major producer. We did look at Zambia and sent folks there during the harvest season, but the rest were just not major producers. So, for example, we really didn't do anything in Botswana or Namibia. We had a lot going on when I first arrived including hosting a regional agricultural attaché conference and a major trade team led by our undersecretary. We were juggling a lot of things and I had hoped we would do more travel towards the middle of my tour. Unfortunately, Covid hit and that changed everything.

We had some technical assistance programs in the other countries, but the programs were handled mostly out of Washington. We would respond to requests from the other embassies, but AID was much more active. Even in South Africa, in a place like Lesotho and other countries there was not a great deal happening.

Q: What is it, Swaziland, which is now, what, Eswatini or something?

HIGGISTON: To be honest, in previous posts I tried to visit all the countries I was responsible for. The problem was, as soon as I got there, the schedule was too busy. Washington asked me to host a regional attaché conference at the last minute because it was cheaper to bring everybody to South Africa than to do it in some place like the UAE, which is not surprising. So, we had to put that together quickly.

Q: Regional means all of Africa?

HIGGISTON: Africa and the Middle East.

Q: Oh, okay. Wow.

HIGGISTON: Well, FAS does not have that many attachés in those regions. In Africa, we only have 6 offices headed by Americans and in the Middle East, only 2, so it wasn't a huge number although we did bring most of the local staff and all the Americans. We also have a large number of folks coming from Washington. Finally, we had representatives from our USDA cooperators there.

Right after that, we had the undersecretary lead a trade mission to South Africa which included about 25 businesses, and we had to set up schedules in Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Cape Town. We had the undersecretary meet with officials in Pretoria while the U.S. business groups were in Johannesburg. That was pretty much my first year. I also wound up being acting DCM several times to help out. So, my schedule filled up pretty quickly. I did get to visit Angola. I was scheduled to go to Mozambique, as COVID hit, but I had my staff basically travel a little bit more than I did because they needed to get the experience. I had a first tour officer and I had a second tour deputy who was dealing with technical assistance programs in Mozambique.

Since it was my last posting, I was less concerned about travel. We also had a tight budget and most of it had to go to travel in South Africa. I wound up doing most of my work there. I would travel to Cape Town and Johannesburg if needed. It was a little easier for me to do those things. And then, after COVID everything got shut down, so there wasn't that much going on for us.

Q: That's a big question on my list here, and I guess we ought to talk about that now since it came up. Operating under COVID must have been extremely difficult. Talk about how that affected your work.

HIGGISTON: When we started our conversation, I mentioned that our overseas offices focused on things like trade negotiations, trade facilitation, marketing, food aid and technical assistance as well as analysis. Once Covid hit, most everything got shut down. There were no international visitors, no trade shows, and inter-provincial travel was not allowed for several months. Anyone who could get permission to travel to South Africa had to quarantine for 14 days at a hotel, so it was cost prohibitive. But the majority of flights were canceled for quite some time. Obviously, we were not doing any regional travel either. Our local staff was asked to stay home and the two Americans in the office only come in periodically. We focused on topics we were not always able to concentrate on.

I think we doubled the number of reports that we did during that first year of Covid. I give a lot of credit to the American and local staff in order to get this done. I mentioned that I did not see my local staff for over a year.

Q: My goodness. You must have seen them on Zoom or something, I presume.

HIGGISTON: Yes. We had Zoom calls every week with the entire staff. I also had calls every day with my two American officers and they, in turn, spoke with the local staff daily.

I would speak to the Americans for about an hour or so, less if we didn't have anything to report on. Washington wanted daily updates on COVID and how it was affecting agriculture and our operations. Melissa was working in HR, and she was going in most days. I had to do Zoom calls at home because our computers did not have mics or cameras. I had to use my personal iPad to do Zoom calls, but I had to do those calls at home because there was no Wi-Fi at the embassy. That made it tricky.

Q: You pretty much went in every day?

HIGGISTON: it depended on the week, but I would go into the office 3 or 4 times a week. I would go in for senior staff or to the Ambassador's residence for meetings.

Q: Was that typical for the embassy at the time?

HIGGISTON: No, not at all. The embassy was quiet. Very few local staff were coming in because there was a real concern about having local staff traveling from the townships to the Embassy. I think GSO and HR had a lot of local staff coming in but my local staff did not. Moreover, when COVID hit, the State Department allowed officers and families to depart post if they wanted to for any reason. Under COVID, if someone just wanted to leave, they could leave.

Q: You mean just end your assignment?

HIGGISTON: No. At the time, folks thought they would be back in 3 or four months. After a while, it became clear that it was going to be longer. The USG had to charter a couple of flights because the commercial flights were mostly canceled. South African Air, which had a direct flight to New York was canceled and in fact it went bankrupt during this time. A good portion of folks, especially those with kids, decided to go. A lot of these folks were teleworking from Washington or wherever they were.

Peace Corps was asked to pull all its volunteers back. AID and CDC had large contingents but most stayed. I think it was about 10 percent of the entire USG contingent who left. In the end, folks realized that they were not going to be able to return and we wound up packing up a friend's house for them. That was going on a lot.

Q: The embassy population?

HIGGISTON: Yes.

We felt secure where we were. Our house was in a secure area. Food supplies were good, and we had access to the private health system in South Africa which was excellent. Given that most local staff worked at home it was easy to self-isolate. The food stores in

South Africa were taking peoples' temperatures at the entrance of stores. The stores were not crowded, and everyone wore masks. Initially, we had to carry an official letter from the embassy that gave us permission to commute to and from the embassy. However, I was never asked to show the letter while I was there.

Q: So, South African regs would have prevented you from doing that?

HIGGISTON: Yes. They were really striving for a complete shutdown. And in fact, during the first couple of months, the streets were very empty. Initially, the government said that we were only allowed to go out to exercise on the streets from 6:00 in the morning to 9:00 in the morning. People would walk around the neighborhood in the morning, but it was still empty. Other than that, you were supposed to be inside. But like I mentioned, you were allowed to go to food stores, Woolies or SPAR. Things relaxed a little bit as time went on, but you still had no travel.

There was no inter-provincial travel and, of course, no international travel. At the beginning of the outbreak, folks were thinking that South Africa would be hit hard. Especially given the population density, but also because a large part of the population had compromised immune systems. South Africa, of course, was the center of HIV and AIDS and the medical experts thought the population would be much more susceptible to catching COVID and most likely die from the disease. In the end, they didn't have the high rate of deaths that they thought they would. I think they attributed it to the age of the population, because it's a much younger population in South Africa. At the outset the worst was expected, and the ambassador requested and received about 1,000 ventilators that were sent to South Africa.

The embassy did not want the local staff to come to the embassy because most lived outside the city in heavily populated townships, where it was much more crowded and more difficult to social distance.

We got our first shots at the beginning of March 2021. I got my second shot towards the end of the month. We lost some local staff at the embassy and in each of the consulates.

Q: Really?

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: Oh, my goodness.

HIGGISTON: Not a huge number, but maybe 2 – 4 people at each of the consulates and in the embassy.

As I mentioned, our office pivoted and we were doing more reporting work, so we were keeping the local staff very occupied. A lot of our work was being done by Zoon, but of course, our computers at the office had no cameras or microphones.

Q: Well, of course, for security reasons.

HIGGISTON: And there was no Wi-Fi at the embassy.

Q: Well, of course, for security reasons. (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: I think I mentioned this, but if you were going to do a ZOOM or Microsoft Teams call, you had to do it either on your personal iPad or your own laptop, and you had to make the calls from home. We would do Zoom/Teams calls with the staff from home in the morning from home. I'd go in for a couple of hours and then, if I needed to call Washington, I would come back home and I would do a Zoom call from home because we couldn't from the embassy because there was no Wi-Fi at the embassy.

I remember we had one senior staff meeting and the management counselor had to be out on the patio outside the embassy. We did some senior staff meetings in the conference room where we could do calls.

But it was an interesting time. I think the ambassador did not like it because she was restricted in terms of travel and meetings. After the elections she invited her family to South Africa and she came down with COVID and had to spend, I think it was two or three weeks in an ICU (Intensive Care Unit).

Q: Oh, wow.

HIGGISTON: She was the person that if I'm not mistaken, had the worst case of COVID among the Americans. I don't remember hearing about anyone else that had to spend time in an ICU.

We were kind of lucky in the sense that, as you might know, there's two hospital systems there. There are both public and private hospital systems. The public hospitals are for the general population, and those are the ones whose ICUs were near or at full capacity. The private hospitals did not have the overwhelming number of patients and so, that was one of the reasons why we were not put on mandatory evacuation, because we had access to the private sector hospitals, and you could easily get in. If there was, the embassy medical staff were confident that we could get help. And in fact, South Africa was an evacuation point for most of Africa. Of course, the South African government was reluctant to bring someone in from another country but that was another issue that the embassy had to deal with.

We got the Pfizer vaccine in South Africa. They made it available both to American staff at the embassy but also for local staff. Initially, there was some concern that the South African government would not allow the local staff to receive the vaccine. I think they were concerned that the local staff at the embassy were being treated differently. This was compounded by the fact that South Africa was going to use the Astrazeneca vaccine which wound up having some issues. In the end, the South African government allowed the embassy local staff to receive the vaccine. But there were some folks, South Africans

who decided not to get vaccinated and wanted to wait until the rest of the country got the vaccine.

Q: You mean within the embassy?

HIGGISTON: Yes. We had a certain number of vaccines that the embassy was receiving that had to be used and we had enough for both American and local staffs. We were receiving the Pfizer. I received two shots prior to my departure at the end of March 2021.

Q: Okay, Jim, we're down to two and a half minutes, so let me turn off the recording but keep you on here for a minute and maybe this would be—we're clearly not going to finish South Africa today, so we'll schedule another session.

HIGGISTON: Yes.

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Q: Today is July 19, 2022, and this is Peter Eicher beginning a new interview session with Jim Higgiston.

Good morning, Jim.

HIGGISTON: Good morning, Peter.

Q: When we left off last time, we were in Pretoria where you were assigned from July 2018 to March of 2021. And I think when we left off, we were talking about the pandemic and the different effects that that had, both on the country and on your assignment. And one question which I was going to ask you about was that you had talked about how difficult it was to get meetings in South Africa and to do business with the government in South Africa, and I just wondered, during the pandemic, how did that work out?

HIGGISTON: Well, during the pandemic we had little or no interaction with the South African government. We were shut down completely from March until September 2020. There was no inter-provincial travel as well as no international travel. My staff maintained contact with the South African agriculture sector but all contact was done remotely. With no international travel we had no industry or official visitors, and we could not really travel outside of Pretoria.

There weren't any active negotiations going on with South Africa during my time there. South Africa had a free trade agreement with the countries in southern Africa. Their major trade relationship outside of Africa was with the European Union, especially for agriculture products.

South Africa was a big poultry market for us. Prior to my arrival, we had a dispute with South Africa, and they agreed, reluctantly, to allow a certain amount of U.S. poultry to enter the country.

To be honest, unlike being nickeled and dimed by the Europeans, which was always difficult, we always seemed to exceed what we were allowed to bring into South Africa. Mainly because there was a big need for lower cost protein. South Africa produced a lot of beef, but it was expensive. They had a small growing pork industry, but it was not one of their main staples. Poultry was really their major source of protein, and they simply did not produce enough to meet demand. So, we were able to fill that gap.

Our job was to really closely watch the trade numbers, making sure we had accurate trade data and relaying that back to DC. There were several times when we crossed wires with the U.S. poultry industry. They would sometimes make claims about trade restrictions but because we were closely following the trade data we were basically able to calm the waters and not let a dispute escalate. Not that the South Africans did not try to inhibit poultry but when we looked closely at the numbers, we were doing quite well but it was something we had to closely monitor trade data.

The U.S. industry was always concerned that the South Africans were going to try to cut off the trade, but in fact, when we looked at the numbers, that was not the case, and we were doing quite well. We really had to make sure that Washington was aware of this because they were taking every opportunity to raise issues with Washington. But poultry was the big trade issue, and it really was the only game in town for us. We shipped a little pork and some processed products.

On the other hand, South Africa was a major supplier of food for the rest of the continent, and especially the southern African countries. It was very important for us to follow production, especially for corn, because they exported a lot of their corn to southern African countries. A lot of times our numbers were somewhat better than the South African government's because we had a lot more sources. Weather was one of the big issues we were following along with the changing weather patterns which I mentioned earlier. USAID was especially interested in the situation because when South Africa supplied the countries in the region, it alleviated the need for USAID to send food aid.

Q: Jim, I'm going to digress a minute, and since you mentioned poultry imports, when we were in South Africa in the mid-seventies, all the chicken that you would buy tasted like fish because they used to feed the fish—fish meal. It was a big running joke that you couldn't buy chicken that didn't taste like fish. Did that continue or did the U.S. imports solve that issue?

HIGGISTON: That is not unusual for some countries, but by the time I arrived the poultry industry had plenty of corn and soybeans for the domestic poultry industry. Given the supplies of soybeans, I never heard any issues with the poultry tasting like fish.

However, when I served in Moscow I traveled to Yalta with a colleague, and we tried some local beer. For whatever reason, they seemed to have used fish meal in their production and the beer tasted fishy.

Q: Oh, my goodness. (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: It was not good.

Q: Okay. I should say not. Another joke was that one time a shipload of frozen chickens went down in a storm, and everybody was happy because maybe now we would get some fish that tasted like chicken.

HIGGISTON: Actually, they did a pretty good job of production, and they had some large production companies. There were only about four or five big companies that produced poultry there. Poultry was relatively easier to produce as opposed to beef and pork. Most families owned several chickens primarily for egg production. However, in rural areas, there were a lot of small producers. According to our agreement, the U.S. industry did a lot of training for black farmers — mostly on business models but also on proper feeding and health issues.

I went to one session where a trainer showed the farmers how to keep spreadsheets with prices, expenditures, income, and costs. The small farmers were just not trained to do that part of the operation. Some of them couldn't figure out whether they were making or not making money, which was kind of basic.

As I mentioned, poultry was probably one of the easier things to raise. And so, it was the commodity of choice for small black farmers. And it was interesting that there were a lot of women who were entrepreneurs in this sector, and they were very good at business. While there was training, the trainers would schedule follow up sessions in six months or so and come back to give an update. It seemed to me that the women always showed up especially for the follow up sessions and always asked questions. It's not that they didn't have any success with men who were coming back, but it was clearly the women who were really taking charge, and they were the ones who, you know, were the bedrock for these smaller farms in many cases. And so, they were there, and they were the ones taking care of the poultry and so forth. Quite interesting.

Q: Mm-hm. Did you have cooperatives and things like you've described in other countries?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I mean, there were associations, local associations that would help out. But the government was not really very helpful. So, for example, in Europe and the United States, we have extension services where they would go out and help farmers if they had a problem. In the United States it's basically free. It's supported by the federal government, state, and local entities, and they decide—you know, depending on where you are, that's what the priorities are.

Our extension service program is probably considered one of the most successful programs. It originated in the 1930s and was basically geared towards whatever the local entity wanted it to be. In South Africa, the rich larger farms had access to private services but most of the small black farmers did not. I noticed that smaller farmers had some help

at the initial stages of production, but my impression was that their day-to-day issues were not addressed. For poultry, most of the small farms were not really considered commercial farms in the western sense. A lot of their production was sold in local markets and not in the larger supermarkets.

Q: Okay. I made a note that in one of our previous sessions you had talked about Chinese influence in South Africa, but you haven't elaborated on that at all. Did that extend to the agriculture sector?

HIGGISTON: Not as much and not as much in South Africa. I mentioned that we covered a lot of southern African countries. I did one trip to Angola. We were visiting some markets outside of Luanda and meeting with some importing companies. But what was interesting, during the trip outside Luanda, I felt like I was in Shanghai. We were on a major road and on both sides were a line of Chinese factories. All the signs were in Chinese. I never felt that way in South Africa, although my deputy said that there were a lot of Chinese facilities in Mozambique. I would note that the Chinese seemed to have the largest embassy in Pretoria.

Q: Oh, my goodness.

HIGGISTON: My understanding was that Angola was in debt to the Chinese and when the oil market tanked, they were over their heads. They owed more money to the Chinese than they could pay. They weren't getting the income from the oil. And so, the Chinese were basically having a lot more influence in the energy sector and were buying up a lot more smaller processing facilities in Angola. Not as much in agriculture, although we did see some of it. I think we saw a lot more Chinese influence in the agriculture sectors in Mozambique and Zambia. Although the South Africans were not very supportive of the United States for several reasons, they were not as supportive of China as the other countries, I seem to remember that the South Africans were a bit more reluctant to accept Chinese investment. At least, it was not as apparent as in other countries. However, the South African economy was not really doing that well when I served there. South African Air went bankrupt. The unemployment rates were very bad.

Q: Did you ever meet with your Chinese counterpart? That is, before the ambassador told you you couldn't meet with other diplomats?

HIGGISTON: No, I never met with them. Their agriculture attachés were not as active in other countries. We met with the Brazilians and Europeans, but the Chinese seemed a bit isolated. I saw more of them in Brussels, but they were not a big player for us.

Q: You had talked in previous sessions about Angola and Mozambique, and I wonder if you did any significant work in some of the other countries that were in your territory.

HIGGISTON: Our office did not do as much work in the other countries. USDA did have some programs in other countries. There were also some programs in Mozambique but not a lot. The Forest Service was quite active. They were doing some work on forest fire

prevention and basically training people on fighting forest fires. In fact, in one year while I was there, it was a particularly bad year in the United States. South Africa wound up sending firefighters from South Africa to the United States to augment the U.S. firefighters. I was told that some of them had never been on an international flight.

We had a program to help the cashew industry in Mozambique, as well as some work with the dairy industry. Other than that, we really concentrated on reporting and some marketing.

We were trying to set up a program in Madagascar, but we had some funding issues. The United States had given them some food aid in the past and there were $7 million in proceeds sitting in a bank controlled by the government. The proceeds were supposed to be used for development projects. However, the government would not release them. Compounding the issue was the frequent change in government in Madagascar. The United States decided that we would not be providing any additional assistance until this issue was resolved. We thought we had it resolved a couple of times, but then there would be a change of government and we had to start from ground zero again. The embassy had the lead, but it was quite frustrating,

Q: You kind of had bad luck being there most of your tour was during the pandemic when I guess travel was curtailed. Did you have a chance—you mentioned a trip to Angola. I can't remember whether you said Mozambique or not. Did you have official travel to any of the other places?

HIGGISTON: I was supposed to go to Mozambique before the pandemic. One of the problems was, as soon as I got to Pretoria, we had two or three big events. I think I mentioned this.

Q: Yes.

HIGGISTON: We had the attaché conference and then we had a trade mission led by our undersecretary. We had a lot of people participating in both events. It was a lot of logistical work. Although I tried to avoid it, Washington brought me back for one of our conferences the next summer. So, those three events come up in quick succession. Plus, because I arrived later than planned, the American staff had not taken much time off, so we needed to address those issues. Finally, I wound up serving as acting DCM for a couple of times so I really could not travel.

Q: Yep.

HIGGISTON: I had plans to travel to some of our other countries, but it just never worked out. And, like I said, once the pandemic hit, we were shut down and stuck in Pretoria. We couldn't even get to Cape Town. And most institutions were teleworking, so meetings were not possible.

Prior to the shutdown, we had a lot of travelers coming to South Africa. We had a big delegation from California, dealing with water shortages. We also did some marketing events. The distilled liquor association did some events in Joburg and Cape Town. But like I said, the South African government was one of those places where we got more information from outside sources than we did from the government. They just were not as helpful. Or they just weren't as informed about what was going on. I would compare it to, like, when we were in Turkey. There was a big outbreak of avian influenza in Turkey, and we had a lot of contacts, both in the ministry of health, the ministry of agriculture, and it became very apparent that the two—those two ministries were not communicating at all about the spread of the virus.

Q: Yeah, you talked about that, right.

HIGGISTON: Each ministry felt that it had a narrow focus and could not understand how the issue might affect them. And in some ways, that's what it was like in South Africa. We would go see the ministry of health because Avian Influenza was an issue there at times or some other health issue but the contacts between the ministry of agriculture would ignore the concerns. I just thought they were not that strong.

Q: Well, let me stop you there because we're down to less than two minutes on our first leg of the session here. And I'll end it and start again.

HIGGISTON: Okay.

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Q: Today is July 19, 2022. This is Peter Eicher continuing with part two of today's interview with Jim Higgiston.

Jim, I wanted to ask you about a couple of probably niche issues that may or may not have come across your desk. One is the wild animal trade. Was that an issue with South Africa and if so, was it one that would cross your desk?

HIGGISTON: That was not really our issue. We had a representative from the Fish and Wildlife at the embassy from the Department of Interior. It was interesting, however. While they had responsibility for wildlife trafficking, the main issue they were dealing with was trade in succulent plants.

There was a lot of smuggling out of the country of succulents, which were very popular in the United States, as well as Europe and Asia. And these plants were only native to South Africa. One day, during staff the Fish and Wildlife rep announced that they had intercepted something like several million dollars' worth of succulents that they were trying to smuggle out of the country. It was a big win for Fish and Wildlife to basically stop it, because you know, they were taking a lot of these succulents in areas which basically depopulated the area of these plants, which are very important to the environment. I believe the plants were headed to Japan.

Q: Like proteus? Was that the flower that was so popular in South Africa ?

HIGGISTON: Proteus was certainly popular in South Africa. I assume it was a wide range of succulents that they grew down there that Fish and Wildlife was trying to stop from being exported. In terms of animals, of course, killing rhinos was a major problem. They had made some headway in stopping that practice, but rhinos were still being killed. The main transportation route was between Mozambique and China and Vietnam.

Despite all the work, the illegal trade in rhino horns continued to grow. Elephants were less of an issue, and in fact, elephants were becoming somewhat problematic because they were overpopulated in South Africa. We didn't hear that much of illegal trade in big cats, but rhinoceros were a real issue during the time we were there. But again, that was Fish and Wildlife's work.

I think USDA was involved in licensing for zoo trade. That was handled exclusively out of the States. We were not involved in the issue. There was some wildlife hunting in South Africa but again Fish and Wildlife managed the import of animals hunted in South Africa and it was very limited.

Q: So, there was illegal trade going on as well then?

HIGGISTON: Like I said, I did not hear much about illegal animal trade except for rhino horn trade. But again, that was not our responsibility.

Q: And how about exotic meats? I know in South Africa all the menus seem to have ostrich and buffalo and things like that.

HIGGISTON: They did not ship meat to the United States. They had problems with Avian Influenza and other diseases. I don't recall ever having a request from South Africa to ship exotic meat products to the United States. As far as live animals, I don't remember any shipments either. Again, this was basically due to health concerns.

So, their big export, as I mentioned, was citrus. We were a pretty important market for them, and they were looking to expand exports especially of tangerines to the United States.

Q: Were they flying in citrus products to the United States? Or did they put those on a ship?

HIGGISTON: They would come out of Cape Town and ship them to the States.

Q: Okay. Wow, that's a long trip.

HIGGISTON: Yes. I can't be certain, but I would assume the shipments were not direct and that the ships stopped somewhere along the way. I doubt very much that they shipped

by air because the cost would have been prohibitive. In fact, we have a sister organization called APHIS (Animal, Plant Health Inspection Service), and they are responsible for plant and animal diseases. The United States had an agreement with South Africa to inspect the citrus shipments for any pests or diseases prior to shipment to the United States. The South African industry actually paid for the process. APHIS had one person stationed in Cape Town, paid for by the South Africans, and brought in people on a seasonal basis from the United States to help with the inspections of shipments going to the States. Normally, countries would ship products to the States, and the product would be inspected on the U.S. side. But the South Africans did not want to ship product to the States, products that were not going to be allowed in because of pests or diseases.

Q: Hmm. Were those people assigned to the embassy?

HIGGISTON: There was a local employee who was in Cape Town and assigned to the Consulate. APHIS' main office was in Pretoria. That office was responsible for Africa.

Q: Wow. So, quite an operation then.

HIGGISTON: Yes. Unlike FAS, APHIS has a smaller footprint around the world. Their regional coverage is a lot larger than ours. They did not do a lot of reporting and their local staff was smaller than ours. It was interesting during COVID. APHIS couldn't bring people from the United States to help with the citrus inspections so the staff in Pretoria had to do that work.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

Then, I don't think we've talked about wine, but did—was there much trade in wine and did that affect you at all?

HIGGISTON: South Africa was a big wine exporter to the United States. What was interesting, we found there were a lot of U.S. investors in the wine industry in South Africa. We did not ship any wine from the United States to South Africa, or if we did, it was a miniscule amount. Our big industry was shipping things like whiskey and rye from the United States to South Africa. There is an organization in the United States called DISCUS, which was the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. They promoted the distilled liquor. They would come to South Africa and do tastings in Cape Town and Joburg. They would invite a lot of the folks who were either importers or ran restaurants to the tastings. A lot of times they would bring in a mixologist to demonstrate cocktails which had become very popular.

However, we did not export wine to South Africa. South Africa, of course, shipped a lot of wine to the United States. There weren't many restrictions.

Q: And this would have been bottled wine? They weren't shipping bulk that would then get mixed with American (indiscernible)?

HIGGISTON: Good Question. They shipped both bottles but also bulk for bottling in the United States.

Q: As South African wine, or just mix it with U.S. grown?

HIGGISTON: It was South African wine that they would bring in and then bottle it in the United States for sale. If it was blended that would have been in South Africa. Obviously, it was cheaper to ship wine in bulk and then bottle in the United States.

Q: Ah ha. Okay.

And I hope you had a chance to inspect some vineyards while you were there.

HIGGISTON: Yes, both for work and business. We took a couple of visiting delegations to wineries in Cape Town and of course, we visited a lot during holidays. It was such a beautiful area of the country.

Q: This must have been still around Stellenbosch?

HIGGISTON: Yes, we visited Stellenbosch and Franschhoek. It was stunning.

Q: Okay.

HIGGISTON: The vineyards were situated in some incredible valleys that were not too far from Cape Town. We visited a lot of wineries along the coast and in Hermanus, for example. There were five or six along one road leaving out of Hermanus, which were, again, just an incredible area for them to be growing in with the mountains. We did a lot of personal travel to the area and a bit of business travel usually when we had a delegation in town. You mentioned the water restrictions earlier. We had a delegation from California who signed an agreement to cooperate on water conservation, comparing experiences on conservation methods being used in order to preserve or limit or use water more effectively in these regions. I believe the California folks had gone to Israel, which was another area in a similar situation.

Q: Okay. Well, that's my question list. Are there any other issues that have come to mind while we've been discussing these?

HIGGISTON: I'm trying to think if there's anything else. South Africa was the first post I had been asked to be acting DCM as well as chargé for a short time. So, for me that was interesting. People were very good about keeping me informed and out of trouble.

I'm trying to think if there was anything else. I have said it quite a lot, but South Africa was a great post to end my career especially given COVID. We were busy but obviously we did not have any visitors or any outside events. It gave me time to get everything in order prior to my departure. The office continued to be productive. I give my U.S. staff credit for keeping the local staff engaged and reporting on the situation in South Africa. I

think Washington appreciated that. But it was clearly a change. Like I said, we were fortunate because we could do those sorts of things. I think other embassies had a little bit harder time adjusting. I think we covered just about everything in South Africa.

Q: Okay. Well, you knew already that you were going to retire at the end of your tour there. That's because you were reaching mandatory retirement age. Was that it?

HIGGISTON: Yes. I was lucky because we don't have that many career ministers, and I think the reason I got the promotion was due to the fact that I had come back to Washington to be acting administrator. I was promoted that year to career minister. So, that allowed me to retire when I turned sixty-five in March 2021. In most of my tours we stayed for four years. My assignment to Brussels was a little bit shorter simply because I had come back to Washington to be acting administrator. But Pretoria was my shortest tour, only two and a half years, but like I said, I was lucky enough to be able to get to sixty-five and then retire from post, which is what I did. Melissa had left at the end December 2020 to come back to Washington to take a permanent job at State in the EUR, HR. She had to come back to take advantage of her eligibility at the end of December and I left on March 31 to catch a flight back to the States. I was retired once I landed.

Q: Did the people in Washington have a lot of interest in debriefing you after your time in South Africa?

HIGGISTON: No.

Q: (Laughs)

HIGGISTON: I think there were a couple of reasons. First, COVID changed everything. Most of Washington was teleworking which meant no one was at headquarters. Secondly, there wasn't a lot going on in South Africa and my American staff was quite capable and up to date on all our issues.

But, FAS never placed a great deal of importance on retirees or their experience. Once you retire, you are not really part of the agency. They've never had a program or process to deal with retirees. In addition, there was a reorganization in 2019 and FAS was able to establish an HR office.

When I left, it was right at the beginning of the new administration. The Secretary had been appointed but there were no other political appointees at that time. The last two administrations were a bit slower in appointing people.

In fact, USDA just got a nominee for undersecretary named a couple of weeks ago, and she's about to have hearings, so she's not even on board yet. I think at the time, there were more pressing things to focus on including China and the January 6 events. A lot of folks now are focused on Ukraine and Russia. South Africa was not really a focal point at the time for us and there were no pressing issues. Poultry trade seemed to be going well.

We were able to deal with the day-to-day issues and my staff was more than capable of handling the office until my replacement arrived.

I did speak with my successor a couple of times, and he sat in on some remote meetings with the staff, so he was aware of who everyone was. I think if it had been a different post like China, Japan or even Ukraine, I probably would have been brought in for consultations.

I guess we could have done something on Microsoft Teams, but I think USDA and FAS was really having a tough time managing the situation with COVID. Particularly how to bring people back to the office in Washington. Technology has made it easier for people to telework and I think we made some real advances. I remember when I was Deputy Administrator for the Foreign Service, we had a discussion of telework during an upcoming snowstorm. This was under the Obama administration. The administration wanted us to telework during snow season. Traditionally, people did not have to work if the weather was bad. They had the time off. The administration wanted to limit their time off and wanted more folks to telework if there was a snowstorm.

During this meeting I asked whether the system could handle all the staff logging on remotely. And the tech folks said about 500. I noted that we had more than twice that many people in DC working on staff. Clearly teleworking would not work effectively at that time.

By the time COVID hit, the system had clearly been upgraded, but in South Africa, we could not do remote calls because our computers did not have cameras or mics. And we had no Wi-Fi at the embassy. We had to do our calls at home using our personal computers or iPads. This did not seem to register with our tech folks in Washington.

Q: Yeah, yep. Well, let's take a minute if you want to and look back on a fascinating career, and do you have any other thoughts you would like to add at this point?

HIGGISTON: You know, I think, as I've mentioned, I certainly never anticipated being at FAS for thirty-eight years. It was not something that I had planned. And as I told you, it was only by accident that I got into FAS. I thought for a while I might go try to join the State Department, but that didn't pan out. I think I fell asleep during the written test. It was during exams at Georgetown, and I just could not stay awake. I figured I could take the exam again the following year. In a way I was lucky. A friend happened to put me in touch with someone in a different part of USDA, and they basically sent me over to FAS. And really, I had no idea that I was going to stay for that long.

I felt very, very fortunate having all the experiences I did. The travel was great and the people I met both locally and overseas were really wonderful. I got to see things that I never imagined I would see.

I was talking to a friend at the agency who was very disappointed that he had not gotten promoted. He was thinking of leaving as a result. I told him that every time I thought I

was going to get promoted, I never got promoted. And every time I thought I didn't have a chance to get promoted, I got promoted. It seemed to even out over the course of a career. I made myself available when the agency needed me. A lot of people don't want to serve in DC. I always thought that was a mistake. Obviously, folks that had families with kids had a tougher time in Washington, given the expense. Still, every time I got promoted to OC, MC and CM, I was in Washington. I became assistant deputy administrator, deputy administrator when I was in Washington.

I didn't go to China, Japan or Korea which were important trading partners for us. I think it was always my work that I did in Washington that really got me promoted. I would always tell people that it's always good to work in Washington to get a feel for what's going on and what the administration was prioritizing. And I always felt like as a Foreign Service officer you had a lot to offer to Washington, a unique perspective of overseas operations. Until the day I retired. I would always say that I still could not believe that they paid me to do that job. I couldn't have chosen a better career. Not that it wasn't without its issues, but I felt very lucky to be able to do that.

Q: Well, thanks so much for sharing your life story. You've had just a fascinating career, a lot of interesting places, wonderful tales of derring-do in far away, strange and not always so wonderful spots.

HIGGISTON: Yes.

Q: And I think it's going to make a great addition to the ADST history collection. And congratulations to you on all you've done and accomplished. So, I guess we—

HIGGISTON: Well, thank you, thank you so much. You know, it's been very cathartic in a way for me to be able to go back and think about some of these things and remember things that I hadn't thought about in quite a while. I really appreciate you offering me this experience and thinking that it would be worthwhile for me to do it. That meant a lot to me, so I really appreciate that.

Q: Well, I appreciate that. And once again, appreciate your participation. I'm going to end the recording but leave you on the line.

End of interview